

Perpetuating the Party and Producing Propagandists: The Politics of Poetics  
in the Lao People's Democratic Republic

By

Charles Matthew Carroll

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Cultural Transformation, Political Economy, and Social Practice

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Jean C. Lave, Chair  
Professor Nelson H.H. Graburn  
Professor Gillian Hart

Spring 2011

Copyright 2011, Charles Matthew Carroll

## Abstract

### Perpetuating the Party and Producing Propagandists: The Politics of Poetics in the Lao People's Democratic Republic

by

Charles Matthew Carroll

Doctor of Philosophy in Cultural Transformation,  
Political Economy, and Social Practice

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Jean Lave, Chair

The Lao People's Revolutionary Party has ruled Lao PDR as a single-Party State since the revolution of 1975. In the mid-1980s the Party initiated economic reforms to transition from the revolutionary "centrally planned system" into a "market-based economy." The reforms introduced a dilemma of adaptive-perpetuation: in order to perpetuate social practices through which the older generation of Party members produce their political dominance, those laboring for the Party must adapt these social practices to the market-based transformations of the political economy. The Party is increasingly dependent on the labor and consumerism of young people for the adaptive-perpetuation of the Party, its institutions, and its single-Party rule.

Propaganda production is the ideal form of labor in which to examine the dilemma of adaptive-perpetuation in practice. Once entirely State funded, by 2006 the Party's arts and literature magazine had to generate 40% of its income through advertising and sales; propaganda production became dependent upon its marketability to young consumers. With sales slumping and their livelihoods on the line, the magazine's administrators recruited established writers as instructors and formed a training-camp for young aspiring writers, with the hope that the products of youth would prove marketable to their peers. The perpetuation of the magazine unit, as a designated institutional home for their labor, an outlet for their products, and source of their income and social identity was dependent on two generations who simultaneously needed each other, and whose social practices were simultaneously threatened by each other.

My analysis contributes to theoretical understandings of bureaucratic adaptability and social practices which are at the roots of emerging forms of authoritarian rule in contemporary Southeast Asia. On a broader level the work provides theoretical insights into cultural representation, nationalism, artistic production, social incorporation, practices of inculcation, propaganda production, communities of practice, and legitimate peripheral participation.

Dedicated to Dalounny and Namfon

## Table of Contents:

Dedication	i
Table of Contents	ii
Acknowledgements	ix
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b>	
Introduction	1
Contributions to understandings of the production of identities – from imagined communities to communities of practice	4
Extension of the theories of situated learning to produce understandings of social practices at the roots of political economic transformations	8
Extension one – communities of practice nested within larger social bodies	8
Extension two - multiple diverse forms of legitimate peripheral participation within a community of practice	10
The politics of permission – entry into the site of my fieldwork – developing an understanding of merit, social relations and/or exchange pathways into legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice	10
The official path to a foreign expert card and visa	11
A discourse of impossibility and the black market visa alternative	12
Paths of merit, social connections, exchange	14
Ethical questions raised in approaching research with human subjects using a black market visa	16
My experience with the politics of permission	16
Before step one – making contacts	16
Step one – writing letters to the Embassy, Ministry, and LNTA	18
Step two- when things fall apart	18
Somewhere after step two- proving myself valuable and non-problematic	20
Back to square one	22
Field research methodology	24
Outline of the chapters	24
Notes	27

## **Chapter 2: Historical-geographical context of the rise of the Lao print propaganda and the rise of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party**

Question explored: How were the social practices of propaganda production for the single-Party State produced in the contemporary Lao People's Democratic Republic?

Introduction	31
The production of <i>Le Laos Français</i> as a geopolitical entity	31
Early challenges to French rule over <i>Le Laos Français</i>	34
The press, propaganda and the production of a Lao identity under the French during World War II	36
The production of the Kingdom of Laos, the rise of Lao nationalism, disrupted lines of succession, and pathways to conflagration	37
The Kingdom of Laos, the Cold War, and propaganda production	42
Party and administrative structures of the Lao single-Party State	48
The Ministry, the censor, the writer and the administration of authorized publishing in Lao PDR	56
Conclusion	58
Notes	58

## **Chapter 3: Producing a social logic of a dependency on the incorporation of the labor of youth: Vannasin Magazine and the transformation of the labor of propaganda production in an era of economic transition**

Question explored: How do the divisions of labor within an organization and the needs for employees within that division of labor combine to produce the conditions for developing a social logic of an institutional dependency on the incorporation of the labor of youth?

Introduction	62
Developing a theory of social practice with a recognition of the imagined dependent organs of the single-Party State	64
Locating Vannasin Magazine (ວັລະສານ ວັນນະສິນ) in the setting of the Ministry of Information and Culture.	66
Employees and the division of labor within the Vannasin Magazine Unit	69
Vannasin's Front Office	69
Office of the Vannasin Receptionist	69
Office of Vannasin's Director/Editor-in-Chief	71
Vannasin's office of Editorial Staff and Technical Department	72
Kinship forms of address and the hierarchy of age among Vannasin staff members	76

Vannasin’s use-right claims over additional Ministry owned spaces	77
Transforming practices of production associated with the implementation of the reforms of “the New Economic Mechanism”	80
Low wages and the leveraging of employment	82
“Special Work” - ວຽກພິເສດ ( <i>viek peeset</i> )	85
Leveraging one’s position of authority to engage in <i>viek peeset</i>	86
Use of Ministry equipment for <i>viek peeset</i>	86
Use of Ministry position to market goods within the Ministry as a form of <i>viek peeset</i>	87
Leveraging one’s job responsibilities to control the labor of others as a means for private income accumulation	87
Conclusion	97
Notes	98

**Chapter 4: Incorporating the Labor of Youth into the ongoing and transforming labor of the Vannasin Magazine unit.**

Questions explored: How is it that members of an older generation of practitioners produce opportunities for legitimate peripheral participation of young newcomers? How do members of an older generation of practitioners employ peripheral participation as a means of mediating perceived threats to continuity of practice and displacement of practitioners when incorporating young people into a community of practice?

Introduction	106
Low wages and the presence of kin	108
The gradual incorporation of the labor of young kin into the work of the Ministry	109
Broader kin relations and pathways into labor for the Ministry	113
Transitions from the “centrally planned system” to the “market-based economy” necessitates Vannasin’s incorporation of non-kin youth	115
Five primary modes of incorporating non-kin youth into labor arts and literature propaganda production	116
Kin affiliated internships for non-kin study partners of Ministry kin	117
Probationary employment of non-kin job candidates through a period of apprenticeship	118

Coercive core technological incorporation governed through permission granting authority	120
Cyclical-transitory peripheral incorporation of non-kin youth	125
Core productive incorporation	128
Conclusion - Changing social practice, dependence upon non-kin youth and the dilemma of adaptive-perpetuation	129
Notes	130

**Chapter 5: Inculcation and intergenerational tensions - components of adaptive-perpetuation:**

**“We want these new writers to work effectively and to follow government policy with regard to content”**

Question explored: How do intergenerational tensions come to a head through mutual dependency and the practices of adaptive perpetuation?

Introduction	135
The need for and purpose of the Sinxay Pen’s Camp from the perspective of the Vannasin administrators	137
Opening day – arranging an impressive welcome to the periphery of a community of practice	139
The older generation - Primary Sinxay Pen’s Camp instructors and their subjects of inculcation	140
Mr. Paengan, Social positioning, Lao culture, language and moral behavior	141
Mr. Dee, Lao poetic structures	144
Mr. Xaypraseuth, Short story writing	147
Mr. Bounpheng, Short story writing	147
Mr. Soubanh, Lao musical genres and their history/Song writing	148
Mr. Chaomaly, Lao lyric structures	148
Mrs. Phounsavath, Short story writing	149
Developing “our” official sources of literary works within the political movement of writing	149
Recruitment of Students	150
The younger generation - A sampling of student profiles	151
Xiong, University student, aspiring short story writer	151
Noukham, a high school student and aspiring short story writer	152
Thippavanh, a business college student and aspiring short story writer	152
Soulichan, Buddhist novice and aspiring short story writer	152

Vatsana, Student entering her final year in NUOL's Faculty of Education	153
Siha, university student and an aspiring short story author	153
Amone, high school student attending camp at her brother's behest	154
Vilayvone, high school student attending camp at as part of the kinship pathway into labor for the Party	154
Phonpaseuth, high school student pop song writer	154
Somsavat, a soldier songwriter	155
Chanthaboun, a musical fruit vendor	155
Bounmee, NUOL student and aspiring songwriter from southern Lao PDR	156
Summing up the students – some generalizations	156
Student inculcation and production - intergenerational tensions visible during lectures and breaks	156
Intergenerational tensions apparent through staff and student interactions between lectures	157
Didactic structures and the production of space for student collaboration - intergenerational tensions made visible during lectures	159
Conclusion	162
Notes	163

**Chapter 6: Re-membling a social body – practices of inculcating memory in the act of incorporating youth into the labor of propaganda production for a single-Party State**

Questions explored: How does one inculcate the younger generation in the aspects of social relations that the older generation developed over time through their shared lived experiences? How does the older generation inculcate aspects of the social memory of the organization the older generation deem to be requisite knowledge for those engaged in the labor of the institution? What sorts of tensions do these attempts at inculcation produce and how are they worked out in the practice of inculcation?

Introduction	166
The Lao National Museum - guiding students through the evolution of the single-Party State	169
Preambling through the second floor	173
Preamble to the Lao Constitution	174
Reflections upon the tour	181
Parallel movements	182
The Lao National Film Archive and Video Center - produced memories	186

A produced memory of the horrors of imperialist aggression: <i>Sorrow of Piew Cave</i>	187
Reflections in the wake of <i>Sorrow of Piew Cave</i>	200
The deleterious influence of capital accumulation, and the perils of forgetting the past: <i>Forget Oneself</i>	201
Reflections on <i>Forget Oneself</i>	208
The Lao People’s Army Museum - teleological teachings on a circular tour that begins and ends with the Party	210
Student disengagement with the guided narrative	225
Tactile explorations where touch is prohibited	229
Student produced narratives	233
Conclusion	236
Notes	237

**Chapter 7: Relations of resistance – adaptive-perpetuation and the intergenerational struggles in the practices of conformity**

Question explored: How are tensions and relations of resistance produced and mediated in the older generation’s efforts of inculcating practices of conformity?

Introduction	239
Peer Collaboration, Critique, and Appreciation outside the view of the older generation	241
Top down mobilization - mobilizing young people to move toward unknown destinations	245
The concurrent production of conformity and camaraderie	250
A social divide – physically segregated concomitant practices of instruction and reward	254
Consumption, a crab, and camaraderie	257
Ridicule, public humiliation, and the transformation of social behaviors	260
Meals, social segregation and camaraderie	263
“ <i>Our</i> Lao music” – finding harmony with the gate-keeper’s structural expectations	265
Performing conformity and the performed critique of non-conformity	271
Conclusion	275
Notes	276

**Chapter 8: An intra-generational struggle - understanding the older generation as a threat to the practice and communities of practice through which they produce their social identity**

Question explored: In the attempts at engaging in adaptive-perpetuation of a community of practice how do the members of the older generation of practitioners produce themselves as threats to the adaptive-perpetuation of the practice and

communities of practice through which they produce their social identity?	
Introduction	277
Exposure to and experiencing social segregation and information flows	279
Students collectively taking control of situations	289
Dialectics of leisure – labor	295
Playing the game of social literacy –extending the concept of a community of practitioners backwards through time	300
Self-censorship – self-imposed transformations and omissions in student work	307
Not exactly passing the torch, the closing night candlelight ceremony	314
Showcasing the products of the older generation’s labor	318
Traveling together towards gender disparate destinations	320
Conclusion	328
Notes	330
<b>Chapter 9: Conclusion</b>	
Introduction	331
Certification ceremony	332
Post camp youth participation in propaganda production	337
A sampling of other student paths	342
Intergenerational tensions and the incremental, slow and ongoing change in practice	342
Adaptive-perpetuation applicability and potential directions for further theoretical development	344
<b>Bibliography</b>	346

## Acknowledgements:

My studies at Berkeley would not have been possible without the support and assistance of Dalounny Phonsouny. She inspired my focus on Lao PDR, assisted me in multiple ways throughout the research and writing process, and I am deeply grateful for all she has done to make my studies and research possible. Secondly I am incredibly thankful for the help provided by our daughter, Namfon. While waiting patiently for me to finish graduate school she has filled my research and dissertation writing years with countless hours of wonderful diversion and entertainment. I thank them both for putting up with all of the hours I devoted to academia.

I am incredibly grateful to all the people in Lao PDR who helped me with my research. First and foremost I must thank the employees of the Vannasin Magazine unit of the Ministry of Information and Culture for inviting me to document their labor. Secondly I need to thank all of the students who participated in both the Sinxay Pen's Camp and Sinxay Culture Club – they opened my eyes to the fascinating tensions that exist at the roots of social change in Lao PDR.

Outside of the Ministry I extend my heartfelt thanks to Mixay, Noy, and Vatsanna for including me in their lives and adventures in and around Vientiane – opening my eyes to new ways of understanding life, language, community and friendship. The late Pha Suey earned my gratitude for looking after my family with sincere concern, especially during my late nights working at the Ministry. I also must thank our neighbor, Peuy, for her constant barrage of taunting playful insults, lobbed from across the fence, which forced me to learn Lao much more quickly than I would have without her around. Dalounny's siblings, Tik, Noi, Mee, Laire, Khao, and my mother and father-in-law all provided amazing assistance during the course of my studies and research. In this regard I must also thank Patricia Cheesman, who welcomed us into her family – our long conversations over more than a decade have helped me learn an incredible amount about changing social practices in Lao P.D.R.

A number of Lao-American community members have also made significant contributions to my understandings of the topics I explore in this dissertation. Since we first met in 1998, Mr. Chanta Luangrath has been a wonderful friend, and incredibly helpful in contributing to my understandings of Lao history, language, culture and society. Ajaan Khit and Ajaan Chan have earned my gratitude and mention here for their patient attempts to teach me Lao at SEASSI in Wisconsin.

My work would not have been possible without the generous support of my parents, William and Susan Carroll, who allowed us to move into their attic and eat the food out of their refrigerator in Berkeley, and supported my research in Lao PDR. Related to this I must thank Mary Jill and Scott, for tolerating my rather unequal occupation of our parents' time, resources, and energy. Scott provided ample amounts of suggestions for completing my studies more rapidly, such as simply writing “Blah, blah, blah. . .” in lieu of chapter nine. Thanks Scott.

At the top of the list of people I would like to acknowledge at UC Berkeley are the faculty members who supported me in the formation of my interdisciplinary Ph.D. program: Jean Lave, Nelson Graburn, Gillian Hart, Joanna Williams, and Ingrid Seyer-Ochi. Though new to Berkeley Ingrid Seyer-Ochi stepped forward to chair my qualifying exams and provide excellent guidance in shaping my reading for the exam. Joanna

Williams went out of her way to make both my wife and me feel welcomed at Berkeley, inviting us both to share our understandings of Southeast Asian textiles with her students. Gillian Hart welcomed me into her courses in Development Studies and Geography, opening my eyes to inspiring ways of understanding social production. As a result of our mutual interests in the anthropology of tourism I have spent more time interacting with Nelson Graburn than any other member of the UC Berkeley faculty - I am honored to add my voice to the chorus of current and past graduate students who sing praises for his truly phenomenal support and guidance. It was the work of Jean Lave that drew me to Berkeley, and I am grateful that despite her plans to retire she accepted me as her final student. She has provided countless hours of advice, and guidance throughout my time at Berkeley, shaping and inspiring the direction of my thoughts and writing. Her careful reading and thought provoking commentary on my drafts were invaluable in shaping this text.

My most positive experiences at UC Berkeley were fundamentally shaped by interactions with Naomi Leite and Stephanie Hom and our collaborative founding of the Tourism Studies Working Group. I am thankful to the extremely active members of the group during the course of my time at Berkeley, including Nelson Graburn, Maki Tanaka, Jenny Chio, Cathy Covey, Clare Fischer, Rachel Giraud, Theo Chronis, Bert Gordon, Alexis Buntin, Mahlon Chute, Scott Macleod, Rongling Ge, and Lu Jin for making coming to campus an edifying joy! Feedback from the members of the TSWG helped to shape multiple aspects of my work.

A number of members of the UC Berkeley faculty and staff went out of their way to provide me support during the course of my studies. Before departing to Vanderbilt Professor Rogers Hall included me in research projects, conference panels, and provided outstanding advice, encouragement and funding. William Collins former Vice Chair of the Center for South East Asia Studies found funds to support my early research in Thailand. Susan Kepner earned my gratitude for her incredible patience in teaching me Thai – she is an outstanding instructor, and like Joanna Williams, made an effort to make my wife feel welcomed at Berkeley too. Peter Koret added a considerable amount of humor to my studies of Lao literature, and his visits in Lao PDR are always a joy. Over the past decade Librarian Virginia Shih has provided wonderful assistance in finding materials. She has established an impressive collection of Lao related materials for any future scholar visiting Berkeley. Her visit to Vientiane helped to open doors into my research site. Eric Crystal, former Vice Chair of the Center for South East Asia Studies has made concerted efforts to guide me along a pragmatic path in the course of my studies, and I am incredibly thankful for his friendship and the advice he provided to help shape this work. Ms. Cassandra Hill of the Graduate Division was very helpful in coordinating all the paperwork required for my interdisciplinary PhD program.

I would also like to acknowledge those who provided assistance in my admission to Berkeley. Jane Stern, Robert Lewis, and Professor Daniel Orey wrote persuasive letters of support. Through his friendship Daniel Orey continues to share and inspire wonderful perspectives on the world. The late Professor of Physics Alan Portis made time in his schedule to meet with me and discuss graduate studies at Berkeley. When I was seeking admissions into the Social and Cultural Studies in Education program Carol Page, the former administrative assistant to the Graduate School of Education, and

Graduate Advisor for the Department of Geography provided me invaluable tips on how to apply.

A number of wonderful friends deserve acknowledgement here for both their support and providing enjoyable breaks and diversion from my studies at Cal. Dr. Audrey Lehman MFT served the role of an ad hoc dissertation therapist, she actually read much of my work and provided detailed feedback. Oko Ipposhi insisted on backing up my hard drive – an action that was invaluable when I fried my external hard drive and lost access to all the notes contained within. Oko and her daughter Hanako provided wonderful company during breaks from my studies. Professor Pitch Pongsawat provided fantastic advice on writing, and a comfortable place to stay in Bangkok during the writing process. Rosa Garcia helped to make the Berkeley campus one of Namfon’s favorite places and provided wonderful company during the qualifying exam prep process. Stephanie Murata, continues to root me on as if I were the athlete competing for a championship. Julie and Andrew McCrady provided amazing hospitality and a comfortable place to stay in Chiang Mai while I was conducting preliminary fieldwork on weaving communities at the time of our daughter’s birth.

Linda McIntosh accompanied me on enjoyable forays into discussions of textiles. Audrey Bochaton provided very helpful assistance with French translation, and joined me in a longitudinal study of many of the gelato flavors at the French Cultural Center in Vientiane. Christine Elliott’s quite humorous insights have provided me considerable amounts of laughter (both in the US and Lao PDR) since we met at SEASSI. Theresa Wong was a wonderful study companion during cool and quiet days of writing in the library of the Mekong River Commission. Fred Branfman has been a great friend, visiting in both Berkeley and Lao PDR engaging me in long enlightening conversations. Nana Johnson’s inspired conversations continue to be wonderfully disruptive of academic thought at a level that could only be achieved by someone who has been a friend since early childhood and happens to also be married to someone from Lao PDR. I am thankful to Dave Meyers stopping by during his visits to Berkeley and providing copious amounts of material for procrastination on the web. Andrew Meyers is one of the very few non-Cal friends who made time to help me procrastinate on the UCB campus. It was a pleasure putting down the books each week to collaborate with Nith Lacroix, Khammany Mathavongsy, Mitchell Bonner, Phoumy Sayavong and Toni Philadeng producing Lao language television programming for the San Francisco Bay Area – I’ve learned an incredible amount from you all.

Finally I would like to acknowledge two outstanding teachers who encouraged my academic pursuits. Mr. Mike Hassett was an outstanding high school English teacher who forced me (through drill sergeant like teaching methods) to be conscious of my writing and ways to improve my expression through writing. As a veteran of the Vietnam War he supplemented the measly single paragraph in our history text with first-hand accounts of America’s involvement in Southeast Asia. I am incredibly grateful that he demanded better writing from me. My pursuit of a Ph.D. began through an interaction with the late Professor Bill Harris, a truly remarkable professor of Special Education Law at California State University Sacramento. The day he pulled me aside after class, and made me promise him that I would pursue a PhD changed my life.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### Introduction:

Living and working in mainland Southeast Asia during the “Asian financial crisis” of the late 1990’s afforded me the opportunity to observe members of different communities both adapting to and producing a range of transformations of social practices. While observing communities in both Thailand and Lao People’s Democratic Republic I was doing a considerable amount of reading on economic change, trying to get a grasp of the social transformations that led us to the state of affairs of the time, and the pathways communities were producing out of their experiences of crisis. Looking at changing social practices in different populations ranging from weavers to public school teachers and politicians I was fascinated by the question: How do social bodies, united around specific forms of labor, produce and put into practice adaptations that will enable the perpetuation of that social body as the members simultaneously produce (and adapts themselves to) the changing political economy?

One might think that schools, as the incubators of labor at the roots of the political-economy of a nation would be the ideal location to study such changes in practice. My work in schools, however, led me to the realization that the crucial places to focus upon were not in the school settings, as the practices within schools (e.g. curriculum design, instructional practices . . . ) were subject to a considerable lag time, perpetually a few steps behind, and reacting to changes that were taking place much more rapidly in social relations outside of the school context. For me, it was within the context of weaving villages (i.e. settings in which many of the most amazing practitioners had very limited opportunities to attend school) that I began to produce my understanding of practices of *adaptive-perpetuation*.

I use “adaptive-perpetuation” as a purposeful movement away from the concept of “reproduction” and “social reproduction” (e.g. the work derived from Bourdieu 1977), as ‘reproduction’ is not a theoretical framing well suited to the historically brief and rapidly transforming social relations of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic where I’ve been conducting my research. The dynamics of the revolution/post-revolutionary period in Lao PDR are multifaceted and revolutionary change in social relations requires a theoretical approach that can account for rapid and significant transformations. One could rather easily paint the history of the Lao monarchy backwards within the frame of social reproduction, but that would obfuscate the true complexity behind the formation of the Kingdom of Laos. The social relations of the Lao revolution are inextricably situated in geo-political relations that extend not only into colonialisms but also into anti-colonial revolutionary movements. The tumultuous and transformative acts of revolution in many ways disrupt and void the utility of attempting broad applications of “social reproduction” to the formation of the revolutionary/Party elite.

I use “adaptive” here *not* in the Darwinian/social Darwinian sense of an “adaptation” resulting from the impact of external factors (environmental or cultural), nor am I employing the anthropological concept of “cultural adaptation.” Rather I use the term while standing with both feet firmly entrenched in social practice theory. I use

*adaptive-perpetuation to contribute an understanding of practices of change that cannot be adequately understood as an effect of impact, but rather must be understood as people engaged in the production of change in practice for the purpose of maintaining some form of continuity (in social relations and/or social practices) while they are simultaneously laboring to produce larger-scale changes in social practices in which they are participants (peripherally or otherwise), and the resulting larger-scale changes entail a threat of producing displacement (displacing their own or others positions in social relations and/or displacing aspects of the practice that existed prior to the initial engagement in change).*

In exploring practices of adaptive-perpetuation I was drawn to the instances of young people entering (as aspiring practitioners) into social bodies with specific forms of labor at their core. It is in these instances, where two generations, practitioners and aspiring practitioners meet through a form of labor, that I found I could best see and develop understandings of the stakes involved, and the tensions played out in their adaptive perpetuation of social practice. My questions, from the start, were a move away from a focus on “social reproduction” and towards developing theoretical contributions to our understanding of practices of social change.

When composing my dissertation proposal my intention was to study adaptive-perpetuation in weaving communities in the rural/urban periphery skirting the capital city of Vientiane Lao PDR. At the time I did not venture to dream of having the level of access I would ultimately be afforded for exploring these social practices within an institution of the Lao government, the Ministry of Information and Culture. The unprecedented access I was granted opened opportunities for me to engage as a participant observer in practices of adaptive-perpetuation within a central government level institution of a single-Party State, as the Party members and government employees engaged in the production of transformations of the political economy. My insights into social practices at the roots of transformations of a political economy were developed through participation in the practices of producing such changes.

My ethnographic fieldwork, within a unit of the single-Party State struggling with the dilemma of adaptive-perpetuation, sheds light on the fundamental importance of intergenerational tensions at the roots of social change and political-economic transformations. The larger changes being produced in the political-economy of the State cannot be adequately understood without delving into these intergenerational tensions played out in the social practices and daily lives of those charged with producing the representations of the single-Party State and the Party at its helm. The struggles between generations become evident in the contexts where the labor of newcomers is essential for the production of the adaptations required for perpetuation of the social body of the administrators. These are contexts of mutual dependency and mutual threat where adaptive-perpetuation is produced.

In the chapters that follow I draw on ethnographic field research to develop the following understandings. First and foremost we must recognize that practices of adaptive perpetuation cannot be understood abstracted from the historical/geographical contexts in which they are produced. Social practice within a specific historical/geographical context produces the divisions of labor within which practices of legitimate peripheral participation and adaptive perpetuation are in turn produced. The divisions of labor within an organization and the needs of employees within that division

of labor combine and contribute to the production of the conditions for developing a social logic of an institutional dependency on the incorporation of the labor of youth.

Members of and older generation of practitioners, motivated by their perceived needs for the labor of youth, produce opportunities for legitimate peripheral participation of young newcomers. These opportunities, however, entail purposeful attempts (on behalf of the older generation) to mediate the degree of peripheral participation of the young people, as a means of mediating perceived threats to continuity of practice and displacement of practitioners. Intergenerational tensions come to a head through mutual dependency and the practices of adaptive perpetuation. The older generation's need for the labor of youth does not necessarily represent an earnest interest in the creative products of the young people recruited as legitimate peripheral participants. Rather the evolving interest in the labor of young people is in many respects reflective of the older generation's self-interest, a vested interest in the adaptive-perpetuation of the community of practice. The intersection of the older generation's self-interests and the younger generation's aspirations set the stage for the mutual production of intergenerational tensions. Legitimate peripheral participation in practices of adaptive perpetuation constitutes a juncture where the creative aspirations of youth collided with the reality of the gatekeeper's disinterest in their creative products.

From the standpoint of the members of the older generation engaged in the community of practice, the perpetuation of a social memory of the overarching organization (that is, a social memory not simply of the specific community of practice, but rather a social memory of the larger social organization of which the community of practice is a nested part) is an important aspect of their practices of inculcating the aspiring members. Efforts are made to inculcate the newcomers in social relations that the members of the older generation developed over time and through their shared lived experiences. One form of intergenerational tension arises within the older generation's attempts at inculcating a social memory.

However, in the acts of incorporation the two generations most visibly come to a head through negotiating and determining the gives and takes of what will constitute the future of a practice they are both inseparably involved in adapting and perpetuating. Questions of conformity of practice and products are contested, mediated, and worked through in intergenerational struggles. Their mutual interests – and their production of their social identities as practitioners of a form of artistic expression are bound up in the future of the practice – but aspects of their interests are at odds with aspects of the existing broader social practices of the members of each generation. Through their interactions with the members of the younger generation, the older generation produce themselves as a formidable threat to the social practices around which the community of practitioners has formed.

I begin this introductory chapter by situating my contributions within existing bodies of literature, describing how the problem I am exploring lies at the intersection of several fields. Following this I present the context of my fieldwork through an account of my attempts to gain permission to conduct field research in the Lao PDR. I use the account to reveal an important and pervasive concept of how one gains access to communities of practice in the Lao PDR. Then I present a very brief explanation of the research methodologies I employed. Finally I conclude by providing a brief overview of the chapters that follow.

### **Contributions to the understandings of the production of identities – from imagined communities to communities of practice:**

My work focuses on people engaged in the practices entailed in the production of national identity in Asia (i.e. the community of practice of propagandists who are themselves engaged in producing: a. State authorized representations of the nation, its people and culture, and b. the next generation of propagandists for the perpetuation of the governing institutions and social practices therein of the single-Party State of the Lao People's Democratic Republic). I devote the following chapter to a description of the social production of *Le Laos Français*, the Kingdom of Laos and the Lao People's Democratic Republic, situating my theoretical contributions within a larger body of research on political and economic transformation in Southeast Asia. Here, however, I focus on the contributions of my work to understandings of the social production of communities and national identity. Benedict Anderson's<sup>1</sup> work introduced concepts within the frame of Southeast Asian politics it remains an important work from which to launch this discussion.<sup>2</sup>

Anderson's introduction of the concept that "the convergence of capitalism and print technology. . . created a new form of imagined community, which in its morphology set the stage for the modern nation"<sup>3</sup> laid the ground for numerous fruitful arguments and extensions that have proved quite helpful in shaping my thoughts about adaptive perpetuation with the practices of propaganda production in the Lao PDR. Looking at the region that is present day Lao PDR, Søren Ivarsson and Nick Enfield both examined the relations of language and nationalism/the production of national identity in two different historic time frames. Ivarsson (1999) contributes to our understanding of how Lao, produced in print as a language, had political roots in countering attempts at cross border production of a pan-Thai identity. His work details the counter moves to the relatively well-documented practices of nationalism in neighboring Thailand in the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>4</sup> The work on the origins of the concept of "Thailand" the rise of a pan-Thai nationalism<sup>5</sup> under political leaders such as Field Marshal Plaek Phibun Songkhram<sup>6</sup> provide a valuable historical context to related labor today.

Enfield's (1999) work picks up on the topic of language and the production of Lao national identity.<sup>7</sup> His work documents the political moves in attempts to purify and standardize the language within the context of producing a larger Lao identity. The work is an important contribution to language politics in Southeast Asia – and the pivotal roles of certain key players in the shaping of language as a component of national identity production. My work on conformity in chapter seven adds to the contribution put forth by Enfield, by examining how the conceptualizations of language and national identity (conceptualizations of standards and identifiable distinguishing elements with roots that Enfield reveals in his historical analysis) continue to influence social practices of writing and identity production today.

What I am exploring through the Lao context, is not simply nationalism, but also the intergenerational struggles at the roots of the production of a transforming political economy. Although Lao PDR is a relatively small country there exists a growing body of work focused on the economic transformation (also described as "the New Economic Mechanism," "economic transition," "reform policy," "fiscal policy under transition," "market adjustment"<sup>8</sup>). Not surprisingly the vast majority of the work addressing the

political-economic transformations initiated in the Lao PDR in the 1980s seems to flow from the pens of economists. I continue to find reading such approaches to writing on Lao economics to be extremely helpful, not in the sense that I find the answers I am looking for in these texts, but rather that a read of the text generates fruitful questioning – thoughts about what the authors fail to address, or address in ways that I think may be best understood in an entirely different manner.

Seeking answers to their questions about the dilemmas caused by the economic transition Thant and Vokes (1997) also explore “education in Laos,” however, they approach education as something inseparable from the institution of schools, producing a theoretical terrain where interactions between youth and adults are invisible, and replaced failures of “human resource development” for “the development process” that may be attributable to lack of books, chairs and trained school teachers.<sup>9</sup> One of the most prolific authors writing on “the economics of transition in Laos” is Yves Bourdet. Bourdet writes succinct statements that prove incredibly helpful in developing questions that have moved my writing forward in opposite directions. For example: “Unlike what is observed in many other countries embarking on a similar transition process, the same political regime and basically the same men have managed socialism and the transition away from socialism in Laos.” A single sentence like this opens up wonderful avenues for questioning: Can the “transition” best be understood as a “process” or would a practice approach prove more useful? If a practice approach is employed can we truly say that what is being practiced as transition in Lao PDR is similar to what has been practiced in other contexts? Or does what we observe in Lao PDR exhibit unique qualities directly related to these practices occurring within a unique historical-geographical context? Is it accurate to say that the same men “managed socialism, and the transition away from socialism?” Would it be more accurate to say that the same community of practice produced the practices they deemed “socialism” and are now engaged in the practices of producing new adapted practices deemed to be a “market-based economy”? While I don’t find the answers to the questions I am seeking in the work of economists writing on Lao PDR, I do find their work incredibly helpful for developing my questioning of some of the most dominant approaches to studying the Lao political economy.

My work is a contribution to the body of literature that tackles the study of social change, revolutionary praxis (literal and figurative), in the region inscribed by the contemporary borders of Lao PDR. Much of this work has been conducted from a historical perspective and will be addressed in the following chapter. Within the growing body of literature exploring South East Asian social change from a range of disciplinary perspectives I’ve found the contributions of ethnographic exploration to resonate most closely with my work. The two foremost ethnographers working in contemporary Lao PDR today are Grant Evans and Vatthana Pholsena. Evans’ groundbreaking ethnography explores the early stages of the transition from practices of socialism to “post-socialism” among farmers living on the outskirts of Vientiane.<sup>10</sup> The work illuminates struggles entailed in the development of practices of governance and how populations navigate and contribute to transforming conceptions of society, economy, and political-economic ideology. Evan’s in his contributions to our understanding of *The politics of ritual remembrance* in Lao PDR since 1975 addresses the “national narrative” - a narrative the contemporary production of which is at the roots

of this dissertation. Focusing on national narratives and playing on Anderson's concept of "the reassurance of fratricide" Evans writes:

Laos today is still in search of a convincing national narrative, because "fratricide" there was not only in the distant past, but very recent – and it is still not "reassuring." The civil war lasting from the late 1950s until 1975 has to be remembered for it is the process by which the new regime came to power, but it also has to be forgotten as a period of disunity.<sup>11</sup>

While I agree with the point Evans makes here, that one struggle involved in the production of a national narrative centers around the tension that exists regarding what is to be remembered and what is to be forgotten (when memory of what the ruling Party wants to be forgotten is still alive and well), I argue that the contemporary struggle for producing a national narrative entails dynamics that are in fact much more complex, dynamics rooted in the intergenerational struggles between old-timers and newcomers meeting upon the plain of writing for the single-Party State.

Pholsena, whose family concluded the revolution with factions split onto two sides, produced a multi-sited ethnographic exploration titled *Post-war Laos: The Politics of Culture, History and Identity*. She describes her intention in the book as "to analyse the ideology of nationalism as a discourse of power by focusing on the relationships between One/Majority and the Other/Minorities."<sup>12</sup> This framing results in a pronounced focus on the duality of majority, and ethnic minority that runs through the work. The framing, I believe, may have precluded a focus on other tensions that would have been useful to explore within the 'majority' or within the 'minority' and within the venues where little distinction is made between the two.

In the literature on Lao P.D.R. there exists a relative paucity of accounts that detail the lived, on the ground, experiences of people actually engaged in the production of the contemporary transformations of the Lao political economy. One of my primary goals with this work is to fill that void, while simultaneously presenting an account of the struggles at the roots of producing those who will be charged with the production of the representations of *culture*, *history* and *identity*, the *imagined community* and the *national narrative* writ large. My theoretical starting point is from within social practice theory.

My research owes a considerable debt to the theory of "situated learning" through "legitimate peripheral participation" developed by Lave and Wenger.<sup>13</sup> Since their introduction of the concept, the phrase "legitimate peripheral participation" has been taken up by others and applied in a wide body of work across a range of disciplines addressing social practice, education, and institutional change. However, little if any of this work addresses a fundamental component of the concept developed by Lave and Wenger: the contradiction between continuity and displacement inherent in legitimate peripheral participation.<sup>14</sup> Dilemmas of continuity and displacement lie at the heart of the intergenerational tensions inherent in legitimate peripheral participation of newcomers in communities of practice. As Lave and Wenger note, in practices of legitimate peripheral participation newcomers and old-timers simultaneously constitute keys to the fulfillment of each other's destinies and threats to the fulfillment of each other's destinies:

Conflicts between masters and apprentices (or, less individualistically, between generations) take place in the course of everyday participation. Shared participation is the stage on which the old and the new, the known and the unknown, the established and the hopeful, act out their differences and discover their commonalities, manifest their fear of one another, and come to terms with their need for one another. Each threatens the fulfillment of the other's destiny, just as it is essential to it. Conflict is experienced and worked out through a shared everyday practice in which differing viewpoints and common stakes are in interplay.<sup>15</sup>

Their focus on the importance of the tensions surrounding the dilemma of continuity and displacement constitutes an essential move away from a simplistic theory of social reproduction. As Lave and Wenger explain, the introduction of newcomers with unique perspectives on the social practice inevitably transforms the practices of old-timers:

Granting legitimate participation to newcomers with their own viewpoints introduces into any community of practice all the tensions of the continuity-displacement contradiction. These may be muted, though not extinguished, by the differences of power between old-timers and newcomers. As a way in which the related conflicts are played out in practice, legitimate peripheral participation is far more than just a process of learning on the part of newcomers. It is a reciprocal relation between persons and practice. This means that the move of learners towards full participation in a community of practice does not take place in a static context. The practice itself is in motion.<sup>16</sup>

At the intersect of generations – working through the dilemma of the continuity-displacement contradiction – practice is put into motion. Unlike theories of social reproduction *change in praxis, rather than stasis*, is central to the theoretical contribution of legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice. As Lave and Wenger state: “Since activity and the participation of individuals involved in it, their knowledge, and their perspectives are mutually constitutive, change is a fundamental property of communities of practice and their activities.”<sup>17</sup> The introduction of newcomers (however peripherally) into a community of practice inherently entails the potential for change in the community's social practice and the products of their labor. The change in practice entailed in the introduction of newcomers into a community repositions the old-timers in relation to the labor around which the group revolves. The changing form of labor (be it in terms of products or practices of production) results in a future for the community in which the old-timers are also themselves newcomers within the community of an evolving practice.<sup>18</sup>

Despite its central importance to their contribution to social science theory, the continuity and displacement contradiction and the tensions that arise through such contradictions have remained largely ignored and unexplored in the ever-growing body of literature purportedly inspired by their work. The applicability of their theories for developing understandings of political-economic transformation expanded exponentially as I worked within the propaganda production wing of a single-Party State. In the work

that follows I return a focus back to the essential intergenerational tensions of *continuity and displacement*, arguing that an analysis of these tensions is a fundamental component of developing an understanding of changing social practice. I provide detailed accounts of instances where such intergenerational tensions, essential relations for the fulfillment of destinies, as well as threats to such destinies, come to a head through practices of legitimate peripheral participation. My work, however, must not be understood as a simple *application* of the work of Lave and Wenger, but rather as a theoretical contribution in its own right as a *theoretical extension* and development of their work.

**Extension of the theories of situated learning to produce understandings of social practices at the roots of political economic transformations:**

*Extension* is an approach I draw from the work of Michael Burawoy as developed in the introductory chapter of his book *The Extended Case Method*.<sup>19</sup> Burawoy has referred to the approach as “standing on the shoulders of giants”<sup>20</sup> – explaining that climbing onto the shoulders of the theorists one finds influential provides a vantage point from which one is able to ‘bring theory and history to ethnography.’ One uses the vantage point provided by an influential theorist not to simply confirm the work of the giant, but rather to explore social practice in situ, examining where one’s grounded fieldwork reveal gaps, occlusions, omissions, and possibilities for refutation in the theoretical contributions of the giant. In his introductory chapter Burawoy describes the approach of extended case method stating: “We begin with our favorite theory but seek not confirmations but refutations that inspire us to deepen that theory.”<sup>21</sup> Refutation, in this approach, “is not the cause for theoretical dejection but an opportunity for theoretical expansion.”<sup>22</sup>

My fieldwork revealed opportunities for theoretical expansion of the work of Lave and Wenger, expansions that enable me to further develop the concept of adaptive-perpetuation. My work returns our focus back to the essential intergenerational tensions of continuity and displacement, and the fact that an analysis of these tensions is a fundamental component of developing an understanding of large-scale political economic transformations of a single-Party State. In order to enhance the utility of the concept of legitimate peripheral participation for contributing to understandings of the context in which I conducted my research, one of the directions the theory must be extended is towards situating related practices into broader social relations. One needs to understand that there exist mutually dependent relations between those who labor for various institutions of the single-Party State. The labor of those working within one institution of the single-Party State must be understood as constituting a component of mutually dependent interrelations of the assembly of institutions whose members (administrators, laborers, etc) constitute the broader social body of the State and the Party.

**Extension one – communities of practice nested within larger social bodies**

In order to produce a critical theory arising from grounded ethnography within an institution of the single-Party State in Lao P.D.R., one must understand that the government ministries are arranged under a conceptualization of structural functionalism. A widely shared perception is that authority over different functions of Lao society fall

under the aegis of specific institutions of the government structure. The Lao Department of Public Administration has outlined the structure in its publication Organization of the Government of the Lao P.D.R.<sup>23</sup> The Ministry of Education is to serve the function overseeing all labor related to education; the Ministry of Health is charged with the function of overseeing all labor related to health; the Ministry of Industry and Commerce is to serve the function of overseeing all labor related to industry and commerce; the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry is to serve the function of overseeing all labor related to agriculture and forestry; The Ministry of Energy and Mines is to serve the function of overseeing all labor related to energy and mining; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is to serve the function of overseeing all labor related to foreign affairs, and so forth. These institutions are envisioned as each contributing in part to the governance of society within the borders of the single-Party State.

Discourse regarding the labor within and between the institutions of the single-Party State is infused with conceptualizations of functionalism. Each work unit, be it a Ministry, a Department within a Ministry, or a unit within a Department is envisioned to have a function that contributes to the labor of a larger whole. There were constant debates within my work unit regarding whether we, as employees of a unit of the Ministry of Information and Culture, were authorized to perform a certain function that might fall under the aegis of another Ministry or another division of our own Ministry. While there are general expressed understandings of the structures and functions of Lao institutions of governance, in actual practice there exist considerable negotiation, manipulation, maneuvering, creative and complex interpretation.<sup>24</sup> However, the practices of negotiation, manipulation, maneuvering, etc., must be understood in relation to the generally shared (printed, published, Party mandated, verbally disseminated. . .) understandings of the structures and functions of the institutions of governance of the single-Party State.

As a result, an understanding of legitimate peripheral participation within a community of practice must be simultaneously understood on multiple levels. In the case of my research, the propaganda production functions of the institution (and the social relations of the employees of the unit) must be understood in relation to both a) the Ministerial institution in which this labor unit is a part (and the social relations between employees of various units within the administrative hierarchy of this government Ministry), and b) the broader political body of administrative labor units for governance in the single-Party State (and the social relations between employees of various institutions of the Party in the single-Party State). Due to the mutually dependent interrelations of the institutions of the single-Party State, legitimate peripheral participation must be understood from the perspective that newcomers are entering into the periphery of a larger social body; a social body larger than just simply the group of employees laboring under the title of a single work unit of a State institution – a community of practice that is much larger than the community of employees producing the arts and literature print propaganda within the Ministry of Information and Culture. Their labor contributes to the perpetuation of a larger social body of which their labor is a mutually dependent part – the social body (a pan-institutional community of practice) of the single-Party State administrators.

### **Extension two – multiple diverse forms of legitimate peripheral participation within a community of practice**

Through my fieldwork I found the need to extend the theory of legitimate peripheral participation in another direction, and for this one needs to understand that the community of practice in which I labored and conducted my fieldwork was itself also arranged under a rather rigid understanding of the division of labor and mutual dependency between each of the component divisions. The writers and editors wrote and edited. The technical department managed the technicalities of layout and technology. The marketing staff dealt with all issues related to advertising and advertising production. The sales staff dealt with all issues related to sales. The typist typed. The Deputy Director coordinated the labor of each of the sub-units for the production of the unit's publications.

The work unit encompassed multiple divisions of labor that collectively produced the identity of the unit as a social organization and sub-division of the State Ministry. Perpetuation of the work unit was dependent upon the mutuality of the diverse forms of labor, the responsibility of which fell to different sub-divisions of the unit as a whole. Collectively the labor of the sub-divisions produced the social identity of the unit as a community of practice – the labor of the sub-divisions of the work unit constituted potential pathways for legitimate peripheral participation in the unit as a community of practice, however, the practices of legitimate peripheral participation in the labor of each of the subdivisions were unique, as were the dilemmas of continuity and displacement. My fieldwork thus opened up the need to extend Lave and Wenger's theories in a direction that would account for multiple modes of legitimate peripheral participation (and multiple levels of *peripheral* in the legitimate participation) for a single community of practice.

### **The politics of permission - entry into the site of my fieldwork – developing an understanding of merit, social relations and/or exchange as pathways into legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice:**

In this section I present the complexities of the process of obtaining official permission to conduct long-term authorized research in the Lao People's Democratic Republic. The case I present is my own, and my purpose in this is to introduce the reader to an idea that in contemporary Lao PDR access to legitimate peripheral participation in a given community of practice is widely perceived as being achieved through one or more of three paths: merit, social relations, and/or exchange. Through presenting my experience I demonstrate how a long-term commitment to building social relations is essential for conducting in-depth ethnographic research in authoritarian environments.

The Lao People's Democratic Republic is a small largely mountainous land-locked country on the eastern edge of the Khorat Plateau in mainland Southeast Asia. The Northern border is shared with Yunan Province in Southern China. The eastern border is shared with Vietnam. The southern border abuts Cambodia. The Mekong River forms much of the western border, a border shared with Thailand. And a small portion of the upper western border is shared with Myanmar. The country has one of the lowest population densities of any country in Southeast Asia, a linguistically diverse population of 5.88 million people at the time of the last census (2005). The country is a

former French protectorate, which, like Vietnam, struggled for independence first from the French, then the Japanese, and then the French again, and finally from the Americans. The conflict that in America is referred to as the “Vietnam War,” is called “the American War” in Lao P.D.R. The US engaged a very different form of warfare in Laos than it did across the border in Vietnam – the American War was largely a covert air war, with the U.S. raining more bombs per capita on the population of Lao PDR than any other conflict in the history of warfare. As the U.S. withdrew from the conflict in Southeast Asia the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party took control from the US backed royalists, and transformed “the Kingdom of Laos” into “The Lao People’s Democratic Republic.” As a single-Party State with a ruling Party that came to power through fighting against “imperialist America” one might think that the country could pose particularly challenging for American scholars wishing to gain authorization to conduct fieldwork in Lao PDR. Over the years, however, I have developed the sense that gaining authorization may be almost as challenging for anyone, not just Americans.

Gaining access to “the field” is one of the first steps necessary in conducting long-term ethnographic fieldwork in any foreign country. In the Lao People’s Democratic Republic a “foreign expert” card in conjunction with a visa authorizing work in the country are the documents necessary for foreign nationals who wish to conduct research in the country for an extended period of time. On paper the proper procedure for obtaining foreign expert status is rather simple and direct. But for an independent researcher (i.e. a researcher initiating the request for a visa independent of an official call for experts / a researcher not already affiliated with any in-country institution) the procedures are far from simple and direct. In this section I present the complexities of this process, the politics of permission, as I came to learn them through the experience of requesting authorization to conduct long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Lao PDR.

I begin by presenting an outline of the proper procedures for acquiring a foreign expert card and visa as explained to me by Lao officials. I then move to examine a discourse circulating among those who desire a means to stay long term in Lao PDR, a discourse arising from the widely held belief that obtaining such a visa is an insurmountable challenge for the independent researcher. I present the most commonly used alternative path for a long term stay, purchasing a business visa, and briefly raise some questions about the ethics of this practice. Finally I present details of the politics of permission by providing an overview of my experience as an independent researcher trying to follow the path for acquiring a foreign expert visa.

### **The official path to a foreign expert card and visa:**

When I was seeking permission to conduct research in Lao PDR, employees of the Embassy of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic in Washington DC and an employee of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs shared the following as the proper procedures to follow when requesting a “foreign expert” visa:

- 1) The person wishing to have such a visa simultaneously writes a letter of interest to:
  - a) The Ministry with whom they are interested in working, and
  - b) The Embassy of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic in their home country.

- 2) The Embassy then contacts the Ministry to see if the Ministry is interested in having that individual come work with the Ministry as a “foreign expert.”
- 3) If the Ministry confirms that they are interested in having this person come work/volunteer as a foreign expert, then both the Embassy and the Ministry write letters to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Vientiane.
- 4) Upon hearing from the Ministry that wishes to have this volunteer, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs contacts the Embassy.
- 5) The Embassy contacts the person who has expressed an interest, and requests that this person send in their passport so a one-month visitor’s visa may be issued.
- 6) The person then travels to Lao PDR on the visitor’s visa, and once in Vientiane the Department of Immigration issues the person a foreign expert visa.

I believe that this procedure may be as simple and straightforward as expressed above when one is answering a formal request for experts. I do know one talented medical anthropologist who skillfully and successfully negotiated a position for herself directly with high-level officials in the Ministry of Health, and her paperwork followed a path similar to the one above. But the reality of the process for many independent researchers is much more complex. The complexity of the politics of permission is at the roots of a popular discourse of impossibility found among foreigners working on subjects related to Lao PDR.

**A discourse of impossibility and the black market visa alternative:**

My experience is that Westerners living (or wishing to live) long-term in Lao PDR generally dispense visa advice on a one-size-fits-all basis. A social scientist working with vulnerable human subjects will likely be offered the same advice as the language researcher who interacts only with ancient palm leaf manuscripts. It is likely that the social scientist and the language expert will, in turn, offer the same advice to you should you inquire. This advice is generally along the lines of: ‘A foreign expert visa is impossible to obtain, don’t waste your time and money trying to get one, you should just buy a business visa.’

In 2005 I approached an American professor, whom I had been told was conducting research in Lao PDR, and asked him for advice on how to get a long-term visa for research in the country. His reply was: “I buy a business visa through Larry. Everybody does it. Even \_\_\_\_\_ does his research on a business visa.” [Note: The \_\_\_\_\_ was filled with the name of a prominent contemporary social scientist working on subjects related to Lao PDR. And it is a myth that he is in Lao PDR on one of Larry’s visas]. Though this is the only time I have heard the name of this social scientist drawn into someone’s rationalization for buying a business visa, it is by no means the first time I have heard reference to Larry.

If you start asking Westerners in Vientiane about how to obtain a business visa, expect to be pointed in the same direction – and that direction is towards Larry. “Yes, Larry. The Australian guy,” someone will say, “the one who used to run Larry’s Guesthouse, his wife has a relative who can get you a business visa.” The discourse surrounding Larry is usually used to rationalize or normalize the practice of paying someone to issue a business visa. When describing how they have ended up going to

Larry people will tend to either a) relate their own personal frustrations with trying to obtain a visa the legal way, or more likely, b) relate hearing of someone else's frustration with trying to do things the legal way. The frustrations led to the realization that the legal way is impossible, and as a result they turned to Larry.

What foreigners may view as a frustrating impossibility could very well be the result of not being aware of the situationally specific appropriate approaches that are needed to accomplish the tasks involved with obtaining a foreign expert visa. I present my own experience with queuing to illustrate what I mean. During one of my first trips to Lao PDR I needed to process documents at an immigration checkpoint. There was a huge crowd of Lao and Thai passing through the same immigration station. I spent some time looking at the periphery of the surging crowd to try and figure out where "the line" began and rather quickly gave that up, realizing there was no line. I eventually made it up to the counter and with my documents in hand I was trying to discern how to politely get my documents to the agent on the other side of the glass. As I watched what others were doing an older European man with a diplomatic passport moved through the crowd to my side and stated, "you're going to be here forever if you do things that way." He proceeded to grab the documents from my hand, shove them through the crowd at the counter and directly into the hands of the immigration official on the other side of the glass partition. As the official started to process my paperwork, the European diplomat turned to me and said, "There is no such thing as a queue in Laos, you need to take your money and your papers and shove them to the front. If you don't you'll be standing here forever."

Initially I had approached the process from my personal perspective of how paperwork was properly dealt with; I thought there should be a line and that by waiting patiently in that line I would eventually get my turn to present my paperwork. In the United States this was a successful approach. Although I could clearly see how others were succeeding with the same task I wished to accomplish, my engrained understanding of how things were 'properly done' made it difficult for me to jump right in and process my papers. My progress was thus much slower than all those around me. There was no line, there never would be a line, and if I continued to hold fast to my situationally inappropriate approach it is very likely that my frustrations would have built as more and more people jostled their way to the front and had their papers processed before me. In this circumstance the paperwork processing was visible – I could see what was actually going on and begin to understand how my learned and engrained approach would get me nowhere. Unfortunately there are no visual clues to the situationally appropriate practices involved in the process of applying for a foreign expert card and visa, and many foreigners (myself included) end up spending some of their time doing the equivalent of standing in line where no line exists. Personal, or second-hand frustrations resulting from the sense of not progressing appear to be some of the factors behind why people turn to Larry for a solution.

The spouse of a western graduate student told me – "Well [my wife] tried making connections, but it was just going nowhere, so after three months we ended up buying business visas from Larry." My observations are that 'slow' progress of one's paperwork is frequently attributed to "corruption." One American I spoke with described Larry's business visa as a fast pathway 'To avoid having to deal with the corruption.' The illegality of buying a business visa is rarely mentioned. In fact, when I have talked

to westerners about buying business visas, just one has addressed the illegality of the practice, and that was only when I questioned him about it. His response: “The visa isn’t illegal. The visa itself isn’t illegal. It’s a real visa. Maybe it is how you get it that isn’t quite legal? Is it?” Those who sidestep addressing the questions of legality tend to rationalize their decision to go with Larry by pointing to someone else’s experience with ‘slow’ paperwork progress, attributing this slowness to the “corruption” of government officials.

A number of insightful and influential scholars have embraced understanding social practices of exchange in Lao PDR through the application of the term “corruption.”<sup>25</sup> I believe, however, that the social practices of exchange in Lao PDR may not be most accurately understood through the application of the term. Recent work on “corruption” in Lao PDR takes as its starting point an acceptance of definitions generated by the World Bank, United Nations office on Drugs and Crime, and Transparency International: “the abuse of public office for private gain,” “the abuse of power for private gain,” “the misuse of entrusted power for private benefit.”<sup>26</sup> The European and American contexts within which the meanings of the term “corruption” have arisen (e.g. contexts where ‘government officials, public office holders, and those entrusted with power’ are paid a living wage with funds drawn from the population through systematically collected taxes the collection of which is enforced through longstanding tax legislation and an established/functioning judicial system) do not necessarily map directly onto the context of Lao PDR.<sup>27</sup>

The blanket application of the term “corruption” to diverse interactions of exchange/redistribution-of-wealth obscures the situationally specific social practices at play by precluding an analysis of the specificities of the exchange, the motives and the needs those involved. An idea at the roots of the exchange/redistribution-of-wealth in Lao contexts appears to be: When you have created extra work for someone, even if that work falls within the regular duties of that person’s job, you find some way to compensate them for the work you have created. Each exchange relationship is going to be different and the type of exchange will be dependent on who is requesting what from whom. To understand this type of exchange it is necessary to move away from the use of “corruption” and towards situational understandings of specific practices of social relations and the geographically and historically specific roots of these practices.<sup>28</sup>

### **Paths of merit, social connections, exchange:**

During a visit to Lao PDR in 2000 I asked a student at the National University of Laos how an aspiring student gains admissions to the University. She explained the popular perspective is that one gains admissions by either being “smart,” having “the right last name” (i.e. a name from a politically influential family), or having a lot of money (i.e. paying for one’s admission to the University). “Smart,” she clarified, was simply a reference to test scores, and those test scores could also be the result of: a) actually earning the grades (being “smart”), b) having “the right last name,” or c) paying someone to adjust the scores (i.e. having money). Presenting this student’s perspective is not intended to imply that every government institution or official operates this way, rather I present this to demonstrate a popular understanding of negotiating a path through human/bureaucratic obstacles involves a combination of the person’s merit, the influence of one’s social/political connections, and/or some form of exchange/redistribution-of-

wealth.<sup>29</sup> In light of this, Larry's business visas might just appear to be part of the normal way of getting things done in Lao PDR.

A closer look at the situations, however, reveals that the two are quite different. The *want-to-be-student* uses the existing practices of merit, family connections, and exchange with the aim of being *a university student*. The *want-to-be-researcher* uses exchange to gain admission to the country not as a researcher, but as a businessperson, fictitiously employed by a private company, with the aim of being *a researcher under the guise of being a businessperson*. When talking with an American graduate student about this section of my dissertation he stated, "I know one graduate student who did his entire dissertation research as 'preliminary field research.'" That is, the researcher was in Lao PDR long term on a black market business visa, but found he was able to interact with people and conduct his research under the pretext of being a graduate student simply conducting "preliminary field research." A British (citizen with an "expert" visa through a Lao government Ministry) commented on the situation: "I wouldn't want to be one of these guys here on a business visa. You know that might be fine for some people, but I don't want to have it on my papers that I'm here working for some Chinese wire company." This researcher recognized that such a visa would not only limit his legitimate access to the people, institutions, and artifacts he needs to study, but more importantly the business visa would force him to conduct his research under the pretext of working for a business; he would have to conduct his research covertly. In his guide to "The Art of Fieldwork" Harry F. Wolcott writes a chapter on the "darker arts" of fieldwork, which may include "clandestine observation." Wolcott concludes the chapter citing the work of Nancy Howell, stating that twenty five percent of the cultural anthropologists in her sample reported being accused of spying.<sup>30</sup> Those conducting research covertly on business visas in Lao PDR might have a difficult time defending themselves against such a charge.

The fact that a foreign expert visa issued through a Ministry can be transformed into a commercial transaction leads some to conflate the foreign expert card/visa and the black market business visa. One western researcher told me how she ended up turning to Larry, explaining: "Well when I was first approaching [a foundation] for funding, I wrote [a government ministry] into my budget. The idea was that I would hire one of their staff for a thousand bucks or something. I mean on paper. And in return they would give me the visa. Well, that is the way it was when I turned in my budget. But when I got the funding I realized that if I actually did it that way, I wouldn't have enough to eat." For this researcher, buying a business visa was cheaper than essentially buying a foreign expert card and visa. The fact that she will now be the fictitious employee of a business and not an official expert fictitiously working under a ministry doesn't seem to be problematic from her perspective, as long as the business visa is cheaper.

Another westerner shared with me the thoughts he was having when weighing Larry's business visa against a tourist visa, revealing a major advantage of the business visa: "Well I've been thinking that I'm just going to get a business visa through Larry, but you know they are changing the visa requirements and you can now get a one month tourist visa on arrival. With Larry's visas you have to leave the country every month anyways, so I don't know, maybe I'll just continue to get my visas on arrival. But if I do that I won't be able to buy a motorcycle." The purchase of a motorcycle required having a long-term visa. Though acquired illegally, Larry's business visas do offer a degree of

legitimacy for a long-term resident. The visa holder is able to interact with some institutions and process documents (such as rental contracts, purchase agreements, etc) that would otherwise be difficult to accomplish<sup>31</sup> without a long-term visa.

**Ethical questions raised in approaching research with human subjects using a black market business visa:**

A multitude of ethical questions arise from using Larry as a source for a visa, not the least of which is the potential for adversely impacting the lives of those Lao citizens with whom the researcher interacts. Those conducting research under the auspices of the University of California must insure that the researcher will conduct his/her research making all efforts to minimize possible harms to human subjects. Those conducting research with human subjects must have University approved protocols in place prior to commencing with the research. The human subjects protocols do absolutely nothing to protect one's human subjects if one does not have the permission to be in the country conducting the research in the first place. "Informed consent" does little good if the subjects are not informed that the researcher does not have government approval to be in the country conducting research.

Without proper permission to be in the country conducting research, or without proper permission to be in a given area, every interaction with a Lao citizen (human subjects proposal or not) has the potential to cause problems for that Lao citizen. One Lao government employee informed me that too many unauthorized interactions with Americans could adversely impact his ability to receive a promotion. Speaking of our interactions he politely dissuaded me from meeting with him until after I received my foreign expert visa stating: "It will be better when you have the visa." There are strict laws governing assembly in Lao PDR, with an official "foreign expert visa" one is able to apply for permission to assemble research subjects for the purposes of group interviews etc, failing to do so could result in the arrest of the subjects and deportation of the foreign researcher. By conducting one's research in the country covertly under the guise of being a businessperson one sets their subjects up to be at risk. Inevitably the researcher wishing to conduct long-term research in Lao PDR finds themselves faced with a multitude of ethical questions: weighing risks to subjects against access to subjects.

**My experience with the politics of permission:**

Below I detail my experience of obtaining a foreign expert card and visa in order to conduct authorized research within the Lao PDR. To illustrate how my experience does and does not follow the steps outlined in the official explanation of the visa application procedure I have labeled each section below to indicate where each would fall within the six step visa application procedure outlined enumerated above.

**Before step one – making contacts:**

According to employees of the Lao Embassy and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the first step a person must take to obtain a foreign expert card and visa is simultaneously writing letters of interest to the embassy and the government unit with which one is interested in working. Before even getting to step one, however, an independent researcher must make contact with the government units with whom they wish to work, and find the appropriate person to act as their contact in the unit.

My quest to obtain a visa for the purpose of conducting my dissertation fieldwork began in earnest in 2003. I was in Vientiane to reestablish the old connections (with people I had met through my wife and mother-in-law in the late 1990's) and establish new connections I needed in order to get a visa. I was also recording segments for an American Lao-language television show I helped to produce in the San Francisco Bay Area. One segment I was producing was focused on textile production in Vientiane. After recording an interview with the owner of a successful textile gallery (an old friend of my mother-in-law, a woman who has known my wife for many years and someone I first met in 1997), I told her about my research interests and mentioned that I was hoping to conduct my dissertation research in Vientiane. As we discussed how she thought I might go about applying for a visa and permission to conduct my research she offered to introduce me to Ajaan Phoumjai, an employee of the Ministry of Information and Culture who provided the Lao models for displaying her textiles in both in Lao PDR and abroad. Ajaan Phoumjai worked for Vannasin Magazine, the Arts and Literature magazine produced by the Ministry of Information and Culture. The gallery owner made significant contributions to the funding of the magazine through her purchase of advertising space on its pages.

The gallery owner explained that Ajaan Phoumjai worked for the Ministry of Information and Culture, and that, as the trainer of models for the government, a photographer, and a government employee working in the field of Lao culture (with a specific interest in textiles) he might be a good match with my research interests. The gallery owner offered to arrange a private fashion show for me to tape, she would ask Ajaan Phoumjai to bring some models for the show, and we could use this event as a way for me to meet him and discuss the possibility for getting a visa. In less than twenty-four hours the arrangements were complete and Ajaan Phoumjai, along with a group of beautiful models from the Vannasin unit's Sinxay Culture Club, met me at the home of the gallery owner to record a fashion show. During the taping of the show my wife and I mentioned my interest in obtaining a foreign expert visa and Ajaan Phoumjai said he would be able to help. It was thus through social connections (which led into the Ministry), and then the act of producing and exchanging something that was of value to those involved (a tape of the event) that I was able to gain my initial access to the Ministry of Information and Culture.

Back in the United States I had to make contact with the Lao Embassy. By this time I had a number of years of experience trying to contact the embassy for various reasons. My experience to this point was that lower level officials in the embassy act as gate-keepers, preventing potentially bothersome people and information from flowing up the chain of command to those officials in the hierarchy vested with the authority to make quick decisions and authorize actions. Lao citizens and Lao-Americans had informed me that it was not uncommon that the gates required some form of lubrication to get information, documents, etc moving past them and up through the chain of authority. I had made a number of calls to the Embassy to find out the proper procedure for conducting long-term research in Lao PDR and with each call I was provided small fragments of the details (the results of repeated calls were the six steps outlined above).

Shortly after returning from taping the TV show in Lao PDR, a good friend, Mr. Khitsomboune (the former Director of Propaganda for a Lao government Ministry) invited me to join him, his friends and one of his in-laws for dinner. The in-law

happened to be the newly appointed Lao Ambassador to the United States. Mr. Khitsomboune, who kindly took my wife under his wing when she first moved to the US, considers my wife his niece, and frequently introduces me as his son-in-law<sup>32</sup>. Such an introduction to the Ambassador helped to transform the pathway through which my papers flowed at the embassy. Rather than having to start with the bottom and work my way up I could send my papers directly to the top, and have the documents handed down to those who were supposed to deal with them. Both Martin Stuart-Fox and Grant Evans describe family connections and exchange (they frame exchange as “corruption”) as major components in political decision making in Lao PDR.<sup>33</sup> My access to the Ministry was through relations of exchange and my access to the Embassy was made through the social relations of “family.”

Around March of 2004 I received an email from an acquaintance stating that a delegation of government representatives from Lao PDR would be making a visit to California, and the group organizing their visit would be holding a meeting at the local California-Asia business council office. I arrived at the meeting hoping to simply learn the details of the visit, and found that by being one of three people attending (the other two being the ones sending out the notice of the meeting) I was, by the mere act of showing up, on the organizational committee for the visit of Lao dignitaries. One of the Lao delegation members was Ambassador Inpone, former Lao Ambassador to the US and Thailand and then the Vice President of the Lao National Tourism Administration (LNTA). Ambassador Inpone and Mr. Khitsomboune were classmates in the very first graduating class at Dong Dok (now known as the National University of Laos). During the reception for the delegation Mr. Khitsomboune told me that he would like to introduce me to Ambassador Inpone and escorted me across the room to the LNTA official. I was not expecting Mr. Khitsomboune to word his introduction the way he did, but it seemed quite effective in getting the Ambassador to respond. Mr. Khitsomboune grasped his old friend’s shoulder firmly and said: “This is my son-in-law, Charlie, he wants to come volunteer with you in Laos, is that okay?” Both the Ambassador and I looked a bit startled. After a short conversation Ambassador Inpone said, “Send me a letter, what you propose to do, and your CV.”

#### **Step one – writing letters to the Embassy, the Ministry, and LNTA:**

In August 2005 I sent off letters and my curriculum vitae to the Lao Ambassador to the US, the Ministry of Information and Culture, and the Lao National Tourism Authority. In each letter I explained that Ajaan Phoumjai, the Ministry of Information and Culture employee who organized the fashion show for me to tape, would be the primary sponsor for my foreign expert visa, but I also added that I hoped to interact with both the Ministry of Information and Culture and the LNTA as I conducted the research for my dissertation, exploring the changing social practices in weaving villages on the outskirts of Vientiane. I waited to hear a response. Waiting to hear a response was akin to what I described above: waiting in line where no line exists.

#### **Step two – when things start to fall apart:**

In September 2005 I contacted the Embassy and Ajaan Phoumjai at the Ministry of Information and Culture. The Embassy staff had no records of my papers ever being received and suggested that I resend the documents. Sheepishly Ajaan Phoumjai

informed me that he actually did not have the authority to ask for permission to grant me a visa, stating that I would need to establish contact with his supervisor, Mr. Paengan, and that I should tell Mr. Paengan that I was referred to him through the owner of the textile gallery, the woman who had originally put me in touch with Ajaan Phoumjai.<sup>34</sup> Inadvertently my actions of writing to the Embassy informing them that Mr. Paengan's receptionist (Ajaan Phoumjai) had offered to sponsor my visa, put his supervisor, Mr. Paengan in a potentially awkward and embarrassing position. Ajaan Phoumjai suggested that my letter to Mr. Paengan should, as my previous letter had done, address my desires to assist the Ministry of Information and Culture while in the country conducting my research on changing social practices in and around Vientiane.

One Lao government employee, who has years of experience working with volunteers sent from abroad, described to me the reticence he notices among Ministries in accepting "foreign experts." He explained that as Lao PDR is positioned as a "developing country" it is continually sent volunteers. Lending institutions and NGO's will fund projects with "foreign experts" included in the budgets, and Ministries are often saddled with dealing with these experts once they arrive. Unfortunately there appears to be the assumption among many sending institutions that simply speaking English is all the qualifications a person needs to be sent to Lao PDR. University students or recent graduates with no practical experience arrive, and there is little they are capable of doing beyond teaching English, and even this they may not be skilled at doing. Further, he explained, some volunteers have "caused trouble" for the host institution, and if the volunteer is on a long-term foreign expert visa it is difficult to get rid of them. Being stuck with a troublesome unqualified foreigner for the duration of a visa could be a taxing situation that might be best avoided.

This government official didn't mention him by name, but in the course of our conversation it seemed that many of his references fit the actions of American journalist. In the late 1990's the journalist was sent to Lao PDR by Princeton University to serve as a "language and marketing consultant" with the Lao National Tourism Administration (LNTA). In 2003, years after leaving Lao PDR, he published an account of his experience in Lao PDR working with the LNTA. He admits he had no qualifications for the job other than speaking English. In the book he writes disparagingly of the Communist Party leaders (referring to them as "cavemen"), shares intimate details of the personal lives of his co-workers, and presents himself as the person Lao turn to for answers - -the only person in the institution who could make sense of things going on around him. Through reading the book it became clear that Lao government officials would have good reasons for being reticent about offering long-term visas to 'foreign experts.'

Mr. Paengan was clearly not eager to take on the responsibility of sponsoring my visa. He would later inform me that the duration of the visa I requested proved concerning for people at the highest levels of the Ministry. I had requested a two-year visa, a duration much longer than the three month to six month durations the Ministry typically requested for foreign experts. If I proved to be problematic the Ministry would be stuck with me for two years. Further I was someone he had never met. I did not appear to have any of the social connections or direct contact with Mr. Paengan as I had with Ajaan Phoumjai. I say, "did not *appear* to have any of the social connections" as at that time neither he nor I were fully aware of some of the social connections that Mr.

Paengan and I did in fact share. Further, I was not fully aware of the status of some of the old family friends of members of my wife's extended family, or how to put such social relations into motion for advancing my goals of obtaining a foreign expert card and visa.

After two years of working to obtain a foreign expert card and visa through the Ministry of Information and Culture the progress of my application for a visa was coming to a halt. With no social connections or financial incentives the progress of my paperwork was not a priority for anyone other than me. Since I had already initiated the paperwork listing a Ministry of Information and Culture as my desired source for the foreign expert position and visa I would have to wait for the Ministry to either accept or reject my request, and notify the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of their decision before I could reapply for a different post.

Realizing that a rejection could result in having to initiate another application procedure, my wife decided to move back to Vientiane to work on building the social relations we lacked, social relations that were necessary for moving my paperwork forward. Through fictive kin "family" relations with Mr. Khitsomboune my wife had access to his old friend from university days, Ambassador Inpone. Ambassador Inpone, who in the past held a high level position in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in turn, introduced my wife to someone in his social network within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a man who had worked under Ambassador Inpone in the Embassy, and was now the Deputy Director General of Europe and Americas. Leveraging family relations my wife was able to gain access to communication with members of the community of practice within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

It became quickly apparent that leveraging social connections may operate vertically within one Lao government ministry, however the influence of rank and potential for leveraging connections dissipates as one moves horizontally outside a given ministry.<sup>35</sup> The Deputy Director General was incredibly helpful; his advice was clear, to the point, and very pragmatic. Unfortunately his rank, and Ambassador Inpone's rank, and the rank of the then ambassador to the United States with whom we had contact (all of whom were part of the social body of the past and present employees of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), had little or no sway over the decision making within the Ministry of Information and Culture. After four months of interactions concerning my request the Deputy Director General suggested that I travel to Lao PDR to work on building the social relations with those in the Ministry of Information and Culture in person. The Lao Embassy issued me a three-month renewable visitors visa, and upon arriving in Vientiane the Deputy Director General's advice to me was "Be sincere and be patient" – this simple advice proved to be the most valuable advice I received during the entire process. I was already more than two years into the application process, and much more patience would be needed.

### **Somewhere after step two- proving myself valuable and non-problematic:**

The Deputy Director General described my time in the country at this stage as being a time where I would need to prove myself valuable and indispensable. Sincerity and patience were necessary as a slow process of inspection began once I was in the

country. One Ministry of Information and Culture official later explained to me that they had to wait to see if I was the type of person that would not cause problems.

Some graduate students find the period of time during which they are applying for a visa to be productive and cost-effective research time. I spoke with one graduate student who had only applied for a research visa but started her research before her application for a visa was under consideration. “I’m going to Xieng Kwang next week. I’m kind of hoping that it does take them longer to process my papers, because if they do give me a visa I’ll be required to bring Lao research assistants with me on a visit like this. For my first site visit I would have to bring two research associates from the National University of Laos, one would be a senior research associate and I would have to pay them thirty bucks a day and the other would be a junior who I would have to pay twenty bucks a day, and then each subsequent trip I would only have to bring one junior research associate for twenty bucks a day.” The slow processing of paperwork enabled this student to avoid following procedures that would have proved costly had she been issued permission to conduct her fieldwork. Recognizing the potential for putting Lao citizens at risk, I chose not to move ahead with portions of my field research where permission from the Ministry was necessary for me to have authorized interactions with subjects outside the compound of the Ministry of Information and Culture.

As Ajaan Phoumjai was eager to have me work with him and record his work my intention was to use that work to demonstrate my merit and potential for contributing to the labor of the Vannasin unit to his supervisor, Mr. Paengan. I spent most of the first three months helping Ajaan Phoumjai with his duties of training models and cultural envoys, recording the training sessions on video, and editing the video in the Vannasin offices. When my first three-month visitor’s visa expired, I met Mr. Paengan in his office to ask where things stood with my foreign expert card and visa application. His reply was direct: “We can do [your paperwork here], but you would have to pay.” This was not said as a demand for money, rather he said this with the tone not much different than that of the European Diplomat who told me that lines do not exist in Lao PDR. In effect, I had been standing in a non-existent line for the past three months. He was informing me of the fact that “exchange” was the means of accessing my desire to officially participate in the labor of the Ministry of Information and Culture. He did not mention who I would be expected to pay, nor did he mention the expected payment – rather he was making the point that my desire to work in the Ministry combined with no form of financial exchange, produced a situation of impossibility for granting permission for a foreign expert card and visa.

This turn of events was not completely unexpected. I realized that many researchers coming to Lao PDR came with funding to pay a host institution for the procedures related to hosting, and I did not.<sup>36</sup> He advised me that it would be best to explore long-term visa options with other institutions, as he was certain that as things stood, my papers would not be approved. My perception is that each exchange (whether it is through Larry, or through government officials) is an act of normalizing the process, further entrenching practices that subsequent researchers will be expected to follow. Not wishing to contribute to the entrenchment of these practices I thanked him for his time, packed up my things, and left the Ministry. More than two years of work to obtain a foreign expert card and visa through the Vannasin unit of the Ministry of Information and Culture had come to an abrupt end. After three months of observation Mr. Paengan had

rejected my application and request to work with his unit of the Ministry of Information and Culture, and I was starting the research permit search again from square one.

### **Back to square one:**

Starting from square one was not the least bit pragmatic – it potentially could result in another two years of building social relationships only to be denied. I decided to take some time to carefully think about the options available to me. In the mean time I had a visitor coming from Berkeley, Virginia Shih, the librarian in charge of UC Berkeley's Southeast Asian collection, and I knew her visit would provide a much-needed break from thinking about how to obtain a foreign expert card, visa, and permission to conduct my research. During the three months I volunteered in the Vannasin Unit with Ajaan Phoumjai I became quite impressed with and intrigued by the work of the publishing unit. Virginia was coming to Vientiane to acquire materials for the library, and I knew she would have an interest in the relatively large collection of arts and literature print materials produced under Mr. Paengan's direction, so I arranged a meeting for all three of us. Since he had already rejected my application I felt no need to restrain my ideas during our meeting, and I expressed my sincere thoughts about what I had observed in the unit regarding the material preservation and dissemination challenges facing the Ministry. After three months of observing these challenges I had developed a number of thoughts about possible solutions to the problems, and I shared these thoughts as well. At the conclusion of our meeting as we stood to exit his office Mr. Paengan asked me to reapply for a foreign expert visa to help implement the ideas we discussed. Within a month I was issued a letter approving my appointment as a volunteer foreign expert in the Ministry of Information and Culture. Two years and nine months after originally initiating the process of gaining permission to conduct research in Lao PDR I was issued a foreign expert card and visa.

My duties as a volunteer within the Unit were multifold. Initially the agreement was: 1) I would write grant proposals to raise funds for the implementation of some of the ideas I had presented at our meeting with Virginia, 2) I would be responsible for producing documentaries about some aspects of the work of the unit, and 3) I would teach the staff of the Unit English a couple of days each week. Eventually over the course of my time in the Ministry my duties would expand to serving as the English Language Editor for a revised Vannasin Magazine, and English tutor for the Chief of Cabinet of the Ministry.

In the end, the exchange I provided was not a financial transaction, but rather an exchange of labor. Nelson Graburn, described the relations we enter into through fieldwork as entering into relations of mutual exchange.<sup>37</sup> This framing of a division of labor with relations of mutual exchange proved quite applicable for understanding my labor within the Vannasin Unit of the Ministry of Information and Culture. The exchange was by no means one-way – it was mutual. There were considerable potentials for costs on my behalf – with the increasing requests to produce video recordings of the unit's activities I was concerned that my tape-stock for field research would be depleted. When I mentioned my concerns regarding the depletion of my field research tape stock and the fact that my volunteer work in the Ministry was so time consuming that I had little opportunity to conduct my fieldwork in weaving villages, Mr. Paengan suggested: "Why don't you make *this* your research?" I had not thought research of the labor within

the Ministry would be welcomed, much less invited. I felt a considerable amount of reticence at first; having spent years doing the preliminary fieldwork in communities of weavers in Thailand and Lao PDR it was not a subject I was eager to place on the back burner. However, I recognized Mr. Paengan's invitation to be a once in a lifetime opportunity, and I realized that I could produce materials of use for the Unit while simultaneously conducting and recording my field research. With the suggestion of Mr. Paengan I redirected my focus from studying practices of adaptive-perpetuation and political-economic transformations within weaving villages, to studying it within the labor of the Vannasin Unit of the Lao Ministry of Information and Culture.

My entry into participation in the labor for the Ministry of Information and Culture was not quick, and it was not easy, but it was possible, and in this regards it stands as an example counter to the dominant discourse of impossibility surrounding the politics of permission in Lao PDR. Understanding and finding situationally appropriate ways to engage in approaches employed by Lao citizens to leverage a) merit, b) social relationships (be they kin for friend) and/or c) exchange can prove invaluable for gaining access to the field. However, my entry would not have been possible without a considerable amount of time devoted to building social relations both within communities in Lao PDR and within Lao-American communities in the United States.

Gaining entry into the Ministry of Information and Culture was not my intention when I met the gallery owner in 1997 and developed a friendship with Mr. Khitsomboune in 1998; rather these relations evolved over time, and happened to prove incredibly helpful as I began the process of seeking permission to conduct field research. Developing sincere friendships is not something one can produce as a methodology for entering into the field. When I am approached by scholars seeking permission to conduct their own research in Lao PDR I dispense the valuable advice given to me by the Deputy Director General of Europe and Americas in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: be sincere and patient. In my conversations with others who have also blazed their own trails into authorized research in Lao PDR, sincerity and patience seem to be important elements of their success. Sincerity and patience contribute to a demonstration of a long-term commitment to working in Lao PDR and reinforce the understanding that relationships may extend into the future far beyond the period of field research.

Through the efforts to obtain a foreign expert visa with the Ministry of Information and Culture I developed important insights into the difficulties 'outsiders' face when trying to become a peripheral participant in a community of practice within a Lao government institution. Of course my experience as an American researcher were different in many respects from the experiences of the young people I document in the remaining chapters of this dissertation, however the experience exposed me to social practices of governance in the Lao PDR, and practices of mediating access to communities of practice within the institutions of the single-Party State. My experiences of peripheral participation with this community of writers enabled me to hone my perception of social practices of incorporating outsiders into labor for the Party, and proved invaluable in the development of my analysis of the practices of adaptive-perpetuation.

**Field research methodology:**

The primary method I employed for field research was participant observation while engaged in labor for the Vannasin Magazine unit of the Lao Ministry of Information and Culture. Part of my responsibilities included video documentation of Ministry activities, and as such a video camera and mini-disk audio recorder were two of the essential tools I used to record details and images that I present throughout this work. I reviewed and edited video for Ministry productions in the office, using the recordings to further engage others in discussions about what I had captured in my recordings. A pen and folded sheets of paper were a constant presence in my pockets, and I scribbled notes on what I observed, heard, engaged in, developed insights about throughout the day, augmenting and expanding upon these notes with additional thoughts in the evenings. I gathered material objects produced by the students and the unit, collecting and collating not just the print material designed for sale, but also printed curricula, schedules, assignments, charts, photographs . . . filing these away with my notes. I conducted ‘formal’ (e.g. sitting down in a quiet spot with the sole purpose of working through a series of questions) and ‘informal’ (e.g. conversing while working alongside colleagues) interviews with members of the Vannasin staff, instructors, and the young people engaged in or aspiring to engage in the labor conducted under the aegis and authorization of the Vannasin unit. I conducted most of my interviews while engaged in activities with those participating in the practices I was studying. I recorded conversations on busses, motorcycles, bicycles, in offices, lecture halls, dorms, guesthouses, museums, fields, restaurants, and homes. I spent time with students and coworkers and their families at their homes. I slept alongside students in a dilapidated and leaky school building, napped near co-workers also napping in the office. Shared conversations over drinks and meals. I wrote, taught, laughed, danced, sang and partied, doing this all as a legitimate peripheral participant in a community struggling with adaptive perpetuation.

**Outline of the chapters:**

In chapter two I present a brief historical account of Lao language propaganda production, the rise and rule of the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party over the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, and the current post-revolutionary context of political-economic transitions. My goal in this chapter is to situate the labor of Lao language propaganda within a historical context, enabling the reader to understand the historically and geographically situated rise of the social practices that constitute the central focus for my theoretical development in the remainder of the dissertation. In chapter two I present the first part of my case supporting the argument that practices of adaptive-perpetuation do not exist abstracted from larger-scale social practices of which a particular community of practice may be a contributing part. My argument in chapter two is not that practices of adaptive-perpetuation are unique to Lao PDR, but rather that the specificities of practices of adaptive-perpetuation must be understood within the specificities of the geographical and historical contexts in which they arise.

In chapter three I explore two overarching questions about the production of a dependency on youth: How do the divisions of labor within an organization and the needs for employees within that division of labor combine to produce the conditions for developing a social logic of an institutional dependency on the incorporation of the labor of youth? This chapter is an introduction to the labor of employees of the Vannasin

Magazine unit of the Department of Publishing and Libraries in the Lao Ministry of Information and Culture. Vannasin Magazine is the Ministry's work unit responsible for producing arts and literature print propaganda for the single-Party State. As a propaganda unit they are inextricably engaged with the production of conceptualizations of the Party and its institutions within the broad scale political-economic transformations they and other institutions of the Party are producing. I present an overview of the labor of those employed by the Vannasin unit, as the members of the unit struggle with their changing practices of labor in an era of political-economic reform. Understanding the struggles entailed in the transforming practices of labor within the Vannasin unit contributes to our understanding of the production of a social logic focused on the recruitment of youth.

After developing an understanding of how the perceived need for the incorporation of the labor of young people is produced we are left with the questions: How is it that members of an older generation of practitioners produce opportunities for legitimate peripheral participation of young newcomers? How do members of an older generation of practitioners employ peripheral participation as a means of mediating perceived threats to continuity of practice and displacement of practitioners when incorporating young people into a community of practice? In chapter four, through the exploration of these questions, I reveal that within a community of practice there may be multiple diverse trajectories of legitimate peripheral participation, each aimed at providing and maintaining differing degrees of peripheral participation. The employees of the propaganda unit that constitutes the focal point of my research produce multiple trajectories for young people to enter into participation in the labor of the unit. I present diverse practices of legitimate peripheral participation employed in incorporating the labor of youth into the practices of adaptive-perpetuation of the Vannasin unit. I differentiate the kinship and non-kinship pathways into the labor for the Party and its institutions, detailing how certain forms of labor require the recruitment of young people who fall outside the kin relations of the Vannasin unit's community of practice. Through juxtaposing two specific practices of incorporating the labor of non-kin youth I demonstrate how practices of incorporation of youth and their peripheral participation are replete with diverse means aimed at managing threats of continuity and displacement.

How do intergenerational tensions come to a head through mutual dependency and the practices of adaptive perpetuation? In chapter five I introduce the Sinxay Writer's Training Camp, a camp initiated under the direction of the Director and Editor-in-Chief of the Vannasin unit for the purpose of adaptive-perpetuation. I demonstrate how the camp was created as a result of the recognition (on behalf of the members of the older generation of practitioners) that the perpetuation of the practice of propaganda production was dependent upon incorporating the labor of young aspiring writers from outside the kinship relations of the Party and the institutions of the single-Party State. Presenting an overview of the camp I reveal how the camp, as a venue for peripheral participation in the practice of writing under the guidance and close supervision by members of the older generation of writers constitutes a nexus through which both mutual dependency and multiple intergenerational tensions come to a head. The tensions that play out through practices of inculcation reveal that older generation's need for the labor of youth does not represent an earnest interest in the creative products of the young people recruited as legitimate peripheral participants. Rather the older

generation's interest in the labor of young people is reflective of the older generation's vested interest in the adaptive-perpetuation of the community of practice. The intersection of the older generation's self-interest and the younger generation's aspirations set the stage for the mutual production of intergenerational tensions. As a result, legitimate peripheral participation in practices of adaptive perpetuation constitute a juncture where the creative aspirations of youth collided with the reality of the gate-keeper's disinterest in their creative products.

In the practices of incorporating the labor of youth, members of the older generation of practitioners face two significant and related challenges: How does one inculcate the younger generation in the aspects of social relations that the older generation developed over time through their shared lived experiences? And, how does the older generation inculcate aspects of the social memory of the organization the older generation deem to be requisite knowledge for those engaged in the labor of the institution? In chapter six I explore how the administrators of the Vannasin unit attempted to deal with these issues in the context of the Young Writer's Training Camp. I guide the reader through three field trips that constitute the camp administrator's attempts at inculcation of a social memory and Party related subject matter. The stated aim of the camp administrators is that the subjects to which the students are exposed through the field trips will flow through the tips of their pens for their friends and society to read. In practice, however, the field trips reveal tensions that exist between the generations, as some young people creatively prod, and produce their own narrations of the official narratives.

Chapter six leaves us with two important questions: How do the members of the older generation inculcate practices of conformity? In the acts of incorporation how do the two generations come to a head negotiating and determining the gives and takes of what will constitute the future of a practice they are both inseparably involved in adapting and perpetuating? In chapter seven we examine the answers to these questions I exploring multiple aspects of the production of conformity. The key question guiding the exploration in the chapter is: How are tensions and relations of resistance produced and mediated with respect to the older generation's efforts of inculcating practices of conformity? Through an account of a "practice camp" I illustrate how conformity must be understood as to encompass not only the end product of the labor but also to encompass the social relations of production. As a result, the older generation's approaches to inculcating conformity are multi-dimensional and diverse. The interactions between the generations initiated through the older generation's attempts to inculcate conformity reveal that practices of adaptive perpetuation entail mutual tensions between the generations produced through diverse practices of resistance to change.

Finally, in chapter eight I present the argument that the practices of the older generation constitute one of the most formidable threats to the practice through which the two generations intersect. The question explored at the heart of this chapter is: How do the social practices of the older generation produce threats to the adaptive perpetuation of the community of practice? Detailing aspects of the culminating activity of the camp I explain how the generation of practitioners, through their attempts at fostering conformity stifle the youthful potential for contributing to significant transformations in a practice that must change in order for the community of practitioners to remain viable. While the members of the older generation perceive the young people as threats to continuity of

their practice, it is the members of the older generation of practitioners who in the end constitute a potentially larger threat to the practice by putting in jeopardy the institutional changes of practices of production that may be most needed for successful adaptation of the community.

I draw my examination of adaptive-perpetuation to a close in chapter nine. After describing the closing ceremony of the Sinxay Pen's Camp, a ceremony in which the senior print censor for the Ministry bestowed upon each participant a certificate of participation, I share some of the diverse paths students followed after the camp. The post camp activities of students reveal subtle but important transformations of the practices of propaganda production within the Vannasin Magazine unit. The products reveal how tensions between the generations continue to play out as the employees of the unit struggle with adaptive-perpetuation of the social practices of propaganda production for the single-Party State.

---

Notes:

<sup>1</sup>(Anderson 1991)

<sup>2</sup> As Anderson notes in the preface to his second edition of *Imagined Communities* that since the publication of his book there has been a proliferation in work on subjects of nationalism. However, one of the difficulties of applying much of this work to understanding ongoing social practices of perpetuating a single-Party State in Asia is that often this work rather unquestioningly takes Europe as a starting point for developing our theoretical understandings (as is reflected in Hobsbawm's statement in relation to the break up of the Soviet Union: "basically, the 'national questions' of 1989-92 are not new. They belong overwhelmingly to the traditional home of national causes, Europe" (Hobsbawm 1992 p. 163)).

<sup>3</sup> (Anderson 1991 p. 46)

<sup>4</sup> (Ivarsson 1999)

<sup>5</sup> Reynolds' edited volume is a particularly useful read for developing an understanding of the political conditions to which a considerable aspect of Lao practices nationalism can be understood as response (see Reynolds 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Terwiel's small volume on the idiosyncratic and "dictatorial ambitions" of Field Marshal Phibun provides considerable insight into the contributions a military commander made to the historic and contemporary conceptualizations of Thai nationalism (see Terwiel 1980).

<sup>7</sup> (Enfield 1999)

<sup>8</sup> These phrases are drawn from the titles of various works (see Than and Tan 1997; Bourdet 1994, 1996, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> (Thant and Vokes 1997)

<sup>10</sup> (Evans 1995)

<sup>11</sup> (Evans 1998 p. 188-189)

<sup>12</sup> (Pholsena 2006 p. 13)

<sup>13</sup> (Lave and Wenger 1991)

---

<sup>14</sup> Lave and Wenger note that the contradiction between continuity and displacement is “fundamental to the social relations of production and to the social reproduction of labor” (Lave and Wenger 1991 p. 114).

<sup>15</sup> (Lave and Wenger 1991 p. 116)

<sup>16</sup> (Lave and Wenger 1991 p. 116)

<sup>17</sup> (Lave and Wenger 1991 p. 117)

<sup>18</sup> Explaining this concept Lave and Wanger write “. . . everyone can to some degree be considered a ‘newcomer’ to the future of a changing community” (Lave and Wenger 1991 p. 117).

<sup>19</sup> (Burawoy 2009)

<sup>20</sup> An opening talk at: Ethnografeast: An international conference on Ethnography for a new century: practice, predicament, promise. Held at the UC Berkeley International House on September 12, 2002.

<sup>21</sup> (Burawoy 2009 p. 43)

<sup>22</sup> (Burawoy 2009 p. 55)

<sup>23</sup> (Department of Public Administration and Civil Service 1996)

<sup>24</sup> The complexity of responsibilities became most apparent for me during the time I was producing a translation of the book *Helping Children who are Deaf*. When I informed an official in the Ministry of Education about our project he told me he would have to be responsible for managing our funding as our work dealt with education. This is despite the fact that education for children who are deaf falls under the responsibility of the Ministry of Health (under the unit responsible for rehabilitation of people with disabilities), and we were working with the members of the Deaf Unit of the Lao Disabled People’s Association which operates under the Veterans Affairs Department of the Ministry of Social Welfare which is responsible for the social welfare of all people with disabilities. Further, as part of the translation project we were producing a Lao Sign Language VCD, after the funds were secured for the video equipment the Department of Mass Communication within our very same Ministry was able to redirect the majority of those resources to themselves with the argument that “Video equipment falls under the responsibility of the Department of Mass Communications, not publishing.” While the structures and functions may be clear on paper, the practice on the ground is much more complex.

<sup>25</sup> (Evans 2002 pp. 156-160; Stuart-Fox 2005, 2006)

<sup>26</sup> (See Feuer 2005 p. 39; Stuart-Fox 2006 p. 59)

<sup>27</sup> I discuss the problem of low wages of Lao government employees explaining the situationally specific and diverse ways of augmenting a government salary in chapter three.

<sup>28</sup> The ethnographic work of Yang (Yang 1994) conducted in China is exemplary in providing insights this regard.

<sup>29</sup> A number of years ago a graduate student from Lao PDR studying abroad in the US explained to me that a foreigner has the luxury of being excused for not following protocols, protocols to which Lao researchers must adhere. A foreigner, she stated, could walk right into a government Ministry and make an appointment to see a high ranking government official, but a Lao citizen would have to go through various gatekeepers following the proper protocol and expected procedures just to get to the point of being

---

able to make the appointment. This student worried that she lacked the type of merit, family connections, and the resources required for exchange that would be necessary for gaining permission to conduct research in her home country. As a foreigner in Lao PDR, am continually excused for not following the proper procedures, protocol, and expectations; even if I lack “the right last name,” I do have this major advantage.

<sup>30</sup> (Wolcott 1995 p. 154)

<sup>31</sup> Note: I say, “difficult to accomplish,” not “impossible to accomplish,” because the pathways of ‘right last name’ and ‘have a lot of money’ often make the *legally difficult* accomplishable in Lao P.D.R.

<sup>32</sup> I describe related aspects of the use of kinship terminology in Lao PDR in detail in a chapter I wrote on Lao practices of domestic and international tourism (Carroll 2009).

<sup>33</sup> (Evans 2002 pp. 156-160; Stuart-Fox 2005, 2006)

<sup>34</sup> Over the course of my interactions with Ajaan Phoumjai I became quite familiar with fascinating aspects of his presentation of self in social relations. For example, while he held the official title of “receptionist” in the Vannasin office, a unit in the publishing department, he had business cards printed in English stating that he worked for the Mass Media Department (a completely different branch of the Ministry), and on these cards he used a flag emblem reserved for much higher level officials in the Ministry. The cards presented a persona much more impressive than that of a “receptionist.” He used the miss-representation of his status in the Ministry to establish relations of exchange. For example, I make a video of his models to be shown on TV in the U.S. and he offers to sponsor my research visa. Most of the time he was able to pull off the charade – the case of offering to provide me a visa was one of the instances where his façade clashed with the reality of his status.

<sup>35</sup> I have noted caveats and exceptions to this, for example: In 2007 when coordinating the English to Lao translation of the book *Voices from the Plain of Jars* (Branfman 1972), Fred Branfman and I met with his old friend Hiem Phommachan. Mr. Hiem helped Fred translate the original text of the book from Lao into French, and Fred then translated Mr. Hiem’s French to English. Fred invited Mr. Hiem to write the introduction to the new Lao edition. Mr. Heim is the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs/Deputy Head of External Relations for the Central Committee of the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party. Having Mr. Heim, an extremely high ranking Party official, involved with the book project proved to open doors horizontally across Ministries. Party hierarchy holds the potential for horizontal influence where Ministry hierarchy may function primarily in a vertical direction.

<sup>36</sup> At a later date I moved on to volunteer under the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare with the Deaf Unit of the Lao Disabled People’s Association (LDPA). After a number of weeks volunteering to write grant proposals for the Deaf Unit and directing a book translation and adaptation project, the Director of the Deaf Unit approached me with a scowl and asked me directly “Where is the money?!” I mistakenly thought he was referring to the funding I was attempting to raise through writing grant proposals. He and his assistant, however, explained to me that they knew for a fact that when foreigners came to work as volunteers in Lao PDR the volunteers came with funding provided by their home-country institutions that sent them over as volunteers. As an example he gestured across the room to an Australian volunteer (a young woman whose post in

---

another branch of the LDPA was funded by the Australian government). This second experience helped deepen my understanding of how widespread the belief is that “volunteers” from abroad will pay some form of financial remuneration to the host institution in exchange for being the host. The fact that I didn’t immediately produce funds for him upon my arrival clearly caused the director of the Deaf Unit a considerable amount of consternation and anger, as if I had intentionally duped him and cheated him out of money by referring to myself as a “volunteer.”

<sup>37</sup> Nelson Graburn’s comments on mutual exchange in field research were addressed to the participants of the Asia Research Institute’s 5<sup>th</sup> Graduate Workshop – Questions of Methodology; Researching Tourism in Asia, September 6, 2006.

## Chapter 2

### **Historical-geographical context of the rise of the Lao print propaganda and the rise of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party**

#### **Introduction:**

On the following pages I provide a brief historical background to help the reader understand the context within which we find the rise of Lao language propaganda production, Lao nationalism and the People's Revolutionary Party. My purpose is not to present a comprehensive overview of a specific aspect of history within the region, I leave that endeavor to many of the other authors whom I cite in the following pages, rather my aim is to simply provide the reader with enough information to place the social practices through which I develop my theoretical insights within a historical/geographical context. The works I cite should provide a very good starting point for any reader who may wish to delve deeper into a particular subject presented here.

I open the chapter with a look at the colonial roots of the production of "Laos" as a geopolitical entity. The French disruption of pre-colonial social relations helped to set the stage for practices of politics that exist to this day. The concept of a Lao state with a population encompassed by borders is a relatively recent colonial era production. The encompassing of the population and the development of a pan-Lao national identity must be understood as an unintended offshoot of the French colonial enterprise in "French Indochina." In this short chapter I argue that looking back at the practices of French colonialism provides us important insights into the social production of the contemporary single-Party State of the Lao People's Democratic Republic, and the practices of politics and propaganda production within its borders.

#### **The production of *Le Laos Français* as a geopolitical entity:**

Although the French explored the region from the mid 1800's,<sup>1</sup> successive years of French colonial rule over the geographic region later to be known as *Le Laos Français* began with 'gun-boat diplomacy' and the signing of the Franco-Siamese treaty of 1893.<sup>2</sup> Through the treaty the French introduced the European practices of geographically conceptualizing territory and the encompassing of a population within borders of a state – a significant disruption of the practices of tribute relations (the *muang* system) that had prevailed in the region prior to the arrival of the French.<sup>3</sup> Writing about the states of Asia that existed prior to the introduction of the European colonial practices of the nation-state, Anderson notes:

. . . the state is typically defined, not by its perimeter, but by its center. The territorial extension of the state is always in flux; it varies according to the amount of Power concentrated at the center. Certain frontiers were generally recognized in practice, formidable geographical obstacles like mountains . . . . Otherwise the kingdoms were not regarded as having fixed and charted limits, but rather flexible fluctuating perimeters. In a real sense, there were no political frontiers at all, the Power of one ruler gradually fading in to the distance and merging imperceptibly with the ascending Power of a neighboring sovereign.<sup>4</sup>

Under such social relations, shifting threats to populations at the periphery of a kingdom's ability to provide protection could lead to shifting allegiances and transformation of practices of tribute/allegiance to a kingdom.<sup>5</sup> Populations could leverage the protection of multiple kingdoms through tribute relations.

As Anderson points out, it is during this period of transition from "a kingdom to a nation-state" one finds a transformation in social practices related to, and views of, political entities in Southeast Asia. Briefly focusing on Siam and the pre-colonial kingdoms in area that is the contemporary nation of Lao P.D.R., Anderson writes:

Prior to the twentieth century, Thai rulers had at different times varying degrees of control over the Northeast, but the problem was never defined as a regional one, since disaffection with, say, Bangkok resulted either in the formation of new centers or the drift of parts of the area into the kingdom of say, Laos, without any implication of parts of historical permanency either way. This fluidity was significantly enhanced by the rulers' preoccupation with control over populations rather than land. In a sense, then, we can date the inception of the regional problem in Siam to the intellectual shift in the Siamese view of the political entity they lived in from a kingdom to a nation-state.<sup>6</sup>

The French focus on demarcations of territory related to geography was an imposed social practice that ignored long established relations of populations. The French demarcation of the border of their geographical territory at the Mekong River effectively divided the Lao speaking population, which resided on the Khorat plateau on both sides of the river, with the bulk of the Lao population settled on the West (Siamese) side of the river. Using the Mekong to define the border, the French encompassed portions of what were then two small vassal kingdoms of Siam (one in Luang Phabang and one in Champasak), and an "enfeebled" royal house in Xieng Khoang.<sup>7</sup> As McCoy writes, "in their insistence in defining Laos in terms of the Mekong basin the French completely ignored existing political structures and carved a colony out of segments of existing states and federations."<sup>8</sup>

The borders encompassed into one geographical territory multiple populations with conflicting long standing regional allegiances and loyalties. The vast majority of the Lao speaking population lived on what became the Siamese side of the Mekong border, leaving within the borders of *Le Laos Français* only a fraction of the Lao speaking population. With hindsight historians have reflected that the effect of the French decision to draw the border at the Mekong, "was permanently to divide the Lao territories, and to relegate French Laos to the status of a remote colonial backwater, landlocked, underpopulated and underdeveloped."<sup>9</sup>

The monarchy of Luang Phrabang was maintained through classifying the status of Luang Phrabang as a French "protectorate" while areas outlying to the Luang Phrabang kingdom were governed more in terms of being a colony.<sup>10</sup> McCoy notes that the treatment of Luang Phrabang as a protectorate, "preserved the traditional royal families and used them as religious symbols to maintain popular compliance with the French Administration."<sup>11</sup> Even outside of the protectorate of Luang Phrabang, the French made use of aristocratic families to maintain political control.<sup>12</sup> Evans points out

that prior to the French, “appointments and positions of power were controlled by the Siamese, and not by the king himself,”<sup>13</sup> in light of this, the French can be seen as appropriating systems of political rule with historical roots and extending these into a new form.

An important aspect the Thai and the French both changed was the practice of succession to the Luang Phrabang throne, and these transformations of succession caused tensions among those in the changing lines of succession.<sup>14</sup> The change in lines of succession, the relative disempowering of some royal families and the maintenance of others planted seeds of antagonism that would later come back to haunt the French. These weren’t the only seeds of antagonism sewn through French colonial rule, the administration of the tax system produced another.

Systems of tributes and enforced labor had historically supported the rule of royals, but how this was put into practice prior to the French and after French colonial rule was quite different. While the colonial taxation system of the French over the population within the territory of *Le Laos Français* was “fleshed out” between 1900 and 1935, we should bear in mind, as Gunn notes, “in its role as appropriator of agricultural surplus and as mobilizer of manpower, . . . was heir to the historical tradition and prerogatives of centralized State power.”<sup>15</sup> The French introduced a system of ethnic hierarchies, reifying race and ethnic identity within the colonial social practices as a means of appropriating labor and materials from within the borders of *Le Laos Français*:

In order to have the hill tribes deliver the taxes, porters, opium (or whatever was demanded of them) regularly and reliably without incurring the expenses of any kind of direct relationship, the French used a system of cross-racial administration which established a brutal ethnic hierarchy, and, especially in northern Laos, pitted the various ethnic groups against each other. The French used traditional racial hierarchies where they were strong, reinforced them where they were weak, and created them where they did not exist. This system of control without direct contact had another advantage for the French. By deflecting people’s anger at the race above or below them on the scale, the French administration was able to exploit extremely independent and volatile groups without ever incurring any direct hostility.<sup>16</sup>

The deployment of the system of cross-racial administration and brutality through ethnic hierarchies helped to lay the historical foundation for ethnic tensions with which the Lao government would decades later struggle to manage. Despite *corvée* labor and taxation, and relatively minimal French investment in infrastructural development (that is minimal in comparison to French colonial investments in infrastructure in other protectorates and colonies), the French faced a perpetual struggle matching colonial revenues from *Le Laos Français* with expenditures.<sup>17</sup> The deployment of the system of cross-racial administration and political control/resource extraction through the brutality of ethnic hierarchies helped to lay the foundation for ethnic tensions that decades later the Lao government continues to struggle to manage.

Within the borders of the Mekong-defined territory of *Le Laos Français* those lowland populations identified as ethnic Lao comprised approximately forty-five percent

of the total population.<sup>18</sup> A comparatively limited educational system was developed in the territory. Rather than focusing French colonial resources within the territory on an adequate educational system to produce local administrators among the indigenous population, the French colonial administration relied heavily upon the importation of Vietnamese labor; as late as 1937 people who were identified as Lao held only fifty-four percent of the positions in the colonial Federal administration.<sup>19</sup> The French also encourage the settlement of Vietnamese and Chinese artisans and traders in the territory's larger cities.<sup>20</sup> In the 1930's while Vietnamese constituted only two percent of the total population in the territory, the population of the administrative hubs such as Vientiane was significantly altered by the large influx of Vietnamese; by 1943 fifty-three percent of the population in Vientiane was Vietnamese, eighty five percent in Thakek, more than seventy-two percent in Savannakhet and seventy-two percent in Xieng Khouang.<sup>21</sup>

### **Early challenges to French rule over *Le Laos Français*:**

Contemporary western authors examining the 1930's place the first upwelling of communist ideology in *Le Laos Français* within the population of Vietnamese residents.<sup>22</sup> Gunn points out, Vietnamese with anti-colonial sentiments passed through *Le Laos Français* on their way to the relative safety of Siam where they were able to congregate in communities outside the reach of the colonial forces.<sup>23</sup> A Lao civil servant named Khamsaen who joined the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) in 1934 is credited as being the first Lao member of the predominantly Vietnamese organization.<sup>24</sup> Outside the Vietnamese population the ICP, and its activities within the territory, were limited in scope.

The early stirrings of the nationalist movements in the French colonial Lao territory should not be conflated with the early stirrings of the communist party (ICP), as Stuart-Fox points out, "Only later did Marxism make any important contribution to the development of Lao nationalism."<sup>25</sup> Stuart-Fox goes further to state that the nationalist organizations that did develop within the territory, "owed little or nothing to Marxism, and were almost as anti-Vietnamese as they were anti-French."<sup>26</sup> This is not to say that colonial rule was not uncontested within *Le Laos Français*. While the French control over the Luang Phrabang monarchy may have made rule over the lowland Lao population more manageable, it apparently did little to preempt a number of ethnic minority uprisings against French imposed hardships.<sup>27</sup>

Challenge to French rule over the territories of Indochina came not only from inside the colonies. The French administration increasingly had to address what may be deemed cultural/political threats, such as that posed by the practices of legitimating the authority of the Siamese monarchy through spiritual practices shared among populations not only within Siam, but also throughout the territory of *Le Laos Français*. The Siamese monarchies had long used practices of Buddhism to legitimate their hierarchical reign over populations.<sup>28</sup> Monks from within the French territory continued to travel to Bangkok for education and, as Ivarson and Goscha point out, this was perceived by the French to be a political threat:

As the modernizing Thai kings turned to the *Sangha* (monkhood) to consolidate their state, Bangkok became the centre for Theravada studies in mainland Southeast Asia. Lao monks living on the Khorat Plateau – and

many monks in northwestern Cambodia – travelled to Bangkok rather than Phnom Penh or Vientiane for religious instruction. The French correctly felt that Bangkok’s religious pull had political implications and could pose a potential threat to their influence in and control of western Indochina.<sup>29</sup>

The French viewed the Siamese monarchy’s leveraging of Theravada Buddhism as threatening to produce subjects (i.e. subjects among the Theravada Buddhist populations within French Indochina) loyal to the Siamese king. Ivarson and Goscha describe the response to this in *Le Laos Français* as efforts to “construct a cultural frontier between Laos and Siam by ‘Laoifying’ the Buddhist religion . . . the French adopted a cultural policy designed to de-link Khmer and Lao Buddhisms from their Thai orbit.”<sup>30</sup>

External threats to French control were not simply “cultural” but also militaristic. In the early 1940’s Japan and Thailand collaborated to prod the territory of French Indochina from the outside.<sup>31</sup> Upon the Nazi invasion of France, Thailand took advantage of the destabilized colonial administration, invading to claim rule over the west bank portion of Champasak in the south of *Le Laos Français*, and staking claim to the territory of Sayaboury across the river from the Royal palace in the Kingdom of Luang Phrabang. A Japanese brokered deal between the French and the Thai made official the loss of these territories.<sup>32</sup> The result was that by the end of 1941 the French had demonstrated they were unable to back their claims of being a protector to the Kingdom of Luang Phrabang and the populations within the territory of *Le Laos Français*.

As grip over its colonies was weakened during the Vichy regime, France struggled to maintain control, implementing projects of ‘patriotism’ with the aim of bolstering colonial rule.<sup>33</sup> These projects aimed at instilling a patriotism towards France were in no small part stirred by the changes taking place across the river under the direction of Siamese Prime Minister, Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram. Phibun envisioned a pan-Thai unification, overseeing the renaming of the country “Thailand,” with the aspiration of drawing together populations of the region based on the concepts of Thai ethnicity. Thai author Preecha Juntanamalaga describes Phibun’s nationalistic movement as follows:

. . . Phibun supported a “Pan-Thai” nationalistic movement. With Japanese backing, Phibun and his followers hoped that Thai-related ethnic groups in Burma (the Shans) and in Laos (then under the French) would be “restored to their rightful place” under direct Thai rule.<sup>34</sup>

As Terwiel notes, writing about a pan-Thai identity existed from the era of France’s initial demarcation of the borders in 1893.<sup>35</sup> But it wasn’t until the weakening of the French hold on Indochina, as a result of World War II, that the French colonial administration began to move to counter the pan-Thai themed propaganda. In Laos the colonial administration supported the “Renovation Movement” – a movement historians have described as, “designed primarily to counter the pan-Thai appeal of Bangkok.”<sup>36</sup>

## **The press, propaganda and the production of a Lao identity under the French during World War II:**

In comparison with other areas of Indochina, France devoted relatively little resources towards projects of 'economic development' in *Le Laos Français*.<sup>37</sup> As Gunn points out, even by the mid-1930s there existed no "local legal press in Laos."<sup>38</sup> The noted scholar of Lao literature, Peter Koret, writes that while lacking in technology for print, relatively contemporary versions of texts did circulate via ancient forms of print dissemination:

In the 1930s and 1940s, it was common practice for monks in Vientiane to obtain published versions of Lao poetic tales from neighboring Thailand and recopy them onto palm leaves for the purpose of circulation. In one palm leaf version of *Nang Auraphim*, for example, failing to take account the change in medium, the transcriber advertises the exciting qualities of the story that follows and asks the reader to purchase a copy.<sup>39</sup>

According to Gunn there was also an active underground press: "from 1936 onwards a veritable flowering of the communist underground press occurred in Laos and northeast Siam." However, the first newspapers of the Indochinese Communist Party to appear in *Le Laos Français* were printed in Vietnamese.<sup>40</sup>

By the early 1940s the press held a significant position in the Lao Renovation Movement as a tool in the production and promulgation of a Lao identity. The aim was to produce materials to instill feelings of gratitude towards France, and, it was hoped, a "firm determination to remain faithful to the French flag."<sup>41</sup> Jean Decoux, the Vichy France Governor General of Indochina would later write describe his view of the urgency that was felt for combating Thai propaganda through the Renovation Movement in the following way:

This movement was responding to an urgent necessity. Indeed an intense and dangerous Thai propaganda grew against us, all along the Mekong, and the question arose as to whether our protected Laotians, troubled and excited by the defeat of France would cede to the demands of Bangkok, and turn their eyes towards their racial brothers, the Siamese Laot, or on the contrary, remain faithful, and be an immovable rock in the shadow of our flag.

I took up the challenge and I wanted a Franco-Laotian influence to be built under our protection, and to extend its propaganda to the right bank. This is what was done with success. The Lao movement, despite the cautious and indirect form of its propaganda, actually aimed to all Laotians, both Siamese and French, and expanded, in all forms, the exciting theme "the grand Lao home"; which could one day gather all children, temporarily separated from this vast family, under the folds of the French flag.<sup>42</sup>

The duties of overseeing the implementation of Decoux's ideas in Lao PDR fell to the Director of Public Education in Vientiane, Charles Rochet. Citing the work of Rochet, Clive Christie writes that the priorities of the Renovation Movement included:

. . . encouragement of general literacy, the education of women, the standardization of the writing system of the Lao language, the resuscitation of traditional Lao literature and literary forms, and the development of a new literature that would connect with Lao tradition, and yet be relevant to the modern world.<sup>43</sup>

As was true with the pan-Thai propaganda push on the Thailand side of the Mekong, the production of a literate target population, standardization of the writing system, and literature tailored to transmit the propaganda were all components of the larger French colonial push for the production of a pan-Lao identity.

While Vietnamese papers had been available in *Le Laos Français*,<sup>44</sup> Lao speakers did not have a paper in their own language until 1941, more than four decades after the start of colonial rule. *Lao Nhay*, the first Lao language newspaper, was introduced in 1941 under the French colonial *Service de Propagande Lao*, as part of the Renovation Movement.<sup>45</sup> The title *Lao Nhay* connotes a large unified "Lao." *Lao Nhay* was designed to be the mouthpiece of the Renovation Movement deployed in the attempt to counter the "pan-Thai nationalist and anti-French campaign originating from Thailand."<sup>46 47</sup> The paper existed as a propaganda tool, featuring poetry, news and cultural information aimed at instilling a pan-Lao identity and thereby bolstering the French colonial rule over the protectorate/colonial territory. Evans describes the content and function of the paper in his short history of Laos as follows:

While the content of the paper was never allowed to stray beyond French policy, nor to become explicitly nationalist, its most important function was to instil [sic] in its readers sense of Lao space and to create a sense of identity across this space. It ran poetry competitions that celebrated Lao culture and history, and it ran columns that propagated the 'glorious lineage' of the modern Lao from the time of Lan Xang.<sup>48</sup>

The Lao Renovation Movement projects aimed at producing a Lao identity (albeit the French administrators' intent was the development of a Lao-patriotic-to-France identity) prepared fertile grounds for the cultivation of a nascent nationalism among elements of the lowland Lao population.

### **The production of the Kingdom of Laos, the rise of Lao nationalism, disrupted lines of succession, and pathways to conflagration:**

It was also during World War II that the northern portion of *Le Laos Français* (the French administrative territory) was transformed into and ratified as *Laos*, a kingdom-protectorate of France. A move toward unification of the geography under the rule of the Luang Phrabang monarchy came after 1941 subsequent to the French loss of Sayaboury province to the Thai. Sayaboury was a portion of the Luang Phrabang Kingdom located across the Maekong River from the Luang Phrabang capital. As

consolation to the King of Luang Phrabang for this loss, the French administrators extended the King's sovereignty over additional provinces of the *Le Laos Français* territory south to Vientiane.<sup>49</sup>

Taking advantage of the weakened French position, and making a move to prevent the instatement of an Allied backed French replacement for the Vichy colonial administration in Indochina, Japan implemented a *coup de force*, wresting control over Laos on March 9<sup>th</sup> 1945.<sup>50</sup> As Murdoch explained: "The significance of the six-month Japanese occupation for Lao national life is that it decisively increased the possibility of Lao independence while at the same time bringing into the open serious tensions within the Lao ruling elite."<sup>51</sup>

It is at this point in history that we begin to see how the French practices of colonial administration would come back to haunt them. The French had worked the elite aristocratic families into the administrative system, as Stuart-Fox notes:

Laos in 1945 was deeply divided, rent by regional antagonisms and personal rivalry. Lao society was still strongly hierarchical, for French policy had been to preserve the prerogatives of the traditional aristocracy, not only in Luang Phrabāng and Champāsak but also through appointment to office in directly administered provinces. Political culture was still regional, centered on the *meuang*. Powerful families wielded political influence through extended clans held together by marital and patronage relations. No 'imagined national community' bound together even all lowland Lao, let alone the ethnic minorities.<sup>52</sup>

The history of disempowering certain lines of succession in various monarchies, while simultaneously affording the children in these lines the aristocratic perks of education abroad and colonial administrative duties, planted many of the unpredictable seeds of change that would sprout into diverse trajectories of nationalism at the end of the war.

One of the significant lines of succession disrupted with the formation of *Le Laos Français* was that of the *uparat* of the Kingdom of Luang Phrabang, Bounkhong. The position of *uparat* is often translated as "viceroy." Stuart-Fox defines it as a "second" or "deputy" king, the second most influential post in a kingdom.<sup>53</sup> A look at Bounkhong's children presents a convenient means of understanding the divergent trails the aristocratic elite blazed in their attempt to find a way through the political uncertainty existing with the Allied victory in Asia. Bounkhong had eleven wives and fathered twenty-six children, among whom were Prince Phetsarat, Prince Soupanouvong, Prince Souvannarath, and Prince Souvanna Phouma. Educated in France with a degree in engineering and a specialization in print technology<sup>54</sup> Phetsarat rose through the ranks of the colonial administrative system from interpreter and adviser to the French Résident Supérieur in Vientiane<sup>55</sup> to the rank of Prime Minister of the Kingdom under a restructuring that took place during World War II. The restructuring established the ministerial system of administration in the Kingdom, a system that would continue with adaptations under successive regimes. Describing the restructuring, and noting the nobility who filled the positions in the new administration Evans writes:

The change was accompanied by a significant modernization of the administration of the Kingdom, with the abolition of the King's council and its replacement by a ministerial system. Prince Phetsarath, who came originally from Luang Phrabang, and through his many ears in Vientiane had become the highest ranking Lao in the French Administration, became Prime Minister. . . . Prince Seta, a brother of the King, became Minister of the Interior. Phoui, a member of the nobility, became Minister of Justice, while a commoner and former provincial governor of Khammouan Province, Outhong Souvannavong, became Finance Minister. A private advisory council for the King was formed, headed by Prince Savang Vatthana [son of the King].<sup>56</sup>

Phetsarath had been somewhat of a thorn in the side of the French colonial administrators, specifically Charles Rochet, in that during the Renovation Movement Phetsarath balked at the writing of Lao in a Roman alphabet. Phetsarath's move was politically charged as Stuart-Fox notes in his description of the incident:

When Rochet encouraged the writing of Lao using the Roman alphabet, he was vigorously opposed by Phetxarāt, who was well aware of its political implications and the threat it posed to the historical identity of Laos and the Buddhist roots of Lao civilization. The idea was dropped, but Phetxarāt's victory gave notice that Lao nationalism was coming of age, that it was outgrowing French influence. Pan-Lao it might pretend to be, but not pro-French.<sup>57</sup>

As World War II was drawing to a close a number of pan-Lao movements had arisen – each with a slightly different political bent. With inspiration from the underground anti-Japanese *Seri Thai* (Free Thai) movement across the Mekong, Lao had formed a *Lao Seri* (Free Lao) equivalent (with added anti-Vietnamese sentiments to boot).<sup>58</sup> Phetsarath was also keeping abreast of the *Lao-Pen-Lao* (Lao for the Lao) anti-French movement.<sup>59</sup> On April 8<sup>th</sup> 1945 the Japanese forced King Sisavangvong to declare independence from France, and when the Japanese surrender came in August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1945 Phetsarath, his younger brother Prince Souvanna Phouma, and others were ready to preempt French attempts at reasserting colonial rule.

King Sisavangvong, however, had other plans. On August 30<sup>th</sup> 1945 the King, up north in Luang Phrabang, pledged that the Kingdom of Laos would, once again, be a protectorate under France. On September 15<sup>th</sup>, 1945 Prime Minister Phetsarath (considerably south of Luang Phrabang in Vientiane) declared that the entirety of the former French territory of *Le Laos Français*, was unified into a single Kingdom of Laos, and that this Kingdom was independent. In less than a month, the King, angered by Phetsarath's actions, stripped Phetsarath of the titles of *uparat* and prime minister. On October 14<sup>th</sup> the deposed Phetsarath and others from the range of pan-Lao anti-colonial nationalist movements joined forces to form the *Lao Issara* (Free Lao) government, and six days later they voted to unseat the King.<sup>60</sup>

During much of this time Phetsarath's younger half-brother, Prince Soupanouvong, was in Vietnam. After studying engineering in Paris he had returned to Vietnam, married

a Vietnamese citizen and embarked upon a career as a transportation engineer.<sup>61</sup> When the Japanese surrender transpired he traveled to Hanoi to meet with Ho Chi Min to negotiate support from and allegiance with the Vietnamese members of the Indochinese Communist Party.<sup>62</sup> He returned to the Kingdom of Laos with a small contingent of armed Vietnamese advisors forming a liberation army along the way.<sup>63</sup> In absentia his half-brother, Phetsarath, had assigned him a role in the *Lao Issara* government. However, Soupanouvong, arriving in Vientiane with Vietnamese advisors in tow was bound to cause tensions in a group made up of Lao nationalists, including members of *Lao Seri* with anti-Vietnamese views.

It must be remembered that Laos had a fairly small population, and only a small fraction of that population was afforded school based educational opportunities. Fall notes that by 1945 only 14,700 Lao had attended “French-type primary schools,” and “less than 100 (mostly from noble families) had received an advanced Western education.”<sup>64</sup> Therefore one can expect to find members of these noble families throughout the administrative systems. In his history of the last century of Lao royalty, Evans explains the prominence of royalty in government administrative positions:

... royalty had up to then constituted the elite and it was from among this group that many people were first recruited for modern education. Of course, as education and the role of the state expanded, the number of royals in positions of power diminished. Nevertheless, over the whole of the RLG [Royal Lao Government] period people of royal descent remained prominent in government and public life . . .<sup>65</sup>

It is not surprising to find that from a family of an *uparat* with twenty-six children, more than one sibling rose through the ranks of the colonial administration.

Phetsarath, Souvanna Phouma, and Soupanouvong had a half-brother, Prince Souvannarath who served as the Economics Minister in the royal Lao government. Unlike his brothers Prince Phetsarath, Prince Souvanna Phouma, and Prince Soupanouvong, Prince Souvannarath remained loyal to the King and the royal decree that Laos would once again become a protectorate of France. When the *Lao Issara* (with Phetsarath at the helm) deposed the King and the members of his government (including Souvannarath) we find this instance of aristocratic siblings unseating family from rule.

Although the *Lao Issara* did put up a significant fight to prevent the French from retaking control over parts of Laos, they were no match for the weapons the French forces had at their disposal. The French had the support of the King, and the support of Prince Boun Oum of Champasak (the Kingdom that was largely encompassed by the southern borders of the French territory in 1893). By the end of April 1945 the French had retaken control over Vientiane, the King was reinstated on his throne, and the *Lao Issara* had limped across the river into exile in Thailand. The French made concessions to the pro-French Prince Boun Oum in return for his permission to annex the former Kingdom of Champasak into the greater geographical territory of a new Kingdom of Laos.<sup>66</sup> By March 1947 Souvannarath was Prime Minister of the first Royal Lao Government, a government ruling over the unified territory of what was once the colonial French geographical creation: *Le Laos Français*.

The *Lao Issara* would eventually split, with Phetsarath largely resigning to a

relatively quiet life of self-imposed exile across the Mekong in Thailand<sup>67</sup>, another faction including Souvanna Phouma making amends with the King and returning to the Kingdom of Laos in 1949. With the communist revolutionary victory in China on the horizon just north of Laos, and many of the leaders of the *Lao Issara* movement moving back to Laos after the French becoming entrenched once more in Laos, Souphanouvong and a cadre of revolutionary minded comrades split from the *Lao Issara*.<sup>68</sup> With Souphanouvong as its figurehead-of-royal-blood they moved forward on a revolutionary path towards in close partnership the communist forces of Vietnam. Citing decrypted intercepted documents Ivarsson writes that the Vietnamese revolutionary leaders had their eyes set on Prince Phetsarath as a leader who would provide them a link to the monarchy that would, in the eyes of the Lao population, provide a form of legitimacy to a Vietnamese backed government in Laos: “the Vietnamese understood that Phetsarath was the real source of legitimation for a ‘new’ *Lao Issara* and that his royal stature would win over the people much more effectively than promises of Communist salvation.”<sup>69</sup> However Phetsarath wanted no part of such a relation. In 1950 the *Pathet Lao*<sup>70</sup> Resistance Government is formed with Prince Souphanouvong (Prime Minister), Nhouak Phoumsavan (Minister of Economy), Kaysone Phomvihane (Minister of National Defense), Chao Souk Vongsak (Minister of National Education), Phoumi Vongvichit (Minister of the Interior). In 1951 the Indochinese Communist Party dissolved so each nation could develop its own Party, and in 1955 the Lao People’s Party was formed. In 1972 the Lao People’s Party would rename itself, the “Lao People’s Revolutionary Party.” The LPRP rules Lao PDR today.

A considerable amount of speculation has been written about the reasoning behind Souphanouvong’s partnership with the Vietnamese. Nina Adams aptly warned against embracing a “unicausal explanation” of Souphanouvong’s behavior.<sup>71</sup> There were clearly a multitude of factors and strategic decisions that he and the others with him had to weigh in developing their own goals and that achieving these goals would require backing from some source. With Truman’s support of de Gaulle, it was clear that both America and France were aligned in keeping the King and French colonialism in place. The support for a Laos free from French rule wasn’t going to come from America or her allies, and it wasn’t going to come from the King. Adams continues, explaining that it was clear that any incarnation of a unified Laos (under a king or otherwise) would need at least some degree of foreign assistance:

For the Laotians, there was never any choice but to accept a measure of foreign assistance in full recognition of the fact that such aid would never be offered through altruism and without implicit Laotian obligations. What distinguished the offers was the price demanded and the reasons put forward for accepting it. In both these spheres, there soon emerged a clear-cut difference between Souphanouvong and Souvanna Phouma as well as between the patrons with whom they worked.<sup>72</sup>

Of course, the pathways to conflagration involved many more players than simply the children of Bounkhong the *uparat* of Luang Phrabang, but in presenting it through his children we are able to see how families of the aristocratic ruling elite split on divergent conceptualizations of the future of the Lao state, on ideological grounds, and on personal

aspirations for positions of political rule. Their example also shows us how post World War II non-altruistic foreign assistance helped lay the ideological foundations of practices of political rule, foundations upon which governing structures were produced, that we find in Lao PDR to this day.

### **The Kingdom of Laos, the Cold War, and propaganda production:**

In his book, *Laos and the victorious struggle of the Lao people against U.S. neo-colonialism* (1969), founding member of the *Pathet Lao* Resistance Government, and then Minister of Information, Propaganda and Tourism of the coalition government, Phoumi Vongvichit described the return of French colonial rule in Indochina as a form of proxy imperialism for the United States. His words reveal the central role of propaganda as a weapon by both sides during the struggle “to arouse fear and admiration” among the population:

From 1950 on, relying upon U.S. aid the French prolonged the Indochina war. This allowed the American Imperialists to intervene in Laos, and help the French break the resistance of the Lao and other peoples of Indochina. On the other hand, profiting from the French morass, they tried to take the situation in hand and recruit agents, watching for an occasion to replace the French. In 1949 Thompson<sup>73</sup> was sent to Laos and northeast Thailand to organize a spying network. The Americans wanted to increase their influence in the villages, chiefly on the youth and functionaries. Their propaganda praised the U.S. might and “aid” to arouse fear and admiration for the Yankees among various popular strata.<sup>74</sup>

Many western texts depict the years from 1946 through 1953 primarily as the Lao resistance movement’s struggles against French colonialism. Here in the historical account of a *Pathet Lao* leader (a text which is itself a wonderful example of *Pathet Lao* propaganda produced in the midst of the revolutionary struggle)<sup>75</sup> we find that propaganda produced by America is identified as being problematic for the resistance as far back as the 1950s.

Though little known by the general population of the US, members of the executive branch of the US government perceived Laos, specifically the prospect of communism in Laos, to be highly problematic. At a press conference on April 7, 1954 President Dwight Eisenhower, in response to a question by a reporter about the strategic importance of Indochina to the free world, laid out the domino theory. Under the Eisenhower administration the United States sent millions of dollars worth of surplus military equipment to prop up the domino of the Royal Lao Government in its struggle against the communist backed overthrow. The ‘Laos problem’ was a central issue discussed between Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy in the transition of Kennedy coming to office, as Kennedy explained in his statement to the press on March 23, 1961. Standing beside a tall revolving three sided prism mounted with maps depicting Laos the President opened the news conference saying:

I want to talk about Laos. It is important, I think, for all Americans to understand this difficult and potentially dangerous problem. In my last

conversation with General Eisenhower, the day before the inauguration, we spent more time on this hard matter than on any other one thing. And since then it has been steadily before the administration as the most immediate of problems we found on taking office.<sup>76</sup>

The perceived importance and severity of the “potentially dangerous problem” of communism in Laos is reflected in both the volume of records related to Laos in the presidential archives ranging from Eisenhower to Nixon, and in the spending put forward to tackle the problem.



Figure 2.1 President John F. Kennedy stands beside one of three maps used to illustrate his statement on Laos, March 23, 1961.

(Public domain photograph by Abbie Rowe, National Park Service, in the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston)

In the question and answer period of the press conference a member of the press posed a question about US funding of the Royal Lao Government dating back to the Franco-Lao Treaty (which pronounced the Kingdom of Laos a sovereign and independent state) and the 1954 Geneva Agreement on Indochina (an agreement that bestowed international political legitimacy upon the *Pathet Lao* granting the revolutionaries regrouping zones in the northwest of Laos<sup>77</sup>). The question reveals the large amount of US aid going to one side of the political struggles in the Kingdom, and Kennedy’s short response reveals the singular objective focus of this entire funding – preventing communism from being victorious:

Question: Mr. President, could you please tell us, sir, what in your opinion this country has obtained out of its roughly \$310,000,000 worth of aid sent in the past six or seven years to Laos?

Answer: Well, Laos is not yet a Communist country, and it's my hope that it will not be.<sup>78</sup>

The *Pathet Lao* propaganda presented such large-scale support of its adversaries as the United State's attempt to transform the Kingdom of Laos into a "neo-colony" and "military base" as part of the larger actions of American imperialism in the former French Indochina. Describing how the *Pathet Lao* revolutionary struggle did not ease with the Franco-Lao Treaty and the Geneva Agreements on Indochina of 1954 Vongvichit writes:

Although Laos had reconquered its sovereignty, power in the whole country did not really rest in the people's hands. Hardly had the cannons died down when the American imperialists took over from the French to commit direct aggression upon Laos with a view to turning it into a U.S. neo-colony and military base. So, the Lao people could not but continue their all-out struggle to hold in check Washington's aggressive designs and the traitorous manœuvres [sic] of its lackeys, liberate the whole country and impel the march of the revolution.<sup>79</sup>

To date, much of the writing on US military involvement in Laos has focused on the United States skirting international law and agreements with the CIA's covert war in Laos, the CIA's training and deployment of Hmong counter-insurgency forces, and the Johnson and Nixon administration's unprecedented and unrestrained aerial bombardment of not only military but also civilian populations.<sup>80</sup> It must be understood that Washington's aggressive designs against the *Pathet Lao* and Vietnamese in 'the liberated zone' throughout the Kingdom were not simply limited to the development of a fundamentally new concept of covert warfare conducted in violation of international laws and treaties. The US was also heavily invested in propping up the Royal Lao Government in other ways and the cost of supporting the government was not cheap.

By February 1962 Prince Souvanna Phouma had taken over as Prime Minister after a neutralist coup, the Pathet Lao and neutralists had waged a collaborative offensive against the Royal Lao army and Prince Boun Oum had formed his own right wing government that the US recognized. Three factions neutralists (represented by Prince Souvanna Phouma), Pathet Lao (represented by Prince Soupanouvong), and a right (represented by Prince Boun Oum) battled for support and recognition as the legitimate heirs to the newly established Kingdom of Laos. At this point in time the United States was spending three million dollars (\$3,000,000) per month to support the Royal Lao Government.<sup>81</sup>

In 1969 the US Senate convened a subcommittee meeting to question the Nixon administration's spending on Laos. The records of the meeting reveal massive amounts of funds devoted to propping up the Lao domino. Between 1946 and 1968 U.S. "nonmilitary economic assistance" to Laos was five hundred and ninety one million dollars (\$591,000,000).<sup>82</sup> In 1969 alone the U.S. spent ninety million dollars

(\$90,000,000) on military assistance to Laos.<sup>83</sup> These figures reveal that the *Pathet Lao* (with Vietnamese/Chinese/Soviet support) were up against some well-funded royal adversaries.

From the senate hearing transcripts we also learn that William H. Sullivan, U.S. Ambassador to Laos, was particularly taken aback by the *Pathet Lao*'s "Robin Hood" themed propaganda (i.e. propaganda that portrayed the *Pathet Lao* taking from the rich American imperialist backed aristocratic elite to give to the poor). An administrator with the Bureau for East Asia, AID, testified that the "issue of corruption and maladministration" was "a constant theme" in *Pathet Lao* propaganda. Arguing against this he stated that in actuality it was "governmental neglect and indifference" that were "the more pervasive issue."<sup>84</sup>

A significant portion of the 'assistance' the U.S. was providing the Royal Lao Government came in the form of pro-Royalist anti-Communist propaganda production. In his opening statement to the committee Ambassador Sullivan introduced the "modest" US propaganda production program operated by the United States Information Services (USIS) in Laos:

. . . I would like to briefly mention that the modest USIS program in Laos consists of both information and cultural activities, with emphasis on Lao nation building.

The nation-building program assists the RLG in stimulating feelings of national identity and improving motivation for national development. USIS works closely with Lao National Radio in programing [sic], and helps the Lao produce a bimonthly, Lao-language magazine which is the most widely read periodical in the country. USIS activities are designed not so much to promote America as to illustrate the role of the Lao Government.<sup>85</sup>

While the USIS program may have been "modest" on an international scale, in the context of Laos the program was substantial. Just how deeply involved the United States was in the production of propaganda was revealed by USIS employee Daniel Oleksiw. In the hearings Roland A. Paul, Counsel to the Senate, questioned him about U.S. propaganda production, I present the transcript of the interview below. In the interview we see Oleksiw slowly unfold a picture of the U.S. Information Agency's large-scale propaganda program in the Kingdom of Laos. Mr. Oleksiew's responses give us a picture of the massive propaganda offensive waged by the US against the *Pathet Lao*, and the details lead the Senate Counsel to question the legality of the US's activities:

TESTIMONY OF DANIEL OLEKSIW, U.S. INFORMATION AGENCY

Mr. OLEKSIW. I may be able to contribute some statistics about the volume of our USIS assistance with the result of that assistance in the calendar year 1968. For instance, during that year USIS either prepared or assisted in the preparation of more than 800 hours of radio programing [sic].

Mr. PAUL. What percentage would that be of the nonmusical programs?

Mr. OLEKSIW. I think almost all of that was nonmusical. It was news, features and, well, folksong and folk-tale types of programs which had a message in them, and almost all of that was on behalf of the Royal Lao Government.

Mr. PAUL. How much other programing [sic] of a nonmusical nature did they have? You said we prepared or participated in the preparation of 800 hours. What percentage of the total talking programs does that represent?

Mr. OLEKSIW. I would estimate that as roughly a third of what they broadcast, of the origination.

Mr. PAUL. Pardon me for pressing the point.

Mr. OLEKSIW. I understand.

Mr. PAUL. You say it is a third of what they broadcast. But in the other two-thirds some of it is music; is it not?

Mr. OLEKSIW. I would estimate, and I am sorry I do not have the specifics on this, but I would estimate that roughly half of their programming [sic] is music.

Mr. PAUL. I see. Thank you.

#### USIS PUBLICATION OF MAGAZINE

You also refer in your statement, Mr. Sullivan, to a magazine in the publication of which USIS participates. How many copies are there of this magazine each issue?

Mr. OLEKSIW. 43,000 copies. It is a bimonthly.

Mr. PAUL. What is the circulation of the largest newspaper in Laos?

Mr. OLEKSIW. My statistics show the circulation of the largest daily newspaper to be 3,300.

Mr. PAUL. So this is considerably larger than the largest newspaper in Laos?

Mr. OLEKSIW. Yes; it is.

Mr. PAUL. Now, with respect to the magazine and also the programing [sic], is the U.S. Government's participation in the preparation of these things evidenced?

Mr. OLEKSIW. By evidenced you mean is there attribution?

Mr. PAUL. Yes.

Mr. OLEKSIW. In most of these things, Mr. Paul, there is not U.S. Government attribution.

Mr. PAUL. So this appears as a document or a program sponsored by the Royal Laotian Government?

Mr. OLEKSIW. At least some of the recipients or some of the audience get that impression. At the same time, I should make it clear that none of this is done covertly.

Mr. PAUL. What do you mean by that?

Mr. OLEKSIW. We do not hide our participation. It is not done secretly, and I believe that many people I think that most people, in the Lao

Government, for instance, or in the Lao bureaucracy are very aware of American participation in the preparation of these things.

#### USIS FORMS OF INFORMATION DISSEMINATION

Mr. PAUL. Besides these two instances of publication, in what other forms of information dissemination is the USIS involved in Laos?

Mr. OLEKSIW. Well, the other ones, I suppose, are films, radio, and printed material. In addition to the magazine we also assist the Lao in the publication of pamphlets and posters; posters which are basically wall newspapers.

Mr. PAUL. Do you also participate in leaflet drops?

Mr. OLEKSIW. We help prepare and print some of the leaflets that are dropped, perhaps all of them. I am not quite sure whether anyone else besides USIS is preparing leaflets.

Mr. PAUL. With respect to the films, is there attribution to the USIS in the films that are shown?

Mr. OLEKSIW. On most of them there is not USIS attribution.

Mr. PAUL. And these are newsreels as well as other forms?

Mr. OLEKSIW. Well, there are several categories. There are newsreels, there are a few documentaries, and then there is--well, there are two types of newsreels, yes. I suppose the right way to characterize it would be newsreels and documentaries.

Mr. PAUL. Just a general question, and a somewhat legal one. Could you point us to the statutory authority that you have for this rather unusual aspect of USIS operations - involvement in propaganda of another country rather than the effort to portray the United States?

Mr. OLEKSIW. I am not sure that I am competent to answer that . . .<sup>86</sup>

Under the Counsel to the Senate's questioning Mr. Oleksiw reveals that the United States was directly involved in the production of massive amounts of propaganda to prop up the Royal Lao Government: Eight hundred hours of radio programming (one third of all radio programming), all content with "a message" focused primarily on behalf of the RLG; the production of a magazine with a bimonthly circulation of forty-three thousand copies (more than fourteen times larger than the circulation of the largest newspaper in the Kingdom); pamphlets, posters, leaflets for aerial drops, newsreels and documentaries all with no indication that the United States Information Services was behind the production. This was just what the US was producing. In addition to this Ambassador Sullivan reveals that the US was involved in the overseas training of Lao radio programming personnel, flying some abroad to places such as Singapore and the United States. On top of the US work, there were also Australian, British, French, and German (allies of the US) technical "advisers" providing technical and "program assistance" for Royal Lao Government radio.<sup>87</sup>

Despite all of the US spending on the war against communism in Laos the Kingdom quickly crumbled with the US withdrawal from Southeast Asia. By the end of December 1975 the revolutionaries had taken over the administration in Vientiane, the King abdicated the throne, and the Lao People's Democratic Republic was formed. As

the Lao People's Revolutionary Party took control we must remember that the Party members developed their social practices of propaganda production in the face of the tremendous onslaught sponsored by the US. In light of this we can understand that the social practices of propaganda production immersed in an intense, factionalized, and internationally influenced battle of "nation building" and ideological warfare are at the roots of the contemporary practices of the press and propaganda production in the Lao People's Democratic Republic today.

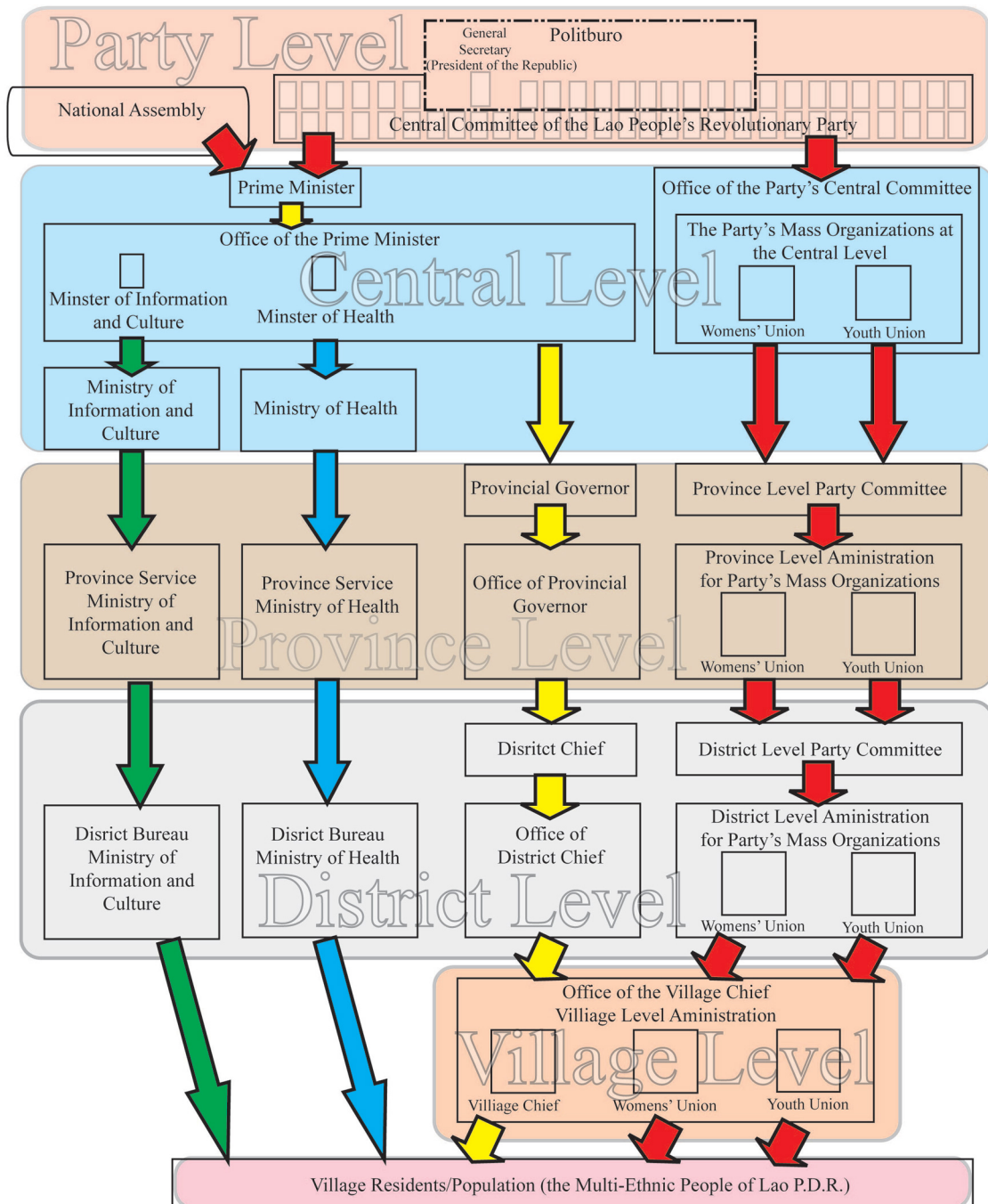
### **Party and administrative structures of the Lao single-Party State:**

In the early formation of the *Pathet Lao* we find the roots of the Party's structural approach to administration. After the 1954 Geneva conference the Pathet Lao established administrative structures that Fall describes as "largely patterned on what the North Vietnamese regime had done in 1945 and 1954 and were eventually operated with a similar degree of fairly high efficiency."<sup>88</sup> The hierarchical structure with committees at the central, provincial, district, village, and association (e.g. the contemporary Youth Union, and Women's Union within the village level), is quite similar to the hierarchical organizational structure of the Party that one finds in Lao PDR to this day. As Fall describes, a system of policing the behaviors of people ("a special watchdog apparatus controlling the whole structure for the benefit of the central leadership") was built into the Pathet Lao administrative system under the revolutionary leader Nouhak Phousavan:

The whole Pathet Lao administrative system is under the constant control of ubiquitous and completely secret *Kene sane* (i.e., he who sees), roving inspectors directly appointed by Nouhak who constantly report on how the regular communist administrative echelon performs. Each *kene sane* can, in turn, appoint several deputies who do not know each other and, thus, unknowingly also report on the activities and performance of their own colleagues.<sup>89</sup>

This secret policing built into that hierarchical social organization of administration proves highly effective at nipping threats to the system in the bud.

As I mentioned above, it was during World War II that a ministerial system of administration in the Kingdom was established. This system has been adapted to suit the governing needs of successive regimes. Below I present a chart depicting the contemporary institutional structure of government administration in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (see Figure 2.2).



Flowchart adapted from: Department of Public Administration and Civil Service. 1996. Organization of the Government of the Lao P.D.R. Vientiane: Department of Public Administration and Civil Service, Office of the Prime Minister; and, United Nations. 2005. Lao People's Democratic Republic Public Administration Country Profile. United Nations.

Figure 2.2: The hierarchical organization and levels of governance of the Party and administrative institutions of the Lao single-Party State. The colored arrows represent simplified idealized general directions directives flow from the National Assembly and Central Committee down through the institutions of governance. (Note: I have simplified this chart significantly representing only two Ministries and two of the four of the Party's Mass Organizations).

At the top level we have the Politburo. At the time of my research there were eleven members of the Politburo, who were members of the larger body of the Central Committee of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party. I believe there were between fifty-three and fifty-five members of the Central Committee during the course of my research. The Central Committee has a sub-committee titled the Committee for Propaganda and Training to develop the presentation of the official Party line. The National Assembly is the elected legislative body currently composed of one hundred and sixty-six Party vetted members. Note, in the figure I have drawn the Assembly to extend slightly beyond the edge of the Party as there is room for non-Party members of the National Assembly, but the overlap of Party over the elected representatives is almost complete. National Assembly members are elected to the Assembly through general elections held throughout the provinces every five years.

There is a substantial and significant overlap between the Party and the governing institutions of the Lao single-Party State.<sup>90</sup> As is illustrated in Figure 2.3 below, we can begin to see the extent of the overlap between the higher echelons of the Party, and the institutions of government when we start drawing lines between the bodies to see where certain members of the Party serve roles in the highest levels of the institutional structures of government.

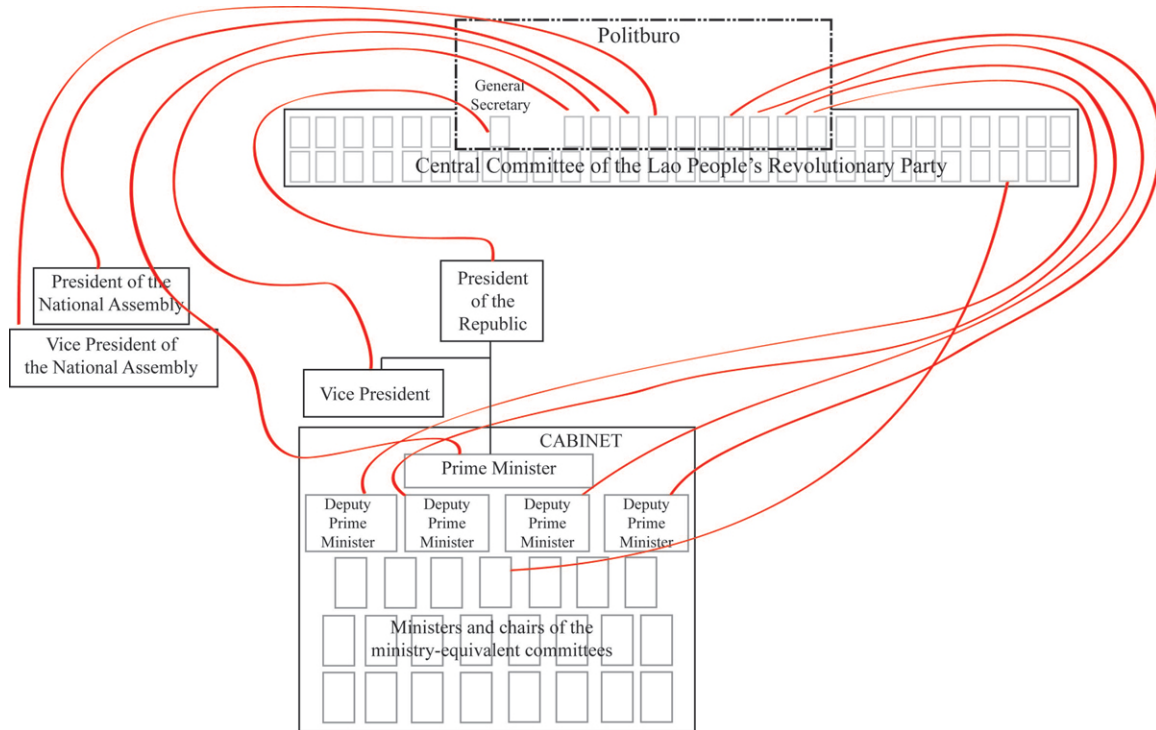


Figure 2.3: Party and Government relations in the single-Party State.

Each small rectangle represents a person, and the red lines are drawn to indicate where one person in the Politburo or Central Committee of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party and the post they hold in the governing structure of the single-Party State. The General Secretary of the Party is the President of the Republic. Another member of the

Politburo serves as Vice President. The President of the National Assembly is yet another member of the Politburo, as is the Vice President. The Prime Minister and all four Deputy Prime Ministers are also members of the Politburo. For simplification I have only drawn one line between the Central Committee and the Ministers and Chairs of ministry-equivalent committees, however in actuality all but perhaps one of these ministers and chairs would be from the Party's higher echelons. For reasons of space I have left off this depiction the Lao judiciary branch, which would also have red lines leading into the higher leadership of the Party.

At the conclusion of each Party Congress masses of posters are printed, distributed and posted in government offices helping the people of Lao PDR attach a face to those who lead the Party and the institutions of the single-Party State. The people on this poster represent the highest echelons of the Party. The Party is the hierarchical decision making body through which appointments are made, and from which policy emanates, and as such it is an integral part of the administrative structure in Lao PDR, with hierarchical Party cells operating in each Ministry.<sup>91</sup>



Figure 2.4: Lao produced representation of the administrative structure of the single-Party State during the period of my research. (Note- this photo is of the poster on the wall of the JICA offices in Vientiane, JICA staff affixed the English language labels).

On the top left we have the President and Vice President. Below them are the head of the People's Supreme Court and the Public Prosecutor General. To the right of these four figures we find the National Assembly leaders arranged in hierarchical order with the President of the National Assembly on the top line (note his image is slightly larger than the rest indicating his importance), and two Vice Presidents of the National Assembly to his right. Below them are the various chairs of various committees and the Head of the Cabinet of the Assembly. The third row of photographs depicts the members of the Cabinet of the Government of the Lao PDR. The largest photo at the right hand side of this row is the Prime Minister. The four photographs to his right are the Deputy Prime Ministers. The fourth, fifth and sixth rows depict the Ministers and Chairs of ministry equivalent committees.

The titles of Ministries and the location of propaganda production within them have changed over the years of the revolutionary struggle. In 1969 when revolutionary leader Phoumi Vongvichit wrote his book about the "victorious struggle" against US "neo-colonialism," he was the Minister of Information, Propaganda and Tourism. Stuart-Fox notes that after the revolution of 1975, propaganda "became a task for the Ministry of Information, Propaganda, Culture, and Tourism (though the term *propaganda* was later dropped from its title)."<sup>92</sup> As per resolution of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party's Central Committee in May of 1976, a "cultural and ideological revolution" was one of three simultaneous revolutions to be carried out for the nation to "advance toward socialism."<sup>93</sup> The primary institution charged with revolutionary responsibilities in the area of culture and ideology in Lao PDR remains the Lao Ministry of Information and Culture. The Party's regulation of print press, radio, television are all managed through this Ministry.

The Ministry of Information and Culture is organized in a top down hierarchical structure diagramed in Figure 2.5 below.

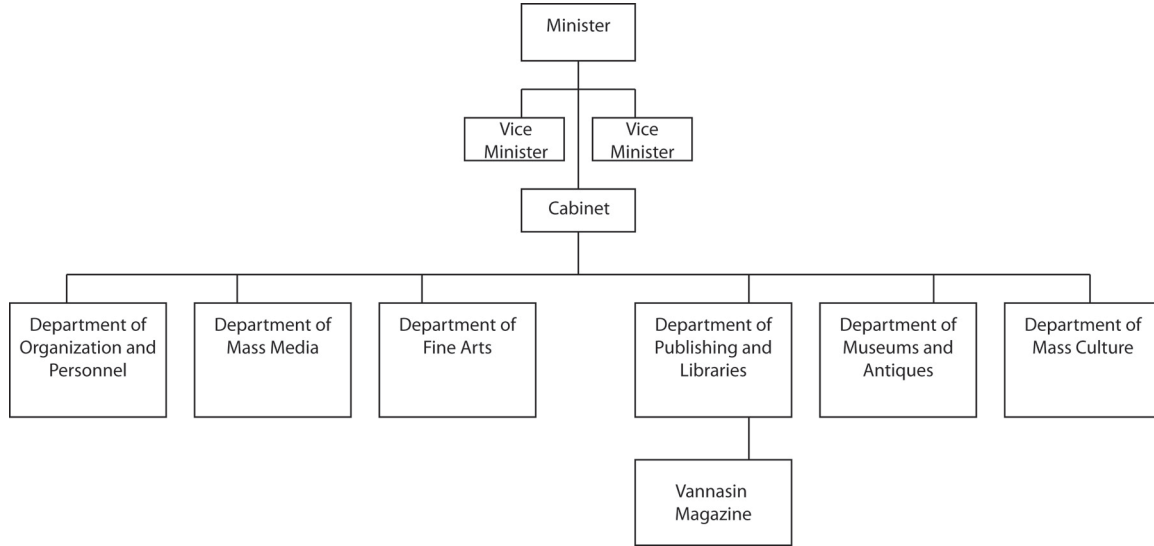


Figure 2.5: Simplified diagram of the organizational structure of the Ministry of Information and Culture. (Diagram adapted from the 1996 Department of Public Administration and Civil Service publication *Organization of the Government of the Lao P.D.R.*<sup>94</sup>)

The Minister is a member of the Central Committee of the Party and the Party membership extends through the administration of each department and the sub-units. As most of the titles of the Ministry’s departments capture the scope of duties that fall to these departments, however it should be noted that Publishing and Libraries was also responsible for approving music lyrics. The Department of Mass Media oversaw television and radio production, while the Department of Mass Culture was responsible for such things as overseeing bars, parks, signage, the designation of “cultural villages” (i.e. villages that have labored to wipe out all of the behaviors that the Party deems to be detrimental to society), and the distribution of loudspeaker systems to villages so the Party’s messages may be broadcast aloud to village residents throughout the country. I conducted my research in Vannasin Magazine unit of the Department of Publishing and Libraries at the Central level of the Lao administrative system.

Writing on the subject of Marxism-Leninism in Lao PDR Stuart-Fox notes that only two principles seem to have been embraced by the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party: “dictatorship of the proletariat (exercised by the party on behalf of both workers and peasants in the virtual absence in Laos of a proletariat) and democratic centralism because together these ensured the party a monopoly on of political power.”<sup>95</sup> He goes on to write “Despite the best efforts of party leaders and the Party Ideological School and years of compulsory ‘seminars,’ understanding of Marxism-Leninism on the part of most party cadres can only be described as shallow and its appeal to the mass of the population slight. By the 21st century, very few Lao could be considered committed Marxists, and the LPRP was Marxist-Leninist in name only.”<sup>96</sup> This point is very important to keep in mind – one should not conflate the current incarnation of Party as a community of practice with all of the ideological doctrines of Marx and Lenin.

Just as the prerevolutionary administrative system was adapted to work under the hierarchical relations of the Party, so too were the pre-revolutionary social relations of the elite. While pointing out the biases inherent in “state-centric approaches” to the study of subjects related to Laos, Gunn notes, “in a country where formal power remained in the hands of the traditional aristocratic elite until 1975, one would be hard put to analyse modern Lao politics without reference to the patron-client bureaucratic polity model, in some form or other.”<sup>97</sup> Social practices of patronage clearly continue to shape the production of the Lao political-economy. With an eye on patron-client social relations Australian historian Martin Stuart-Fox, has detailed how pre-revolutionary social practices of ascendancy to positions of political power through kinship were adapted to the post-revolutionary rule of the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (LPRP):

At first the structure of the LPRP promised to introduce a thoroughly modern approach to politics that would replace traditional Lao political culture. After all, membership of the former social elite was a disadvantage for recruitment into a party of the proletariat. But the Party desperately needed recruits. Because the revolutionary movement had controlled mainly the mountainous parts of the country up until 1975, membership of the Party included a relatively large proportion of poorly educated minority cadres. After 1975 recruitment concentrated on the lowland ethnic Lao population. Many of these new members were political opportunists: none had been honed by years of revolutionary struggle. They brought with them the attitudes they had learned to authority and ways of accommodating power, and many soon turned their positions within the Party to their own interests.

. . . senior Party members soon began to dispense patronage in the traditional Lao way, rewarding extended family members and loyal retainers with jobs for which they were often poorly qualified, in order to build a political support base. In particular, such patronage applied within the Party itself: political promotion required the patronage of senior Party officials. The criterion of revolutionary dedication was replaced by family and clan affiliation.

The resulting system was one that those who had supported the former regime well understood. Remaining members of former aristocratic families moved to cement relations with powerful Party members, for example, through marriages between their children. Thus a new political and social elite began to take form, an alliance of new power with old wealth and social standing, which used the Party to promote family interests.<sup>98</sup>

In reading the passage above, however, one should not conclude that all elements of the Party did not make concerted attempts to practice socialism. Soon after the revolution the Party did try to implement a system of centralized planning. There were some reported successes attributed to the centrally planned system.<sup>99</sup> However, failures of this system, particularly in regards to a populous unwilling to go along with top down imposed forced collectivization in agriculture is well documented<sup>100</sup> and the Party openly

admits the failures in the press as part of its justification for the abandonment of the centrally planned system and the adoption of new economic practices.<sup>101</sup> The failures and economic struggles, and perhaps personal interests of Party members in accruing private capital and controlling resources at their disposal led to the promulgation of economic reforms collectively known as the “New Economic Mechanism” (NEM).

The NEM was a sweeping set of reforms put into play after the Fourth Party Congress in 1986. In the Lao English language press the reforms are described as a transition from a “centrally planned system” to a “market-based economy.”<sup>102</sup> The main principles of the reforms, as outlined by Chanthavong Saignasith, then Director of the Department of Planning and Public Investment Programs of the Committee for Planning and Cooperation in Vientiane, were:

- to switch from a system with administrative instruction from supervising authorities as the primary tool for managing state enterprises to a management system that relies on economic incentives (price, profits, taxes, etc.);
- to replace the system whereby compulsory deliveries of goods, and barter were predominant with a system consisting of freely contracted trading arrangements and increased monetization of the economy; and
- to allow trade liberalization, and free circulation of goods in the whole country, and ensure full equality for all sectors with respect to trade.<sup>103</sup>

With an understanding of the Party and governing administrative structure it is fairly clear to see how these reforms stood to potentially benefit and enrich those who were members of the Party elite. Stuart-Fox writes of how the NEM contributed to post-revolutionary “political-economic elite formation”:

This reform was a political necessity, to address the deteriorating economic situation, but one unforeseen outcome was to provide new opportunities for the new political-economic elite to pursue their personal interests under the cover of the Party.

The example set by senior Party members, both in Vientiane and in the provinces, was soon adopted at all levels. Party members with access to the resources of the state appropriated some for themselves and dispensed some as patronage in the traditional Lao way. But whereas under the Royal Lao regime powerful families competed for influence in the arena of party politics and there was at least some residual notion of a bureaucracy in the service of the state, rather than of the ruling political party, in the Lao PDR the LPRP alone exercises political power and the bureaucracy functions as a highly politicised arm of the Party. With no tradition of bureaucratic administration (as in China and Vietnam), politics in Laos reverted to competition between networks of influence and patronage cohering around senior Party officials, leading to what might be described as clientelism.<sup>104</sup>

Within this context we can understand both a) why young people from outside the

social relations of the Party would have a particular interest in finding pathways into the social relations of the Party, and, b) why the Party would make concerted efforts to control the representations of the Party. In this setting the control over the image of the Party and the projection of an image of the justness and legitimacy of the Party and its institutions of single-Party rule becomes an important challenge facing the Ministry of Information and Culture.

### **The Ministry, the censor, the writer and the administration of authorized publishing in Lao PDR:**

Publishing in Lao PDR remains under the regulation of the single-Party State. If one wishes to publish (song lyrics, poetry, children's literature, novels, short stories, etc.) one must receive approval from an authorized government agency prior to putting the item into print. In a 2006 interview with *ຮັບເດີນ* Update Business and Entertainment Magazine, Mr. Siviengkhek Konnyvong, Director General of the Publishing Department of the Ministry of Information and Culture provided details on the state mandated procedures that govern publishing in Lao PDR:

Writers who have ideas for writing and want to publish a book may send the contents to the Publishing Department for inspection [i.e. for review by the Ministry's censors]. Or they could find an organization that belongs to the government that could approve the contents. If that [State run] organization approves the book they [the State organization] must take responsibility for any mistakes within the text. At the present time in our country we do not yet have laws or regulations for granting permission to privately owned businesses to form their own publishing agencies, therefore privately owned printing houses are still not able to function as censors for their own publications.<sup>105</sup>

All publishing in Lao PDR must receive the approval of a State run institution's censors prior to appearing in print. Each State institution overseeing its own subject specific publishing must follow the directives of the same government decree on publishing that governs the Ministry of Information and Culture's Publishing Department:

Other Ministries and State institutions can establish their own publishing agencies. For example, the Ministry of Finance is able to establish a printing agency and censor texts related to works about finance. Each [State run] institution that establishes its own printing agency must follow the same government decree and adhere to the same regulations that currently govern the work of the Publishing Department. Therefore people who write books, or organizations that are responsible for publishing books for sale, must first understand the government's decree, and have a certificate of approval from the government.<sup>106</sup>

Passing the censor's inspection and receiving the certificate of approval from an authorized government institution for each piece written is an essential required step for

writers wishing to publish work in the Lao People's Democratic Republic. The Lao government maintains monopolistic control over publishing in the Lao language within the country through the censor and certification process. In his interview Mr. Siviengkhek stressed that the decree governing publications is not accessible to those outside government institutions, and he alluded to the practices of bargaining over censorship costs that take place as a writer negotiates one's way through the approval process:

The decree and the certificate of approval are not things for sale in the market, each person who wants this decree must come to get it directly from the Publishing Department. Currently the Printing Office is subordinate to the Printing Department and has two censors, the cost of their labor is negotiable.<sup>107</sup>

While the Vannasin Unit, is a division of the Publishing and Libraries Department producing official publications of the Ministry of Information and Culture in the areas of arts and literature, the private publishing work (i.e. "special work" of writing that supplements one's income) must receive approval from the censor just as non-ministry affiliated citizens must. One morning during my second year at the Ministry of Information and Culture Mr. Dee (by this time he was the Director and Editor-in-Chief of Vannasin Magazine, the Ministry's Literature and Arts Magazine) passed me on the way into his office saying that Mr. Khamsing (the most senior censor for the Publishing Department) had just returned his manuscript for a non-Vannasin publication. It was a collection of poetry for children produced as part of the "Action with Lao Children" writing project. I asked Mr. Dee what the censor had changed. Flipping opened the manuscript to show me an example Mr. Dee explained that the censor does not make changes, but suggests what the writer should consider changing. In his interview with Update, Mr. Siviengkhek made a similar point: "The censors are not empowered with a right to cut or add any words to what the writer has produced. They can only point things out and propose ideas regarding what they observe."<sup>108</sup> While the censor may not cut or add words to a written work, they do hold the position of approving or not approving the work for publication.

Pointing to the page with the censor's marks Mr. Dee explained that he had been called into the censor's office primarily to discuss changing one word at the end of a poem, a word that indicated the violent death of a character. The censor had suggested changing the words in this one line to a phrase with similar intonation and vowel sounds, thus transforming the meaning from a violent death of the character, to the character simply going away. The censor's suggestion came from his concern that a character's violent death could potentially upset young children. With a smile Mr. Dee said that the censor's suggestion had actually improved the sound of his poetic work. With the change made the Mr. Dee's text was approved and moved forward towards publication.

In his interview Mr. Siviengkhek's frames the conditions under which the Party (in the form of the Ministry of Information and Culture, embodied within the social relations of the Department he oversees) labors to control printed expression. This context of Ministerial oversight and approval is the context within which authorized

writing is produced in the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Further, it is the Department of Publishing and Libraries' duty to promote writing within this context.

### **Conclusion:**

Adaptive-perpetuation cannot be adequately understood abstracted from the geographically and historically situated social practices of those engaged in the community of practice under study. The contemporary practices of propaganda production in the Lao People's Democratic Republic were developed over time through fierce contestations of political rule over the geographic territory currently ruled by the single-Party State. The struggles of adaptive-perpetuation and the intergenerational tensions between a) aspiring practitioners and b) those already employed for the Party as propagandists must be understood in light of the revolutionary struggle, and the emerging challenges produced through the social relations of the Party in this post revolutionary period.

In the following chapter I introduce the Vannasin Magazine publishing unit of the Ministry of Information and Culture and delve into the challenges the members of the unit face in producing literature and arts propaganda for, and in the context of, the transformation from a "centrally planned system" to a "market-based economy."

---

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> (See Stuart-Fox 1995 pp. 111-116)

<sup>2</sup> (See McCoy 1970 pp. 74-75)

<sup>3</sup> (See Winichakul 1996, 1994)

<sup>4</sup> (Anderson 1972 p. 28)

<sup>5</sup> Martin Stuart-Fox provides a detailed historical description of the *meuang* system of tribute relations and political-economic social practices across time (see Stuart-Fox 2005).

<sup>6</sup> (Anderson 1972 p. 29 footnote 57)

<sup>7</sup> (Evans 2009 p. 6)

<sup>8</sup> (McCoy 1970 pp. 75-76)

<sup>9</sup> (Stuart-Fox 1995 p. 121; this assessment resonates with McCoy 1970 p. 67)

<sup>10</sup> (Ivarsson 1999 p. 62; Evans 2009 p. 9; Christie 2001 p. 61; Ivarsson and Goscha 2007 p. 58)

<sup>11</sup> (McCoy 1970 p. 78)

<sup>12</sup> Explaining how aristocratic families remained in positions of political power through French colonialism Stuart-Fox writes: "Even in the more directly administered regions of central and southern Laos, French administrative and political institutions were imposed on top of, rather than in place of, traditional Lao social and political relationships. Aristocratic families remained in place, their status maintained, if not reinforced, by the preferences accorded them by the French" (Stuart-Fox 2006 p. 66).

<sup>13</sup> (Evans 2009 p. 6)

<sup>14</sup> (Murdoch 1978 p. xiv)

<sup>15</sup> (Gunn 2003 p. 68)

<sup>16</sup> (McCoy 1970 p. 80)

- 
- <sup>17</sup> (McCoy 1970; Stuart-Fox 1995)  
<sup>18</sup> (McCoy 1970 p. 75)  
<sup>19</sup> (Gunn 1988 pp. 32-33)  
<sup>20</sup> (Stuart-Fox 1997 p. 42)  
<sup>21</sup> (Gunn 1988 p. 32)  
<sup>22</sup> (See Gunn 1988; Brown and Zasloff 1986)  
<sup>23</sup> (Gunn 1998)  
<sup>24</sup> (Stuart-Fox 2001 p. 152; Brown and Zasloff 1986 p. 18)  
<sup>25</sup> (Stuart-Fox 1997 p. 53)  
<sup>26</sup> (Stuart-Fox 1997 p. 57)  
<sup>27</sup> (See McCoy 1970 pp. 87-92; Gunn 2003; Pholsena 2006 p. 34)  
<sup>28</sup> (See Reynolds 1976; Keyes 1989)  
<sup>29</sup> (Ivarsson and Goscha 2007 p. 61)  
<sup>30</sup> (Ivarsson and Goscha 2007 p. 61)  
<sup>31</sup> (See Roth and Institute of Pacific Relations. American Council. 1941; Christie 2001 p. 74; Evans 2009 p. 9)  
<sup>32</sup> (Wyatt 1984 p. 256)  
<sup>33</sup> (Christie 2001 pp. 83-86)  
<sup>34</sup> (Juntanamalaga 1988 p.76)  
<sup>35</sup> (Terwiel 2002 p. 114)  
<sup>36</sup> (Stuart-Fox 1997 p. 54)  
<sup>37</sup> (Stuart-Fox 1996 pp. 33-34)  
<sup>38</sup> (Gunn 1988 p. 83)  
<sup>39</sup> (Koret 1999 p. 232)  
<sup>40</sup> (Gunn 1988 p. 83)  
<sup>41</sup> (Decoux 1949 p. 395)  
<sup>42</sup> (Decoux 1949 p. 409 Translation assistance provided by Audrey Bochaton Ph.D.)  
<sup>43</sup> (Christie 2001 p. 115)  
<sup>44</sup> (Gunn 1988 p. 82-83)  
<sup>45</sup> (See Ivarsson 1999; Pholsena 2004 pp. 10-11)  
<sup>46</sup> (Christie 2001 p. 64)  
<sup>47</sup> (The pan-Thai propaganda push of the Thai nationalist movement of Field Marshal Phibun is described in brief in Terwiel 1980 p.13-14)  
<sup>48</sup> (Evans 2002 pp. 80-81)  
<sup>49</sup> (Murdoch 1978 p. xvii; Evans 2009 p. 9)  
<sup>50</sup> (See Dommen 2001 pp. 75-83; Stuart-Fox 2001 p. 79)  
<sup>51</sup> (Murdoch 1978 p. xvii)  
<sup>52</sup> (Stuart-Fox 1997 p. 60)  
<sup>53</sup> (Stuart-Fox 2001 p. 339-340)  
<sup>54</sup> (Fall 1965 p. 175)  
<sup>55</sup> (Evans 2002 p. 47)  
<sup>56</sup> (Evans 2002 p. 76)  
<sup>57</sup> (Stuart-Fox 1997 p. 55)  
<sup>58</sup> (Stuart-Fox 1997 p. 57)  
<sup>59</sup> (Adams 1970 p. 106)

---

<sup>60</sup> (Stuart-Fox 1997 pp. 61-62)

<sup>61</sup> (Soupanouvong's movements are described in Fall 1965)

<sup>62</sup> (Stuart-Fox 1997 p. 63)

<sup>63</sup> (Adams 1970 p. 108)

<sup>64</sup> (Fall 1965 p.174)

<sup>65</sup> (Evans 2009 p. 21)

<sup>66</sup> (Stuart-Fox 2001 p. 45)

<sup>67</sup> Shortly before his death Phetsarath did return to the Kingdom of Laos, and the King reinstated his title of *uparat*. His return was documented by Anthropologist Joel Halpern, and is described in (Evans 2009).

<sup>68</sup> (Ivarsson and Goscha 2007 p. 73)

<sup>69</sup> (Ivarsson and Goscha 2007 p. 75)

<sup>70</sup> *Pathet* translates as "country" or "land" as in the name "*Pathet Thai*" or "Thailand." If treated the same as "*Pathet Thai*," the phrase "*Pathet Lao*" would translate as "Laoland." Most authors translate it as "Land of the Lao" or "Country of the Lao." In either case it reflects a non-French pan-Lao identity – an ethnic Lao centered nationalism with roots in the countering of the pan-Thai identity produced in the 1930s.

<sup>71</sup> (Adams 1970 p. 116)

<sup>72</sup> (Adams 1970 p. 119-120)

<sup>73</sup> Note: This was James "Jim" Thompson of the Office of Strategic Services (forerunner of the CIA), operative advisor to the *Siri Thai* movement, the man who would later found The Thai Silk Company, now known as Jim Thompson The Thai Silk Company.

<sup>74</sup> (Vongvichit 1969 p. 47-48)

<sup>75</sup> Historian Thongchai Winichakul observes that one finds in print competing narratives in Lao history: "In Laos and Vietnam there have always been competing national narratives— communist, anticommunist, and others— all laying claim to the nation's past"(Winichakul 2003 p. 4). Vongvichit's book is a wonderful example of the laying of claims.

<sup>76</sup> (Text of President John F. Kennedy's Statement on Laos, March 23, 1961, reprinted in Adams and McCoy 1970 p. 393)

<sup>77</sup> (Fall 1965 p. 180)

<sup>78</sup> (Text of President John F. Kennedy's Statement on Laos, March 23, 1961, reprinted in Adams and McCoy 1970 p. 397)

<sup>79</sup> (Vongvichit 1969 p. 57)

<sup>80</sup> Fred Branfman's chapter, *The presidential war in Laos*, presents an amazing account of that transformation of warfare that took place over Laos. It is a significant contribution to our historical understanding of the contemporary practices of US warfare (see Branfman 1970). His book *Voices from the Plain of Jars* was the only book to come out during the war presenting warfare from the perspective of the peasants who experienced the atrocities committed by the United States on the ground (Branfman 1972).

<sup>81</sup> (U.S. may resume aid to Laos 1962)

<sup>82</sup> While the exact total figure for military and non-military spending in Laos is not revealed in the Senate subcommittee hearings on the Kingdom of Laos, the records print the word "billion." We find this when Senator Fulbright questions Ambassador Sullivan:

---

“ . . . what was the justification for our policy in Laos, which has occasioned the spending of [deleted] billion” (U.S. Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad. Part 2: Kingdom of Laos 1969 p. 553).

<sup>83</sup> (U.S. Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad. Part 2: Kingdom of Laos 1969 p. 555)

<sup>84</sup> (U.S. Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad. Part 2: Kingdom of Laos 1969 p. 569)

<sup>85</sup> (U.S. Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad. Part 2: Kingdom of Laos 1969 p. 370)

<sup>86</sup> (U.S. Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad. Part 2: Kingdom of Laos 1969 pp. 585-587)

<sup>87</sup> (U.S. Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad. Part 2: Kingdom of Laos 1969 p. 585)

<sup>88</sup> (Fall 1965 p. 181-182)

<sup>89</sup> (Fall 1965 p. 182)

<sup>90</sup> (Stuart-Fox 2005 p. 12)

<sup>91</sup> (Stuart-Fox 2005 p. 12)

<sup>92</sup> (Stuart-Fox 2008 pp. 271-272)

<sup>93</sup> The other two of these simultaneous revolutions being: a “production-relations revolution” and a “technical revolution” (see Brown and Zasloff 1977 p. 109).

<sup>94</sup> (Department of Public Administration and Civil Service 1996)

<sup>95</sup> (Stuart-Fox 2008 p. 208)

<sup>96</sup> (Stuart-Fox 2008 p. 208)

<sup>97</sup> (Gunn 1998 p. 13)

<sup>98</sup> (Stuart-Fox 2006 p. 67)

<sup>99</sup> Increasing the number of people in the country who had basic reading abilities was one success, though there are clearly some exaggerations in the post revolutionary statistics in this regard. In her book Lao women yesterday and today historian Mayoury Ngaosyvath writes that Vannasin Magazine reported that literacy had been entirely eradicated in Lao PDR in 1984, such an achievement, though glorious as it would be if true, is rather difficult to believe (see Ngaosyvathn 1995 p. 138).

<sup>100</sup> (see Evans 1995)

<sup>101</sup> (see Phouthonesy 2010)

<sup>102</sup> (Phouthonesy 2010)

<sup>103</sup> (Saignasith 1997 p. 25)

<sup>104</sup> (Stuart-Fox 2006 p. 67-68)

<sup>105</sup> (Vongphachan 2006 p. 36 Translation edited by the author.)

<sup>106</sup> (Vongphachan 2006 p. 36 Translation edited by the author.)

<sup>107</sup> (Vongphachan 2006 p. 36 Translation edited by the author.)

<sup>108</sup> (Vongphachan 2006 p. 36 Translation edited by the author.)

**Producing a social logic of a dependency on the incorporation of the labor of youth:  
Vannasin Magazine and the transformation of the labor of propaganda production  
in an era of economic transition**



Figure 3.1: The sign that hung above the door of the Vannasin Magazine office at the Ministry of Information and Culture in Vientiane, Lao PDR.

**Introduction:**

The specificities of social practice and the larger scale divisions of labor (within which a community of practice exists) are produced within, and inextricable from a geographical-historical context. It is within the unique situated specificities of the community of practice that the perceived dependence upon the labor of youth is produced. This perceived dependency upon the labor of youth sets the stage for the move to recruit young people into the community of practice for purposes of contributing to the adaptive perpetuation of a) the practice, b) the community of practice, and, in the case of a government institution of a single-Party State, c) the larger social body of which the community of practice is a mutually dependent part.

Before we can jump into an exploration of the intergenerational tensions that exist within an organization faced with the dilemma of adaptive perpetuation we need to understand what generates the circumstance in which the older generation of practitioners initiates a recruitment of young people. It is only when we look into the labor of the organization and how employees produce the conditions of their employment that we can fully understand the social logic behind the recruitment. On the following pages I explore the question: How do the divisions of labor within an organization and the needs for employees within that division of labor combine to produce the conditions for developing a social logic of an institutional dependency on the incorporation of the labor of youth?

To show how such a social logic of the dependency on the incorporation of the labor of youth is produced in practice I introduce the Vannasin Magazine unit of the Lao

Ministry of Information and Culture. I introduce Vannasin Magazine not as a printed product, but rather as a complex social organization in an era of economic transformation (transformations the employees of the propaganda unit are themselves laboring to produce), with members engaged in diverse and changing forms of labor that coalesce in the production of the single-Party State's literature and arts propaganda. To understand the labor of propaganda production one must delve deep beyond a surface read of an administrator's outline of a work unit's division of labor or an analysis of the products produced by a unit. Administrators within the Ministry of Information and Culture do create and assign specific functions to the sub-units of the Ministry's departments. However, structural charts and outlines of the functions of the organization of the government of the Lao PDR fail to capture the complexity of the labor that actually goes into production for and of the Party.<sup>1</sup> Further, the products of propaganda production belie the complexity of social relations of which their production is a part. The day-to-day labors that converge to constitute support of the single-Party State through propaganda production are far more complex than one may be led to believe by simply analyzing the print products the Vannasin Magazine unit produces.

Magazine production has changed considerably since the arts and literature mouthpiece for the Party was formed, and, in the era of market-based economic reform, the staff members of the Vannasin unit are faced with increasing responsibilities for income generation, both for themselves and for the production of the magazine. Below I provide a description of the unit not from the Ministry's standpoint of an imagined organ within a social body, but rather as a community of practice, presenting the reader with a description of the setting and social relations in which the literature and arts propaganda production is produced, briefly detailing the divisions of labor and duties of each staff member and then delving into the social practices that both complicate and buttress the existence of the labor unit as a contributing component of an administrative institution of the single-Party-State.

I open the chapter with a brief introduction to the Vannasin Magazine unit as an imagined component functioning within the structure of the Ministry of Information and Culture's hierarchical division of labor. This framing enables us to understand how the social practices of the magazine unit is envisioned to fit within, and as a component part of larger communities of practice (i.e. the Department within which the unit is located, the Division to which that Department is assigned, the Ministry of which that Division is one of two subparts, the administrative structure under which that ministry operates as a component part, and the single-Party State which their labor supports). After situating the Magazine unit within the labor of the institution I describe the structure of the division of labor of the Vannasin Magazine offices – detailing assigned labor responsibilities and spaces within the rooms occupied by the magazine unit. An understanding of this breakdown of the division of labor is essential to developing further understandings of how a) different divisions of the community of practice engage in diverse forms of labor and the leveraging of that labor, and b) how one community of practice may have multiple forms of legitimate peripheral participation. The labor related hierarchical social relations within the community of practice of the Vannasin unit exists within other forms of hierarchical social relations in Lao PDR - after explaining the breakdown of the division of labor in the office I introduce how hierarchical kinship terminology is used

within the office, expressing and shaping the social relations between members of the work unit.

After presenting the use of kinship terminology within the unit I move on to detail aspects of Vannasin's use-rights over additional Ministry owned spaces to introduce two concepts: 1) that the hierarchical administrative structure is leveraged to benefit the families (i.e. biological kin) of those who occupy the higher rungs of the unit's hierarchy, and 2) that the unit is struggling not simply with its output, but importantly with finding consumers for that output in the emerging context and practices of the new "market-based economy." The use-rights over Ministry owned spaces not only reveal how the administrative hierarchy is leveraged for personal capital accumulation and struggles with the transitional practices of production in the face of the new economic system, but also sheds light on the deteriorating conditions of the Ministry, both in terms of its infrastructure and in terms of its production. The use of Ministry owned spaces serve as indicators of the unit's lack of preparedness for the rapid transition from a "centrally planned system" to a "market-based economy."

A glaring example of a significant challenge facing the members of the unit in the market-based economy is further revealed through a look at the Vannasin unit's pay scale. Outlining the below-the-cost-of-living wages of employees of the Vannasin unit, I demonstrate how employees leverage their low wage employment for the Ministry to augment their insufficient salaries. Through examples from the Vannasin unit I delineate how Ministry employment both requires and makes possible forms of "extra work" – the labor that provides the supplementary income needed to afford employment in institutions of the single-Party State. I conclude with an example of how the mass incorporation of young people into peripheral participation of one division of the unit is leveraged to enable a Vannasin employee the ability to perform his low wage labor for the single-Party State. Moving through the elements of the chapter I reveal the production of the social logic behind the perceived need for the incorporation of the labor of youth into a community of practice facing the dilemma of adaptive perpetuation.

### **Developing a theory of social practice with a recognition of the imagined dependent organs of the single-Party State:**

An exploration of labor within an institution of the government of Lao PDR must be conducted with an awareness of how the divisions of labor within the institutions of the single-Party State are widely hierarchically organized by institutional administrators, and widely imagined by those who participate as functionaries in the labor for the institutions of the single-Party State. As I explained in chapter one, the people who labor within the institutions of the single-Party State share a discourse about their labor, a discourse in which they labor to serve the specific functions of a larger social body, a social body with many mutually dependent parts and multiple mutually dependent sub-parts within each dependent part. The labor (for producing the Party-assigned functional responsibilities of the institutions) within larger institutions of the single-Party State (for example, within each of the Ministries at the Central Level of Government) is divided into work units that are specifically assigned specialized functions. The responsibilities for the labor of administering information and culture are assigned to the Ministry of Information and Culture. Within the administrative structure of the Ministry of Information and Culture there exist specialized subdivisions, each constituting a

specialized division of the overall labor of the institution; each assigned different functions that constitute part of the overall functional responsibilities of the Ministry. Television shows, radio broadcasts, newspapers, magazines, book publishing, the National Museum, . . . are all regulated through the Ministry of Information and Culture, insuring that only positive messages about the Party and its single-Party rule are disseminated to the public through these Ministry regulated channels of information.

As explained briefly in the previous chapter, the Vannasin Magazine unit of the Publishing and Libraries Department is assigned the duties of arts and literature print production for the Ministry of Information and Culture. Working within the Vannasin unit I developed an understanding of diverse practices through which the labor of employees was reified as if their assigned duties were components of social bodies. This reification was produced through the creation and dissemination of institutional organization charts, descriptive diagrams of the functions of work units, administrators' discussions (during staff meetings and otherwise) regarding labor expectations of employees, the distribution of invitations for events<sup>2</sup>, the privileges and practices of voting in Ministry wide Party votes . . . . On one level Vannasin employees imagine themselves and identify themselves not only as members of the community of practice entailed in the production of literature and art propaganda, but also as being nested within other larger social bodies or components there of. From a social practice perspective we can understand that the employees produce multiple social identities related to the communities of practice within which they contribute their labor. Moving up through the levels of nesting within the Ministry of Information and Culture alone these would be, the community of practice of the Publishing and Libraries Department, the community of those laboring within the Culture division of the Ministry (as opposed to the Information division) and then the community that is made up of all the component parts constituting the Ministry (which would include both the Information and Culture divisions of the Ministry).

Further, and this is an important component of social identity, within the Ministry of Information and Culture, employees of the Ministry also, through their labor for the State, have membership (with varying degrees of peripheral participation) in a concomitant inseparable social body coexistent with the institutions of governance in the single-Party State – the membership in the social body of the Party. Young employees of the Ministry come to work on Fridays wearing the blue shirt designating their required participation in the Ministry's youth branch of the Party. Senior employees attend scheduled meetings of the Ministry's branch of the Party to discuss Party related issues and vote with their small Party books in hand. The Ministry's branch of the Party holds its own congress (with representatives from the Ministry's provincial level branches converging on Vientiane) – and the Ministry's branch of the Party is part of a larger social body of the Party composed of multiple other Ministry branches of the Party. As mentioned in chapter one, employees of the Ministries share discourses of membership and participation in larger social bodies than just simply that of the community of practice through which they perform the specific duties of their labor for a single Ministry or sub-division there of.

The production of one's social identity through one's labor, cannot simply be understood through a narrow focus upon the specificities of the assigned task in which one engages during the work day (e.g. the production of the social identity of the

magazine layout artist can't be adequately understood through a focus simply on the interactions of those who are engaged in the practices of magazine layout). Rather one must be aware that the labor of those employed by an institution of the single-Party State are engaged in the production of a much larger social identity. In this respect, when studying the employment of those working within an institution of the single-Party State, it must be understood that those engaged in *production for* the Ministry and the Party are engaged in the *production of* the Ministry and the Party. Through their labor the employees of the single-Party State produce their multiple nested identities as members of the social body that constitutes the Party and its institutions. Perhaps nowhere is this *production for*, equals *production of* relation clearer than in the practices of propaganda production within the government institution assigned the function of propaganda production for a single-Party State. In Lao PDR, the Ministry of Information and Culture's propaganda *production for* the Party is a fundamental component of the *production of* the Party.

### **Locating Vannasin Magazine (ວັນສານ ວັນນະສິນ) in the setting of the Ministry of Information and Culture:**

To grasp the Ministry's perceived significance of the labor I examine in relation to the overall hierarchical structure of the Ministry of Information and Culture, it is helpful to envision the assigned setting for the Party's arts and literature publishing. The physical location of offices in the Ministry generally (though not perfectly) reflects the hierarchical power structure of the Ministry. The highest-level officials (including the Minister and the Chief of Cabinet) and their staff occupy offices on the top floor of the main building. The bottom floor of this two-storey colonial era building is where one finds the Department of Publishing and Libraries and the office of its Director Mr. Siviengkhek Konnyvong. The primary print censor occupies a room (equipped with its own rear entrance) next to that of the Director in the back of the Publishing and Libraries office.

Behind the main building and still within the gates of the Ministry compound stand two long single-storey colonial era buildings aligned parallel to each other, with office doors facing the opposite building across the width of a courtyard occupied by a badminton court. The offices of Vannasin Magazine (a division of the Department of Publishing and Libraries) occupy four adjoining rooms in the middle of the annex building closest to the print censor's rear door. Other divisions of the Publishing and Libraries Department exist off site (such as the office for the Director of the National Library). The Vannasin Magazine Unit, however, is kept within the gates of the Ministry compound – where the labor of the unit is integrated into the daily social practices of the Ministry. This physical positioning is reflective of the perceived significance of the labor of this unit within the Ministry.

Vannasin Literature and Arts Magazine was founded in 1979, four years after the revolution, with a mission to produce Lao literature and arts publications aligned with the mission of the Ministry of Information and Culture and goals of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party. During its heyday Vannasin boasted a staff of twenty-five and received all of its operating budget through Lao Government allocations of resources. Today when the few remaining older staff members flip through the pages of archival issues from the early 1980's, they inevitably speak nostalgically of the days when poets,

illustrators, photographers, and graphic artists labored side by side producing relatively spectacular content for publication. At that time titles and graphics were all hand illustrated, layout was composed manually; magazine production was a hands-on labor-intensive process that required collaboration.

Production had changed dramatically by 2006. The full-time staff was already whittled down to eleven.<sup>3</sup> Of the eleven employees, one was away on leave earning a masters degree in Vietnam, leaving only ten employees working full-time in the office. During the period of my research, staff was augmented by one person “on probation” (a preliminary position for a job candidate with hopes of full time work within a Department of the Ministry), and three non-paid part-time interns (students from the National University of Laos completing their senior theses on subjects related to the work of the Ministry of Information and Culture).



Figure 3.2: The front door of Vannasin's main office in 2006. Through the doorway one finds a long narrow room with a width that spans between the two rectangular support pillars visible on either side of the door in this exterior shot. Vannasin occupies three additional adjacent rooms to the left of this one (not visible in the photograph).



Figure 3.3: The French colonial era rear annex of the Ministry of Information and Culture in 2006. The three visible doorways (from right to left) are those of the Division of National Cultural Heritage Management, the Division of Museum Management, and the front office of the Vannasin Magazine Unit. The structure at the far end of the badminton court (with the low roof tacked onto the colonial era building at a perpendicular angle) is the Ministry's storage shed. Three additional rooms in the colonial era building occupied by Vannasin staff are located in long the dark corridor beneath where the shed roof is tacked to the colonial era building.

### **Employees and the division of labor within the Vannasin Magazine Unit:**

It is important to be aware of the division of labor that exists among the eleven employees of the unit in order to comprehend the unit's dependency upon youth (which is discussed in detail in later chapters). Below I introduce the staff members, and their assigned duties, positioning them within the physical layout of the unit's offices. The physical layout reflects a hierarchy of sorts as well, as like-labor is congregated into specific rooms, resulting in groupings of employees who occupy the same classification on the Ministry's hierarchical employee structure and pay scale.

#### **Vannasin's Front Office:**

Three female employees worked in Vannasin's front office (the door to which is pictured in figure 3.2). They were each classified as "class three" in the Ministry's hierarchical employee structure, and their job responsibilities were all related to sales and finance. In terms of years of service, the most senior employee was Mrs. Onchanh, the head of the accounting and finance staff, who had 28 years of experience working for the Ministry of Information and Culture.

A mother of a university aged young woman, and wife of a tourist police officer; Mrs. Onchanh was one of the most hard working employees on the Vannasin payroll. She was almost always the first person to arrive at work in the morning, and was most frequently the last to leave when her husband came to pick her up on his motorcycle at the end of his workday. Mrs. Onchanh was in charge of overseeing all the bookkeeping and finances for the Vannasin Unit including all negotiations and coordination with the State Printing House. In 2006 Mrs. Onchanh was earning less than \$45 U.S. per month.

Though senior in terms of years of service, Mrs. Onchanh was outranked by one of the employees she supervised: Mrs. Manivone. Mrs. Manivone had a history of sixteen years of service to the Ministry and worked under the supervision of Mrs. Onchanh overseeing the sales and marketing of Vannasin products. Mrs. Manivone is the mother of a pre-school aged boy and lived together with her husband and extended family in the frame of a home undergoing a slow (paycheck by paycheck) process of construction. Mrs. Manivone's rank (boosted by her educational attainment, having attended Dong Dok University) placed her monthly net income the equivalent of one dollar higher than that of Mrs. Onchanh.

Mrs. Anoumone was the lowest ranking Ministry employee in the front office under the direct supervision of Mrs. Onchanh. Mrs. Anoumone was in charge of documenting Vannasin's income and expenditures. A mother of two pre-school aged boys she lives with her husband (a lawyer) down river from Vientiane in a village renowned for weaving. With only six years of service to the Ministry under her silver belt, and a two-dollar per month bonus for each of her children Mrs. Anoumone earned a monthly net income equivalent to five dollars less than that of Mrs. Onchanh.

#### **Office of the Vannasin Receptionist:**

This first office is connected to the adjacent Vannasin room through a door in the wall at the rear of the rooms. The second room is the domain of the Vannasin "receptionist": Ajaan Phoumjai. Ajaan Phoumjai, was also a class three employee. On the payroll his job title translates to "office administrator," though the Director of

Vannasin referred to him in English as, “the receptionist.” The young people affiliated with the Ministry address Mr. Phoumjai with the respectful term “Ajaan” due to his role as an instructor for the Ministry’s cultural education courses.

Ajaan Phoumjai was responsible for managing Vannasin’s Sinxay Culture Club, a training program and talent pool for the Ministry’s cultural models and cultural envoys. The members of the culture club are young men and women (in their late teens to early twenties) trained by Ajaan Phoumjai to embody and perform Ministry approved enactments of Lao culture and multi-ethnic harmony for public gatherings, greeting visiting dignitaries (see figure 3.4 below), or on the cover and in the pages of Vannasin Magazine.

Ajaan Phoumjai maintained the unit’s binder which held bios and photos of each of the Sinxay Culture Club models, and was responsible for visiting with potential advertisers, and negotiating the advertisers’ use of Sinxay models in advertisements featured in Vannasin Magazine. With eighteen years of employment in the Ministry he stood just below Mrs. Onchanh on the pre-bonus pay scale. However, with less of a ‘years of service to the government’ bonus and no bonus for children (he was single and without children), Ajaan Phoumjai ended up earning the equivalent of five dollars per month less than Mrs. Onchanh (approximately two dollars less than Mrs. Anoumone).



Figure 3.4: Ajaan Phoumjai trains young models to embody the Ministry’s ideals of Lao culture, and enact representations of multi-ethnic harmony. Here models dressed as different officially recognized ethnic populations, serve as cultural envoys (enacting multi-ethnic harmony), welcoming delegates to the December 2005 Conference of the ASEAN Federation of Engineering Organizations (CAFEO) meetings in Vientiane. Photo courtesy Vannasin Magazine.



Figure 3.5: Trained, costumed, posed and staged by Ajaan Phoumjai, models depict rural farmers on the cover of a 2005 issue of Vannasin Magazine.

In 2006 Ajaan Phoumjai had a probationary employee under his wing. Probationary employment is one pathway for people outside of the Ministry’s social network to enter into labor within the Ministry. Probationary employment is a form of apprenticeship through which senior Ministry staff can assess the candidates for Ministry vacancies prior to committing to accepting them as employees. Mr. Daeng was the probationary employee assigned to assist and work under the supervision of Ajaan Phoumjai. During the period of probationary employment (which lasted approximately six months) his salary was a fraction of what it would be after the probationary period, making Mr. Daeng the lowest paid, youngest and lowest ranking employee in the Vannasin office. As such Mr. Daeng was responsible for many of the menial tasks in the office including going out and purchasing meals for the rest of the staff at lunchtime.

**Office of Vannasin’s Director/Editor-in-Chief:**

Ajaan Phoumjai’s wooden desk stood next to the double French doors connecting the office administration room to a third room - the office of the Vannasin’s Director and Editor-in-Chief: Mr. Paengan. A father of two (a daughter attending the National University of Laos and a son in high school), a poet and past recipient of the South East Asian Write (SEAWrite) Award, Mr. Paengan also served as the Secretary General of the Lao Writers’ Association. A number of those who share his family name occupy significant positions of authority in various institutions of the Lao government. With access to scholarships after completing his studies at the National University of Laos, Mr. Paengan continued his education in the former Soviet Union and in Japan. With the collapse of the Soviet Union Mr. Paengan realized English would afford more opportunities than skills in Russian, so he taught himself English and is now one of a handful of employees within the Ministry who are able to communicate efficiently with native speakers of English.

As Director, Mr. Paengan was ultimately responsible for all of Vannasin’s

production. In the agenda for a staff meeting in 2007 the director's functions were spelled out as: 'providing leadership for the unit both in terms of technique and political ideology. This political and technical leadership should be based on studying and developing practices and policies related to rules, regulations, and directives from higher leaders.' Mr. Paengan reported directly to Mr. Siviengkhek Konnyvong, the Director of the Department of Publishing and Libraries.

#### **Vannasin's office of Editorial Staff and Technical Department:**

In Vannasin's chain of command, immediately below Mr. Paengan was Mr. Dee, the Deputy Director of Vannasin. Mr. Dee, the father of an eight year old, and husband of a Lao National Television producer/host, is a well-known poet and short story author. Mr. Dee oversaw the labor of the editorial staff and the "technical department" (typing, artwork and layout staff). As a class four employee with one child, twenty-two years experience working for the Ministry and a bonus for higher responsibility (related to his duties as Deputy Director), he earned approximately twelve dollars more than Mrs. Onchanh. Mr. Dee and the staff members under his supervision occupied a room twice as large as the typical rooms of this colonial era building. The room of the technical department and editorial staff was adjacent (though not connected directly with a doorway) to that of Mr. Paengan's office. A two and a half meter tall glass wall running the room's center divided into the room half lengthwise. The ceiling's height was twice that of the glass wall, so sound and air flowed fairly freely from one side to the other.

The half of the room on the north side of the wall was occupied by the desks of three of the four members of the editorial staff. Mr. Sisavath was the lowest ranking employee on the editorial staff. In 2006, Mr. Sisavath was a recent graduate of the National University of Laos (with a degree in literature) who had just completed his period of probationary employment in Vannasin. Although low ranking in terms of age and years of service to the Ministry, Mr. Sisavath was hired as a "journalist", a job with a classification ("Class four") higher on the pay scale than those of Mrs. Onchanh (a "Class three" employee who then had twenty eight years of service as a government employee), and Mrs. Manivone (a "Class three" employee with a degree from the same University and a history of fifteen years of employment for the Ministry). By 2007 Mr. Sisavath was earning the same pre-bonus salary (equivalent to \$49 per month) as Mrs. Manivone.

Mr. Sisavath, a young single man from one of the northernmost provinces of Lao PDR clearly had his sights set on government employment as a path for continuing education opportunities abroad.<sup>4</sup> The fact that foreign governments use the provision of educational opportunities for Lao government employees as an attempt to secure favoritism and loyalty<sup>5</sup> is not lost on younger employees who enter the Ministry with sights set on education through government service. Each year a number of foreign governments provide scholarships and educational opportunities to Lao government employees as part of their efforts to strengthen foreign relations with the Lao P.D.R.; such opportunities are often not readily available to young people outside of the institutions of the State. As a result, the potential for educational opportunities abroad is a major factor influencing some young people's decisions to enter into employment with units of the Party and institutions of the State. Mr. Sisavath was ever alert for postings regarding such educational opportunities, and spent many of his workdays composing application materials for foreign government calls for Lao government educational

opportunity applicants.

Mr. Thongsing was another class four journalist with a desk in Vannasin's editorial staff office, and was still on Vannasin's pay scale despite the fact that he was away earning a Masters Degree in Vietnam on a scholarship provided by the Vietnamese Government. Mr. Sisavath was essentially taking over the duties left vacant by Mr. Thongsing. In 2006 Mr. Thongsing had twenty-one years of experience working for the Ministry. With bonuses for four children and a non-employed wife, his monthly net pay was approximately seventeen dollars more than that of Mrs. Onchanh. Upon his graduation in Vietnam and return to Vientiane in 2008, Mr. Thongsing's assignment within the Ministry was shifted from Vannasin to the Department of Mass Culture.<sup>6</sup>

Although Mr. Dee was the appointed head of the editorial department, Mr. Khamphon was the most senior editor on staff, with a record of twenty-two years of employment for the Ministry. Mr. Khamphon was the father of an eleven-year-old girl, and married to a woman employed at a health clinic across town. Mr. Khamphon came to the office early each day and would sit at the guard booth in front of the Ministry reading the day's Lao language newspapers and socializing with other employees of various departments of the Ministry waiting until all of the Vannasin office doors were unlocked and opened. He spent his mornings at his desk, with a pen in hand, quietly meditating on his own writing or editing the work others had submitted for publication. Mr. Khamphon's monthly salary was approximately eighteen dollars higher than that of Mrs. Onchanh.

Mr. Khamphon, Mr. Sisavath, and the absent Mr. Thongsing were all classified as "journalists" in the job description column of the Vannasin pay scale. It was expected that both Mr. Sisavath and Mr. Khamphon would submit written contributions for the monthly magazine. Mr. Paengan and Mr. Dee (the Director and Deputy Director) also submitted contributions. The volume of poems, short stories and articles submitted by Vannasin's full-time staff were not sufficient to constitute the body of text needed for an issue of the magazine. Thus the unit relied heavily on contributions submitted by the other members of the Lao Writer's Association.<sup>7</sup> Writers contributing content that was published in the magazine were compensated at a rate of about \$3.25 for a single page submission. Royalties were also paid to writers who had older works from years past re-published in a current edition of the magazine.

While many of the other employees congregated in Vannasin's front office for a shared meal at noon, Mr. Khamphon usually brought his meal from home and ate it quietly at his desk before the lunch hour, enabling him to spend noon onwards engaged in games of *pétanque*. *Pétanque* was growing in popularity throughout Vientiane at this time with courts being erected in villages throughout the city. In 2007 the Ministry invested a considerable amount of money transforming the back annex's concrete badminton court into a large elevated gravel *pétanque* court. However, this court was visible from a roadway passing beside the Ministry, and soon after it was constructed word came down from on high that it did not reflect well on the Ministry to have so many male employees of the Ministry spending long hours of the work day playing (i.e. gambling) on this court. So play (i.e. gambling) once again reverted to the original *pétanque* court hidden from public view between structures of the compound.

Mr. Khamphon was not the only staff member in this room who brought his own set of *pétanque* boules to the Ministry; Mr. Vongkham the Head of the Technical

Department was also an avid player. Although Mr. Vongkham had been employed at Vannasin for only two years, he had already made himself indispensable. With a degree in computing from the National University of Laos (where, by no act of coincidence, his brother serves on the faculty of Computer Science) he understood the hardware and software used by Vannasin better than any of the other employees.

The technology over which he was in charge was neither up-to-date nor complex. In 2006 the vast majority of the unit's computing work (from accounting to publication) was accomplished on computers and software purchased in the 1990's. Three Macintosh computers discarded from the Vientiane International School as "broken" formed the backbone of the unit's technological capacity (a Macintosh LC III circa 1993, a Macintosh LC 575 circa 1994, and a Power Macintosh 6100/66 circa 1995). There were two additional computers in Vannasin's arsenal; both of these were PC computers, one purchased in 1999 and the other in 2003. The newest of these PCs was so infested with viruses that it did not function. The unit's only printer was an HP LaserJet 5MP circa 1995 - this printer only operated when a heavy weight was placed on top of its cracked housing. Vannasin owned one camera, an early Cannon F-1 single lens reflex camera. Unfortunately the camera was damaged and no longer functioned.



Figure 3.6: Computers discarded from Vientiane International School constituted the primary functioning technological assets of the Vannasin Unit in 2006.



Figure 3.7: Vannasin's single functioning PC, shown here in mid-process as the typist entered a text, line by line, from the printed document lying on the tabletop to the left of the keyboard. Contributors typically submitted hand-written articles, poems and short stories to the editors; after these were edited on paper the technical department's typist entered the text into MS Word files on this computer. These were printed, edited on paper again, and the typist entered the final corrections into the MS Word files that were passed along to the Head of the Technical Department who would compose the final layout using PageMaker.

As Head of the Technical Department Mr. Vongkham only oversaw the work of one employee: Mrs. Viengmany. Mrs. Viengmany is the niece of Mrs. Onchanh. With four years of experience working for Vannasin she was classified as a “Class two” typist; she was the lowest ranking and lowest paid employee of Vannasin Magazine. By 2007 she had a net monthly salary equivalent to approximately \$30 US. As kin of one of the office administrators Mrs. Viengmany seemed to be given a considerable amount of leniency in terms of her job performance (or lack there of). Her apparent coping mechanism for dealing with the tedium of her job responsibilities was the near constant use of a nasal inhaler.<sup>8</sup> While her job duties were at the computers in the technical department, she spent most of her time in the front office conversing with Mr. Daeng, Ajaan Phoumjai, Mrs. Onchanh, Mrs. Anoumone, and Mrs. Manivone.

By lunchtime Ajaan Phoumjai was usually out of the office purportedly doing his assigned duties related to marketing the advertising space available in an upcoming issue of the magazine. Mr. Daeng (who usually has the task of picking up the food to be shared by the staff in the front office) typically eats with Mrs. Onchanh, Mrs. Anoumone, Mrs. Manivone and Mrs. Viengmany. Mr. Dee and Mr. Sisavath usually joined this group for the shared meal, then after eating they made their way to the *pétanque* court. Mr. Paengan typically ate outside the Ministry compound, often in the company of his daughter and/or wife.

#### **Kinship forms of address and the hierarchy of age among Vannasin staff members:**

The Vannasin staff that shared a meal also shared a closeness that was expressed in the use of kinship terminology. Mrs. Viengmany and Mrs. Onchanh were the only staff members who were biologically related. Mrs. Viengmany\_ as the niece of Mrs. Onchanh addressed her aunt as “*Sao*” (ເສີໂວ), this term translates into English as “maternal aunt who is younger than my mother.” The younger male staff, Mr. Sisavath, Mr. Vongkham, and Mr. Daeng, all addressed Mrs. Onchanh as “*Phaa*” (ພາ), a term that translates into “maternal aunt who is older than my mother.” Ajaan Phoumjai, Mr. Dee, Mrs. Anoumone and Mrs. Manivone all addressed Mrs. Onchanh as “*Euey*” (ເອ້ອຸຍ) a kinship term that translates as “elder sister.” Mrs. Onchanh addressed Mr. Dee simply with his first name “*Dee*,” Mr. Sisavath, Mr. Daeng, Mrs. Viengmany, Mrs. Anoumone, Mrs. Manivone all addressed Mr. Dee as “*Aye*” (ອ້າຍ), the Lao kinship term for elder brother. Mr. Khamphon, older than most of the Vannasin staff, was addressed by all but Mrs. Onchanh with the kinship term for older brother, “*Aye Kham*” with a notable shortening of his full name to merely “*Kham*.” Mrs. Onchanh simply addressed him as “*Kham*,” without the “*Aye*” (older brother) pre-fix, as she was older than Mr. Khamphon. Older staff members (i.e. Mrs. Onchanh, Mr. Dee, Mr. Khamphon, Mrs. Manivone, and Mrs. Anoumone) addressed the youngest staff members (i.e. Mr. Sisavath, Mr. Vongkham, Mrs. Viengmany, and Mr. Daeng) simply by name or nickname.

Mr. Paengan was the one person in the office who staff members did not refer to through kinship terminology. Rather, when addressing Mr. Paengan, his name was prefaced with the non-kin hierarchical title of “*Than*” (ທານ). “*Than*” would be almost equivalent to “Mister” in English, with a strong connotation indicating the hierarchical

positioning of the addressee as occupying a recognized superior social positioning above that of the speaker.

This use of kinship terminology reflected and reinforced the senior centrality of Mrs. Onchanh in the social hierarchy of the Vannasin office. She was respectfully treated as one might treat a knowledgeable, kind, and approachable elder sister or aunt. In turn she looked after these staff members as a kind elder sister or aunt might look after her younger siblings, nieces and nephews. When staff members were facing problems outside of the workplace Mrs. Onchanh made herself available to listen, and she did not shy away from providing advice.

Mrs. Onchanh communicated with staff as an elder aunt or elder sister might communicate with younger relatives – for example, when printing deadlines approached she would not shy away from delivering kind-hearted scolding to those who were clearly not as engaged in their assigned responsibilities as they could be. Mrs. Onchanh, overseeing the finances of the unit, was also well aware of the financial struggles of each staff member, and concern for staff member’s financial well-being clearly occupied a considerable amount of her time and energy in the office. On the rare occasions when extra discretionary funds did flow into the office coffers Mrs. Onchanh made it a priority to personally distribute small amounts of cash to the staff members whom she knew were in the greatest financial need. As she made her rounds with these small distributions concealed in white envelopes, she would quietly address the needs she knew the staff members were facing, saying things like “use this to buy some milk for your child” or “this is for gasoline for your motorcycle.” Though not an assigned duty, her aunt-like care and concern for the staff helped to foster close bonds of loyalty between the staff and the Vannasin administration.

### **Vannasin’s use-right claims over additional Ministry owned spaces:**

Vannasin’s use-rights over Ministry owned property were not limited to the four rooms of the colonial era annex within the Ministry compound. The Vannasin Magazine Unit also held use-rights over a prime piece of property outside the compound: a considerable portion of a colonial era structure on the *Nam Phu* Fountain Circle right in the heart of one of the city’s main tourist hubs. The centrality of the location combined with a large amount of daily tourist foot traffic (the road constituted the major artery for foot traffic between the riverfront and the high end hotels) had the potential for generating a substantial amount of income for the Vannasin Unit. The structure was divided into two shops. One shop was leased out but unused. The prime shop front, located on a corner with some of the highest tourist foot traffic in all of Vientiane, was not leased; rather Mr. Paengan’s wife occupied this location with a small shop displaying rather garish low quality textiles. A jovial and talkative woman, she had the well-deserved reputation of being the life of Vannasin parties. The volumes of karaoke often blaring from the little shop seemed to indicate her occupation of this Vannasin owned space was more of a relaxed social venture of the bosses’ wife, than a serious business venture.

By positioning his wife and her business in this prime piece of real estate Mr. Paengang staked a long-term claim over the property. In 2007 the Ministry promoted Mr. Paengang up and out of the Department of Publishing and Libraries, making him the Deputy Director of the Department of Mass Culture. Mr. Dee was promoted to the

position of Director of Vannasin, and Mrs. Onchanh was promoted to the position of Deputy Director of Vannasin. If Mr. Paengan's shift in duties had been a lateral move in the hierarchy, Mr. Dee might have had the opportunity to reclaim this prime corner piece of property. But because Mr. Paengan was promoted up the hierarchical ranks of the Ministry, even though the promotion (out of the Publishing and Libraries Department) put him outside the direct line of authority over the Vannasin assigned space occupied by his wife, the unit and its new administrators were unable to reclaim use of the territory.

A second (though far less desirable) space over which Vannasin held use rights was a single room in the Ministry's storage shed. The storage shed was a late addition to the Ministry compound - built spanning one end of the courtyard of the Ministry's back annex, directly in front of the offices of Vannasin's Director and Editorial/Departments (see figure 3.3). Vannasin had exclusive rights to the use of one padlocked room in this large wooden walled shed, and the unit used this room for storing back issues of its publications. The shed's other rooms were piled high with assorted salvaged items from different departments of the Ministry including car parts, spare tires, a motorcycle, old ink cartridges for a broken Risograph machine, and a large poster composed of four identical images of Soviet General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev greeting the Lao revolutionary leader Kayson Phomvihane (rather Andy Warholesque).

A rotund male cat slept in this shed at night, and laid claim to a territorial range encompassing the three structures in the rear annex of the Ministry. Due to his near omnipresence in front of the Vannasin office, one could almost mistake him as being part of the Vannasin staff. His mornings were spent reclining and preening, though every workday, a little past noon, he heaved his hefty haunches over his feet to make rounds past each of the offices in the rear annex. With his tail held confidently erect he would saunter haughtily to the door of Vannasin Magazine's main office and loudly demand to be fed. In response one of the lower ranking staff members would dutifully deposit the office's post-lunch discards (typically fish heads, spines and ribs picked clean of flesh, scraps of pork and noodles, and the remnants of deep fried fish tails) onto a patch of dirt next to a woven bamboo trash basket just outside the office's front door. The cat clearly expected acquiescence from the populous that reside within his territory, and for the most part they did act unquestioningly in his support.

In the time since the two colonial era back buildings and the shed were constructed, much of the surrounding land, street, and parking lots have been elevated in order to prevent other structures in the area from flooding during the region's regular heavy downpours. This has left the Vannasin offices, and the storage shed lower than their surroundings, and frequently subject to several inches of rainwater. Rain pools into the rooms over the sills of the front doors, and overflow from a drainage ditch/sewer in the alley behind the building seeps through the walls at the rear of the rooms. At the start of each rainy season Vannasin staff elevate power strips, cardboard boxes, and stacks of print material, lifting these from the floor of the offices and placing them on tabletops, chairs, stools and desks. In the Technical Department a large red carpet (which helps to prevent the technical staff from being shocked when touching the ungrounded computers) is rolled up and placed across several chairs to keep it from becoming a giant sponge in the floodwaters. As the waters recede from Vannasin's office, mineral deposits on the rear wall, and a creeping black mold remain as indicators of where the water once stood.



Figure 3.8: Mineral deposits and mold on the rear interior wall of Vannasin’s Technical Department, indicating where floodwaters seep through the walls and into the room during the rainy season.

The shed served as a shelter for all sorts of creatures seeking dry refuge from the rain and floodwaters. Because the shed was the nocturnal lair of the fat cat, one might think that he would have driven away or consumed the vermin creeping in to shelter from the rain. But (perhaps because he received sumptuous meals each noon during the work week whether he labored or not) it appeared that he had little interaction with the other creatures making their home among the stored stacks of Vannasin Magazine inside. A couple of times each year the Vannasin staff themselves ventured into the shed to sweep out the rodent nests and discard the back issues destroyed by flooding, rodents and termites. The pompous portly puss demanded its subsistence through the subservience of the population within its territorial domain but provided little service in return.

The use of Vannasin’s shop space in the colonial era building at the fountain circle, and Vannasin’s use of the shed reflect two aspects Lao PDR’s transition to a “market-based economy.”<sup>9</sup> Mr. Paengan’s wife’s occupation of Vannasin’s shop space is emblematic of how Lao government officials are able to leverage resources under their authority to provide unique and advantageous opportunities for a) their kin, and b) private capital accumulation. The use of the shed for Vannasin’s storage of large quantities of unsold publications reflects something entirely different: the lack of preparedness among some government institutions for the transition to new practices of labor made requisite as a result of “market-based” mandates issued from above in Lao PDR’s political hierarchy. I expand upon this second point in the following section.

### **Transforming practices of production associated with the implementation of the reforms of “the New Economic Mechanism”:**

The existence of a large supply of back-issues stacked in the storage shed was in no small part the result of transformations associated with the shift in the “centrally planned economy” to a “market-based economy.” In order to comprehend the connection between surplus products and the practices of incorporating the labor of youth into the social practices of the Ministry’s propaganda production, it is essential that one understand how the shift to a “market-oriented” economy was experienced in the Vannasin Magazine unit. I detail ways in which the transition was experienced below.

By 2006 the Vannasin unit had produced more than three hundred issues of Vannasin Literature and Arts Magazine and fifty books (ranging from collections of short stories to poetry anthologies and novels) in support of the Party and its goals in the areas of literature and the arts. This same year the Vannasin Unit was struggling to maintain its print output. The Vannasin administrators attributed the struggles to economic reforms in the area of Lao Language publishing. In June of 1993 the market-based economic reforms initiated with the New Economic Mechanism were introduced into the practices of propaganda production through the National Assembly’s passage of “Resolution 36.”<sup>10</sup> Mr. Dee explained to me that prior to the 1990’s Vannasin’s production costs were entirely supported by the Ministry of Information and Culture. The changes in publication implemented in the 1990’s were aimed at slowly weaning propaganda production units from their full economic dependency upon the State. By 1994 the Lao Government was experimenting with transforming practices of propaganda production, allowing for limited advertisements within the publications of the State press, and encouraging publications to engage in revenue generation through sales of publications and advertisement space within the publications.<sup>11</sup>

By 2006 the production staff of the Vannasin unit was down to a fraction of what it had been in the “Soviet era”<sup>12</sup> and the unit was responsible for generating forty percent (40%) of the cost of producing each issue through the sales of advertising. Compounding the challenges posed by the income generation requirements was the growing number of publications competing for a relatively small population of prospective consumers.<sup>13</sup> Potential advertisers aiming at audiences within Lao PDR could now choose to place their advertisements in existing government produced magazines (e.g. ວັລະສານ ວັທະນະທຳ Culture Magazine<sup>14</sup>, or ວັລະສານ ວັນນະສິນ Vannasin Magazine), tourism oriented in-flight type publications (e.g. ວາລະສານທ່ອງທ່ຽວ ດິສໂຄວີວີ ລາວ Discover Laos Travel and Business Magazine<sup>15</sup>, or ທ່ຽວມືອງລາວ Visiting Muong Lao<sup>16</sup>) or the emerging private commercial enterprise magazines increasingly being granted permission to print in the Lao Language. Competing for advertisers and an audience was a new experience for the once fully subsidized arts and literature propaganda mouthpiece. Almost all of these newly formed privately owned magazines were formatted as bilingual (Lao/English) “business” or “lifestyle” magazines targeting the ever-emerging body of Lao consumers-with-expendable-incomes within the post-economic reform generation (e.g. ມະຫາຊີນ Mahason, ອັບເດດ UpDate, ທາເກັດ Target, ໄຊໂຢລາວ Sayo Lao).<sup>17</sup> The Vannasin administrators were desperately trying to figure out how to compete while the staff under their charge had little incentive to disrupt the entrenched divisions of labor

and their social practices of magazine production.

Starting in 1979, throughout the period Vannasin Magazine was produced on full government subsidies, the labor of those in the unit was not tailored to engaging in market-based competition with other publications. While the earliest versions of the magazine (when the staff was quite large) reflect a substantial investment of staff time and creativity, flipping through the archives of more recent issues of Vannasin it is easy to argue that the content, layout, and graphic design of the magazine generally reflect little concern for attracting an audience. However, in 2006 with forty-percent of their production budget dependent upon advertising and sales the realization that Vannasin was in competition for an audience was a growing concern among the administrative staff (Mr. Paengan, Mr. Dee, and Mrs. Onchanh).

Vannasin was the only unit in the rear annex of the Ministry that had to produce a portion of its operating budget through the generation of advertising and sales revenues. The other units in the back annex did not labor in the field of publication, and appeared to plod along with a regularity of practice akin to the clockwork regularity of the fat cat's daily noontime procession around the courtyard.

In 2005 the Vannasin Unit had printed around 18,000 copies of its magazine, however, it appeared that termites were likely the most avid consumers of Vannasin's most recent issues. With print runs of only one thousand five hundred per issue, surprisingly tall stacks of unsold issues of the magazine stood unopened nearly filling Vannasin's room in the storage shed. Gnawing their way upwards through reams of poetry, short stories, and historical fiction, termites transformed the stacked periodicals into high-rise habitats for their colonies. Back-issues removed from the bottom of these stacks had the appearance of being shot through at close range with a shotgun blast. Issues closer to the top of the stacks opened to reveal what looked like a fine Swiss cheese. While popular with the termites, the stacks of unsold issues reflected the magazine's lack of popularity with human consumers and the low level of demand for Vannasin's products. The administrators of the Vannasin unit were struggling with the fact that what they produced did not sell well in the face of growing competition in the Lao language magazine production marketplace.

To a large extent, the staff of Vannasin had maintained relatively long-standing practices of production (i.e. practices of production developed prior to the introduction market-based requirements for income generation through advertising and sales), despite the fact that the survival of their unit was dependent upon adapting the magazine to meet the interests of consumers and advertisers in the transforming Lao language magazine market. Each month the magazine staff scrambled, at the last minute, to pull together enough material to form a magazine, often scavenging material from the unit's archive of older issues.<sup>18</sup> Vannasin Magazine stood on the shelf in markets in rather stark contrast with the glossy Lao/English bilingual "business" and "lifestyle" magazines – in juxtaposition Vannasin appeared to be a poorly crafted dusty old throwback to the bygone era of a "centrally-planned system." The haphazard last minute labor put into producing each monthly issue was frequently apparent in the content and cover-art.

The media reforms being implemented in 2006, specifically the requirement that Vannasin produce an ever-increasing amount of its own operational budget through the sales of advertising and magazines, made requisite a change in the productive practices of the Vannasin Unit. Confronted with the requirements for transforming practice in the

face of economic reforms in the area of print media, the director of Vannasin implemented an active recruitment of young labor in order to revive the magazine unit's slumping production and challenges with sales.

In order to understand the active recruitment of young people into the transforming practices of magazine production for the State within the Ministry of Information and Culture in the era of the social production of the Lao market-based economy, it is imperative that one understands the low wages of Ministry employees and a type of social practices inextricably linked to the low wages: the leveraging of one's paid employment for "special work." By examining the different ways in which employees leverage their employment, we can begin to understand how multiple trajectories and practices of legitimate peripheral participation of young people may be produced within a single work unit.

### **Low wages and the leveraging of employment:**

One could posit a simplistic analogy: Like the fat cat, the employees of the unit had grown used to being rewarded despite their minimal productive output. The fat cat did little to thwart the pest problem within the Ministry compound, and the staff put forth minimal efforts towards magazine production. Though exerting little effort towards productive contributions for the population within its domain the cat maintained a territorial domination over the realm of the back annex. The Vannasin staff maintained a territorial domination over literature and arts publishing with ever diminishing amounts of labor actually going into efforts of production. Such an analogy, however, would fail to account for a key difference between the two: the despite its minimal labor the cat was provided with ample sustenance, despite their labor the Vannasin staff were not.

One would never become wealthy as a result of the actual salary of a Ministry of Information and Culture employee. The sample pay scale I present below represents typical salaries one would have found in a Ministry of Information and Culture work unit in June 2007. It is important to note this pay scale reflects wages after the 8<sup>th</sup> Party Congress and the subsequent reshuffling of positions within the Ministry, and staff promotions/pay increases. The pay of Ministry of Information and Culture employees during the period covered in the bulk of my dissertation was actually slightly lower than the figures presented here, but I present these figures to provide a more contemporary picture of Ministry wages in order to demonstrate that even with the positive adjustments made in 2007, the salaries remain minimal.

Example of a pay scale for a Ministry of Information and Culture work unit.  
 Currency conversions made at the April 2007 exchange rate of 1 Lao Kip = 0.0001085 U.S. Dollars

Job Title	Class	Rank	Range	Monthly Salary	Bonus for higher responsibility	Employee Bonuses				Total for 1 month	6% Social Security deduction*	5% Income Tax deduction**	Monthly net pay	Three months of past-due pay owed		
						Years working for government	Bonus	Number of children	Bonus						Non-employed wife	Bonus
Class 4				\$274	\$2	67	\$11	6	\$12	2	\$3	\$302	\$16	\$14	\$272	\$815
Journalist	4	10	288	\$62		23	\$4	1	\$2	1	\$2	\$70	\$4	\$3	\$63	\$189
Director	4	7	261	\$57	\$2	18	\$3	1	\$2		\$2	\$64	\$3	\$3	\$57	\$172
Journalist	4	6	254	\$55		22	\$4	4	\$8	1	\$2	\$69	\$3	\$3	\$62	\$187
Technique	4	3	233	\$51		3	\$0.49					\$51	\$3	\$3	\$45	\$136
Journalist	4	2	226	\$49		1	\$0.16					\$49	\$3	\$2	\$44	\$131
Class 3				\$212	\$2	71	\$12	4	\$8			\$233	\$13	\$11	\$209	\$628
Sales	3	9	266	\$49		16	\$3	1	\$2			\$54	\$3	\$3	\$48	\$145
Deputy Director	3	6	200	\$43	\$2	29	\$5	1	\$2			\$52	\$3	\$2	\$47	\$140
Office Administrator	3	4	190	\$41		19	\$3					\$44	\$2	\$2	\$40	\$119
Income/Expenditures	3	4	190	\$41		7	\$1	2	\$4			\$46	\$2	\$2	\$42	\$126
Monthly Pay	3	2	180	\$37								\$37	\$2	\$2	\$33	\$99
Class 2				\$33		5	\$0.81					\$34	\$2	\$2	\$30	\$91
Computer	2	3	153	\$33		5	\$0.81					\$34	\$2	\$2	\$30	\$91
				\$519	\$4	143	\$23	10	\$21	2	\$3	\$570	\$31	\$27	\$511	\$1,534

\* Social Security deduction is subtracted from the Monthly Salary without the addition of Bonuses

\*\* Income Tax deduction is subtracted from the Monthly Salary plus Bonuses for higher responsibility and years working for the government. It is not deducted from the child or non-employed wife bonuses.

In 2007 the highest paid Vannasin employee had a net (after taxes) monthly salary equivalent to \$63 (this employee's annual income was approximately \$756). The lowest paid Vannasin employee had a net monthly salary of about \$30 per month (this employee's annual income was around \$360). In 2007 the Director/Editor-in-Chief's net monthly income was equivalent to \$57 (an annual income of approximately \$684). The last column on the right hand side of the unit's pay scale is reserved to record the amount of past-due pay owed employees for months in which the Ministry did not have sufficient funds to disburse employee salaries. For example, at the end of June of 2007 Vannasin employees were owed three months past-due pay. Having received no pay for both April and May, the Director was owed approximately \$172 by the end of June, and the lowest paid employee was owed around \$91. As the existence of this final column indicates, is not uncommon for Lao Government units to run out of funds prior to payday and thus owe their employees a considerable amount of back pay.<sup>19</sup>

To put these salaries in perspective I present a number of actual expenses of the Vannasin employees below. Each of the Vannasin employees drove to work on a motorcycle – the price of a genuine four-stroke 100cc Honda Wave motorcycle was equivalent to around \$1,000, the price of a Chinese imitation “Honda Wave” motorcycle was equivalent to approximately \$400. A section of French bread sliced opened with sweetened condensed milk spread within (a typical breakfast item) was about \$0.54. A bowl of noodle soup with pork (a typical breakfast or lunch item for Vannasin staff) was approximately \$0.54. A one person serving of sticky rice was about \$0.33. A serving of papaya salad was around \$0.54. A barbequed fish or a single leg of barbequed chicken from a street vendor was about \$1.63. A bottle of filtered drinking water, between \$0.33 and \$0.54. A plastic bag full of Pepsi and ice was about \$0.33. A plastic bag of ice-coffee cost approximately \$0.65. A mobile telephone cost around \$40. The recharge cards for a mobile telephone number were as low as \$1.09. Parking one's motorcycle downtown in front of a bank or post office \$0.33. The cost of her food alone consumed the daily wages of the lowest paid Vannasin employee. Mr. Dee, the Deputy Director, lived a considerable distance from the Vannasin offices, and the monthly cost of fuel for his commute to work and back exceeded his monthly salary.

For the most part, the Vannasin employees' monthly salaries were barely sufficient to cover their monthly expenses. For those with long commutes the salaries fell short of their employment incurred expenses. Mr. Thongsing, it would seem, was experiencing the pinnacle of perks of the job – with twenty-one years of seniority an unemployed wife and four children he had one of the highest net salaries in the Vannasin unit (about \$62 per month in 2007). On top of this he was receiving a fully subsidized graduate education in Vietnam. His service to the Party and its institutions was being rewarded with an educational opportunity available to only a select few, and he was clearly grateful for what his service to the Party was affording him. His high rank on the salary scale and the perks of education abroad, however, did little to ease the financial struggles of raising four daughters.

At the conclusion of each term of his masters degree program Mr. Thongsing would take a long bus ride back across the Vietnamese-Lao border to be with his family, and he would always stop by the Vannasin offices to bring small gifts of Vietnamese sweets to his colleagues. During one of these return visits Mr. Thongsing and I traveled out to his village and the surrounding area to conduct interviews with women who weave

textiles for the Vientiane Morning Market. In the afternoon we returned to his home to escape the heat of the day and rest. Mr. Thongsing turned upright one of the glasses in the green plastic basket and proceeded to pour me a glass of water. His daughters were home from school and at the looms, weaving intricate borders for Lao skirts. If it weren't for their weaving, he explained, his children wouldn't be able to purchase school clothes and supplies, much less pay their school enrollment fees. His glass now rested on the tiled concrete tabletop. Both of his hands were clasped around the glass, and his elbows rested on the table seemingly supporting the entire weight of his body. He peered down into his cup apparently contemplating all that he had just explained to me, and then he shook his head slowly as if disappointed by a realization and chuckled, "My children raise themselves." Then he looked up at me, tilted his head to gesture towards his daughters at the loom, and repeated, "My children raise themselves." The weaving of the children, produced during the time outside of school is how the family affords their school attendance.

Within the Vannasin unit, even those with the highest salaries and afforded the greatest perks of the job, faced the fact that their Ministry of Information and Culture salaries fell short of providing them with a sufficient income. These pay conditions were a significant factor contributing to the staff members' practices of leveraging Ministry employment for purposes of private income accumulation.

#### **“Special Work” - ວຽກພິເສດ (*viek peeset*):**

For most Vannasin employees, engagement in the actual labor of writing, editing, layout, accounting, reception, or marketing for the magazine constitute only a small fraction of the typical workday. If engaged in at all, almost all productivity related to one's actual Ministry position generally ground to a halt at eleven thirty in the morning, just before the fat cat made his rounds. With the exception of Mr. Paengan, those employees who had not made their way to the *pétanque* court<sup>20</sup> nap from about twelve-thirty to two o'clock. Waking hours in the office are often devoted to ວຽກພິເສດ *viek peeset*: labor outside of one's official job duties that function to supplement one's official source of income.<sup>21</sup> The term *viek* (ວຽກ) translates into English equivalent to “work” or “labor,” and the term *peeset* (ພິເສດ) can be translated as “special” or “extra.” *Viek peeset* essentially enabled Vannasin employees to afford their low paid Ministry employment. All but one Vannasin employee engaged in *viek peeset* (the one being Mrs. Onchanh, whose office work-load left neither time nor energy for ‘extra work’). For all others their full-time low wage employment with Vannasin made necessary their *viek peeset*, and their *viek peeset* detracted from the time during the work day that they could afford to devote to their paid employment.

Most staff members' *viek peeset* involved leveraging (in one form or another) one's paid employment for private capital accumulation. Below I provide brief descriptions of four of the diverse forms of *viek peeset* of Vannasin employees: leveraging one's position of authority to earn extra income during job hours; use of Ministry equipment for “extra work”; use of Ministry position to market goods within the Ministry as a form of *viek peeset*; leveraging one's job responsibilities to control the labor of others as a means for private income accumulation.

**Leveraging one's position of authority to engage in *viek peeset*:**

The administrators of Vannasin occupy one of the positions within the Publishing and Libraries Department authorized with a considerable amount of autonomy to approve certain materials for publication. Combined with the fact it is staffed with experienced Lao language editors the administrators of the Vannasin unit have the ability to provide publishing services to those who wish to produce materials in the Lao language. For example, when the Japanese Soka Gakkai religious organization wished to have translated from Thai into the Lao Language a series of its texts promoting Soka Gakkai, the administrators of Vannasin partnered with Soka Gakkai to do the work. The Vannasin editorial staff was paid to work on the translation of the Thai text; the Head of the Vannasin Technical Department was hired to do the layout. The books (which have little or nothing to do with Arts and Literature) became part of Vannasin's print offerings. During the period of income generating production the Soka Gakkai texts took precedence over the time consuming tasks of magazine production, and it even took precedence over games of *pétanque*. This paid contracted work during work hours, provided a substantial form of financial augmentation, helping to enable the editors and technical staff afford their low wage labor for the Party.

**Use of Ministry equipment for *viek peeset*:**

At the beginning of 2007 the higher echelons of the Ministry of Information and Culture issued a new computer to the Vannasin Unit. This was the first computer upgrade for the unit since 2003 (and the 2003 computer had stopped functioning quite some time before 2007). As a technological tool intended to facilitate production in line with the Unit's duties, the computer fell within the territorial domain of Mr. Vongkham "Head of the Technical Department." Moments after the computer arrived Mr. Vongkham was on the phone, and shortly a middle-aged Lao Army officer arrived with accounting books in hand.

The very first task for which Vannasin's new computer was employed was not a task of magazine layout, graphic design, or text editing, but rather the production of salary spreadsheets for this officer's Lao army unit; one aspect of Mr. Vongkham's *viek peeset*. On January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2007 Mr. Vongkham spent the entire workday using Vannasin's new computer developing a logo to submit to the design competition for "The Young Entrepreneur Association"- the winner of the competition was to receive a \$200 cash prize (a figure more than four times his monthly salary). Photo editing for a friend was one of the next tasks at hand. Vannasin's new computer enabled Mr. Vongkham to engage in an ample amount of technology dependent *viek peeset*, and augment his low wage employment for the Party.

**Use of Ministry position to market goods within the Ministry as a form of *viek peeset*:**

Mrs. Anoumone, as a low-ranking staff member in charge of documenting Vannasin's income and expenditures in hand-written ledger books, did not really have any technological office resources within the domain of her job responsibilities to leverage for *viek peeset*. What her employment did provide was access to a population to whom she could market the products of her *viek peeset*. At her home on the outskirts of Vientiane, Mrs. Anoumone raised crickets. The crickets, placed in a pan over a fire with a dash of salt, become a popular snack, considered a crisp and tasty source of protein. After harvesting and roasting, Mrs. Anoumone would bring pint-sized bags of crickets to the office to sell to other employees in different departments throughout the Ministry. Mrs. Anoumone was also an authorized retailer of Lao Government lottery tickets. Using techniques similar to those she applied to Vannasin's book keeping, Mrs. Anoumone spent a considerable amount of time recording her sales of lottery tickets to fellow employees in the Ministry.

Mrs. Anoumone was far from alone in the *viek peeset* of marketing of products within the Ministry. A woman in the Accounting Department marketed mobile telephone recharge cards. A woman in the Personnel Department made her rounds selling Lao tube skirts. Just about every day a young woman in the Mass Culture Department delivered freshly made yogurt to customers through out the Ministry of Information and Culture compound. Low wage employment within the Ministry both instigated and constituted the prerequisite necessary for each of these women to go into business, marketing the products of their *viek peeset* goods within the gates of the Ministry compound.

**Leveraging one's job responsibilities to control the labor of others as a means for private income accumulation:**

A more complex form of *viek peeset* involves leveraging the labor those officially under one's charge for private income accumulation. A prime example of this within the Vannasin Unit is the *viek peeset* performed by Ajaan Phoumjai through his responsibilities as director of the Sinxay Culture Club. Ajaan Phoumjai would not be able to afford his low wage labor for the Party and its institution of Information and Culture if he were not able to engage in a form of *viek peeset*. Ajaan Phoumjai does not leverage his job responsibilities to control the labor of Vannasin employees, but rather he leverages his job responsibilities to control the labor of young people (from outside the kinship relations of the Ministry), young people who are peripheral participants in the print and propaganda production of the unit. Ajaan Phoumjai produces the income he needs to support his low wage employment for the Vannasin unit through his leveraging of his job responsibilities that entail recruiting young people to model for the Ministry. I devote a considerable amount of space to this final form of *viek peeset* because this example provides us valuable insights into the Ministry's complex dependency on the labor of non-kin youth. The example of Ajaan Phoumjai's leveraging the labor of young people provides us with an introduction to the topic of incorporating the labor of youth into the labor of the Vannasin unit, which is the subject explored in detail in the following chapter.

Since its early incarnation the Sinxay Culture Club has functioned as a pool of models from which Vannasin's ad hoc photographers could draw talent for photographic

elements within the magazine. Sinxay Club models were most often featured in the magazine, employed for the purpose of advertising a magazine sponsor. Such advertising employment may incorporate club members modeling products of a private or State run enterprise (see figure 3.9 and 3.10), a sponsored biography of a Sinxay Club model (see figure 3.11), reprints of calendars and promotional materials sponsored by INGOs, international lending institutions, and corporations which featured Sinxay Club models (see figures 3.12 and 3.13), and in 2005 Ajaan Phoumjai posed and photographed the models when the cover of Vannasin Magazine was leased as advertising space to the primary supplier of contemporary textiles used in the Sinxay Culture Club's fashion shows (see figure 3.14). Ajaan Phoumjai was the gatekeeper for such employment, and acted as the de facto agent for the club of models he had groomed.



Figure 3.9: A jewelry advertisement employing Sinxay Culture Club models from Vannasin Magazine, November 2006, page 3.

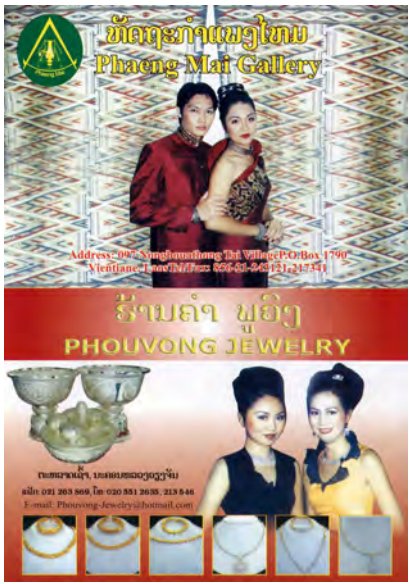


Figure 3.10: Textile and jewelry advertisements featuring Sinxay Club models from Vannasin Magazine, May 2006, page 10.

**ໄວສິດໃສ**  
ກຳກັບໂດຍ: ໄສພາ ອິນທະວົງສາ

**ໄກ່ແກ້ວ ໄຊຍະລາດ**



ອາຍຸ 21 ປີ  
ສຶກສາຢູ່ຄະນະວິສະວະກຳສາດ ມະຫາວິທະຍາໄລແຫ່ງຊາດ  
ມັກແຕ່ມຮູບ, ຮ້ອງເພງ ແລະ ຫລິ້ນກີລາ.  
ເປັນຊາຍແບບປະຈຳສະໄໝສອນສິນໄຊ ເຄີຍໄດ້ໂປສະແດງຮັບໃຊ້ທັງພາຍໃນ  
ແລະ ຕ່າງປະເທດ ເຊັ່ນ: ຍີ່ປຸ່ນ ແລະ ໄທ ມາແລ້ວ.

ອຸປະຖຳໂດຍ: ຮ້ານເສີມສວຍຄວາມງາມທຸກວນຕາ  
ບໍລິການແຕ່ງຫນ້າ, ເກົ້າຕີມ, ອອກງານຕ່າງໆ  
ມີຮູດເຈົ້າສາວ, ເຈົ້າບ່າວ, ໃຫ້ເຊົ່າດ້ວຍລາຄາເປັນກັນເອງ.  
ສະຖານທີ່ຕັ້ງຢູ່ບ້ານທົ່ງຂັນຄຳ P.O.BOX 3892.  
Tel Hom: (856-21) 223102, Mobile: (020) 5404551

Figure 3.11: A sponsored biography of a Sinxay Culture Club model from Vannasin Magazine, December 2006, page 11.



Figures 3.12 and 3.13: Sponsored calendars featuring Sinxay Club models printed in Vannasin Magazine, July 2006 page 20, May 2006 page 21.



Figure 3.14: The April 2005 cover of Vannasin Magazine, photograph composed under the direction of Ajaan Phoumjai, promoting a Lao textile manufacturer in Vientiane. The green logo is the logo for the textile gallery, and the textiles displayed in the cover photo are products of the gallery.

As the “receptionist” for Vannasin Magazine, one of Ajaan Phoumjai’s duties was to visit potential advertisers and entice them to place advertisements within the magazine. Despite what one might expect from a “receptionist,” more often than not Ajaan Phoumjai was out of the office. Most frequently when out, he was purportedly meeting with those who may purchase advertising space in upcoming issues of the magazine. The frequency with which he was out of the office reportedly working was the subject of running jokes among the office staff: “Oh [expressed with feigned surprise] is Phoumjai out of the office? I thought he would be here.”

He used these purported meetings with potential clients as his excuse to hold onto a binder that contained the data and contact information of the Sinxay Club models. The binder was akin to a portfolio for the stable of models under his tutelage. Each model had a biography sheet, a resume of sorts, complete with a photo, contact information and brief biographical data. Each of these sheets was stored in this binder over which Ajaan Phoumjai retained possession.

Control over the binder and the members’ contact-sheets was not uncontested. In fact, after turnover in administration in the office, the binder and control over access to the binder was the subject of more than one staff meeting. During one such meeting, the newly appointed Deputy Director of the office, Mrs. Onchanh, stated directly that the Vannasin administrators must have Ajaan Phoumjai return the binder. She explained that she and other Vannasin staff members had the need to contact members of the Sinxay Club for employment and club related activities, but without access to the binder and the contact sheets the Vannasin staff were unable to do so. Ironically, Ajaan Phoumjai was not present at this meeting, as he was out, with the binder, self-reportedly in the field meeting with potential clients.

The binder and the contact sheets were just one means through which Ajaan Phoumjai provided potential clients a view of his stable of models. He also staged venues in which the models could be viewed in person. The weekend afternoon training sessions at the Ministry of Information and Culture were one such setting. A field trip to a local video production studio, the Sinxay Culture Club student certification ceremony, and fashion shows organized by third parties are examples of others.

Ajaan Phoumjai leveraged his position in the Ministry of Information and Culture, and the responsibilities for training models, to access the additional private accumulation of wealth needed to augment the meager salary provided for his service to the Party. In this respect practices of labor in service to the Party (e.g. Ajaan Phoumjai’s training of cultural models), and practices of private capital accumulation (e.g. Ajaan Phoumjai’s accrual of income through modeling related activities) are mutually dependent and mutually constitutive. Here we have a situation where the maintenance and perpetuation of the Party and the social practices that constitute its institutions are dependent upon and constitutive of specific related practices of capital accumulation. Likewise the existence of practices of capital accumulation interrelated with modeling are dependent upon the social relations that constitute the Party and its institutions.

The Ministry’s permission granting authority for both cultural events and the assembly of large groups of people plays a significant role in Ajaan Phoumjai’s *viek peeset*. An entrepreneur affiliating his/her event (e.g. a concert, a yogurt promotion, a fair or festival, the promotion of a new pop singer’s CD, a promotional event for a market,

etc) with the Sinxay Culture Club affords the entrepreneur an established pathway towards acquiring the requisite permission for hosting such an event in Lao PDR. By incorporating the Sinxay models into one’s event (and supporting the activities of Vannasin), the request for permission could emanate from within the Ministry (i.e. from Ajaan Phoumjai’s desk), within the social networks Ajaan Phoumjai had already established inside the Ministry.

For example, in early 2007 the new wing of the Morning Market, a long-delayed construction project in the heart of Vientiane, was nearing completion. Ajaan Phoumjai received an invitation to coordinate the Miss Morning Market Pageant as part of the grand opening promotion of the new facility. His labor for coordinating the beauty pageant was clearly *viek peeset*, and, importantly, it was *viek peeset* occurring during the working hours for his job with the Ministry of Information and Culture. Part of this “special work” involved designing the recruitment posters calling upon young women to enter the pageant as contestants (see figure 3.15). In early March Ajaan Phoumjai began posting these posters on bulletin boards, doors and windows around the Ministry of Information and Culture, as identical announcements were being posted around town.



Figure 3.15: Recruitment poster for the Miss Dalat Sao contest. Designed by Ajaan Phoumjai, 2007.

By posting, Ajaan Phoumjai was publicly acknowledging that he was engaged in the training of contestants (model training) during work hours, almost as if it would not be questioned whether such work fell within or outside his duties as the trainer of models for the Sinxay Culture Club. Posting of the recruitment posters around the Ministry was not an act of audacity, but rather a skillful tactical maneuver. In designing the poster Ajaan Phoumjai listed the Ministry of Information and Culture’s Sinxay Culture Club as

the institution that potential contestants should contact in order to enter the pageant, and listed the Vannasin office phone number (the phone it was his duty as “receptionist” to answer) as the contact number for interested contestants to call. The poster was a tactical maneuver, publicly presenting his *viek peeset* as if it were part of his duties within the Ministry of Information and Culture: rather than asking his superiors for permission to conduct such work during office hours, he put them in the position of having to explain how such duties don’t fall within his job description, should the supervisors wish to engage in such a negotiation.

At the March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2007 staff meeting the Deputy Director did engage Ajaan Phoumjai on this issue. The Deputy Director’s primary verbalized objection to what Ajaan Phoumjai had done was not that he had simply listed the Sinxay Culture Club and office number as the contact number for the contestants, but more importantly the poster clearly stated that a requirement for contestants was that they possess “ໜ້າຕາດີ” (*nah tha dee*, which translates to ‘a face that is pleasing to the eyes’). At the meeting, in front of the Vannasin staff, the Deputy Director informed Ajaan Phoumjai that the Ministry of Information and Culture, the Sinxay Club, and the Vannasin employees do not function as the judge of the physical beauty of young women. She made it clear that the Sinxay Club could not be a part of a beauty pageant.

Ajaan Phoumjai stayed in the room with the Director and Deputy Director of Vannasin when the staff meeting ended, and when he emerged they had reached a deal. The staff members were informed that the Miss Morning Market contestants would pay the Vannasin Unit the Sinxay Culture Club membership fee (i.e. the contestants for the Miss Morning Market contest would contribute financial support for the Vannasin Unit), receive Sinxay Club training through Ajaan Phoumjai (see figure 3.16a), and the posters would remain as they were. When the pageant was complete, the pageant winner graced the cover of Vannasin Magazine (see figure 3.17). It is in this manner that activities initiated as *viek peeset* for the private income generation of Vannasin employee may become incorporated into the officially authorized labor of the unit providing supplementary income for multiple members of the staff.



Figure 3.16a: “Miss Morning Market” promotional pageant contestants training as Sinxay Culture Club models on the stage of the Ministry of Information and Culture’s large meeting hall, under the motto of the nation, and flag of the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party. March 2007. Photo provided by Vannasin Magazine.



Figure 3.16b: Contestants under the tutelage of Ajaan Phoumjai perform a walk down the runway during the Miss Morning Market promotional pageant. Photo provided by Vannasin Magazine.



Figure 3.17: Miss Morning Market pageant winner modeling a polite *nop* on the cover of Vannasin Magazine, May 2007.

Beyond the use of Sinxay models in fashion shows, print media, and as cultural envoys, Ajaan Phoumjai also employed select models in the service of lubricating social relations during social gatherings of Ministry officials. A Lao idiom that explains reciprocal exchange in social relations is: “Meat goes, fish comes” (ຊີ້ນໄປປາມາ). The phrase indicates that a gift or favor that flows in one direction will be reciprocated in another form. Such exchanges in Lao society are made discretely, and often at social gatherings where an exchange or gift-giving would be customary.<sup>22</sup> Ajaan Phoumjai, with a club of beautiful models under his beck and call, was able to deploy young women as commodities in such a reciprocal exchange.

Social gatherings at the Ministry are one such venue where select models may be deployed for these acts of social lubrication. Ajaan Phoumjai invited one contestant/Sinxay Club student from the Miss Morning Market pageant to join the Vannasin staff at the Ministry of Information and Culture’s annual Lao New Year ceremony at the Ministry compound in April 2007. On the morning of the New Year celebration Ajaan Phoumjai, a make-up artist/hairstylist with whom he frequently worked, and the Sinxay Cultural Club student transformed the front office of Vannasin into a make-shift beauty parlor to prepare the young woman for her role in the day’s social events. After a Ministry-wide spirit calling ceremony held in the Ministry’s large meeting hall, Ministry staff and guests congregated in the rear parking lot which was converted into a party venue complete with tables, a buffet, a tent shading a dance area with amplifiers and a keyboard. Various talented Ministry employees took turns performing songs while the staff ate and socialized around the tables. When time came to start the Lao circle dance (ລຳວິງ *lahm vong*), Ajaan Phoumjai and the Deputy Director of Vannasin scouted the crowd and discussed how the beautiful model would be deployed. Following their directions she gracefully made her way through the crowd to politely

invite designated recipients for a dance. The targets of her deployment were a) the higher-ranking Ministry officials from whom the Vannasin unit must seek and receive permission in order to be authorized to undertake specific activities, as well as, b) those individuals who had lent their assistance to the Vannasin unit in the past.<sup>23</sup> In this manner the model that Ajaan Phoumjai carefully trained was incorporated as a commodity into the exchange relations of the Vannasin unit.

Parties outside of the Ministry hosted by Vannasin administrators were another venue where models were frequently deployed as part of exchange relations. When present as models at social events the Sinxay Club members defied the typical occupation of social space to which the Vannasin Staff generally adhered. At social gatherings the female Vannasin staff members usually congregated around the kitchen area and labored in food preparations, while male staff members generally occupied the front room with distinguished guests (sometimes higher ranking Ministry officials) seated on chairs or sofas. If models or lower ranking female staff were not present in the room, the lowest ranking male Vannasin staff members would typically pour drinks for the seated guests. Once Ajaan Phoumjai and the model(s) arrived, it was the models who undertook the labor of drink-pouring-hostess and engaged the guests in polite casual conversation.

On the occasions when Ajaan Phoumjai arrives at a social gathering without a model, it can come as a surprise to the guests, but he will typically substitute another form of commodity in their place. When Ajaan Phoumjai arrived at one weekend social gathering with no models in tow, a Ministry of Information and Culture guest asked in surprise, “Phoumjai, did you bring any models?!” To which Ajaan Phoumjai replied, “No, today I only have Johnny.” As he said this he placed a bottle of Johnnie Walker Red Label on a coffee table within easy reach of his supervisor and the guest. The deployment of the model (like the Johnnie Walker) may not be the only form of exchange employed, rather it may be a component of a series of cumulative acts that will eventually result in an act of reciprocity (e.g. forgiveness for not being in the office during working hours, a signature on a form of permission for an event, overlooking the fact that one’s business card misrepresents oneself . . .).

The apparent simplicity of the Sinxay Culture Club models’ movements belies the depth and complexity of the social relations behind the public performance. In the role of “Ajaan,” managing the training of the culture club’s models, Mr. Phoumjai’s labors are focused on transformation. Ajaan Phoumjai receives students as a craftsman might receive a sensuous material, in a raw form, and his labors transform the students, their behaviors, movements and mannerisms, shaping them into a form that is simultaneously useful to him and the Ministry.

What we observe at a party on the surface level is a pretty young model pouring a drink for an older higher-level official, however, we must not let the immediacy and sensuousness of the labor of the model obfuscate the labor of exchange that lies at the root of the interaction. Ajaan Phoumjai is enmeshed in a complex network of social relations; his labors (and any profits from such labors) are dependent upon the labors of others. The passing of forms up the chain of approval, signatures, stamps of approval, reservation of venues, securing sponsorship for events, all bring him into working relations with others. The training of the Sinxay models has a social form that extends far beyond the direct relations with the students in the room in which he trains, and the

employment of models have social forms that extend far beyond direct relations with the person for whom they are pouring a drink or inviting to a circle dance.

Leveraging the responsibilities of his paid employment, Ajaan Phoumjai incorporates the labor of the members of the club he directs, orchestrating their social relations for the production of a group of young people who embody a value, a value he is able to appropriate through relations of exchange. His position, working as an employee of the State, enables him to legitimately access the social relations in which he can employ the models.

The value appropriated from employment of a Sinxay model is neither abstract nor fixed, but rather the model's value is context specific and variable – dependent upon the historically specific forms of social relations in which they are employed. Ajaan Phoumjai capitalizes upon the employment of the models under his charge, extracting different forms of values in the context of different exchanges. In the context of a cultural exchange (e.g. when he and the models travel to represent Lao culture in Japan, China, Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand, etc), value may return to him in the form of per diem and travel; in the context of deploying the models at a party or social gathering, value may be returned in the form of a signature permitting his work with a particular event. Through his *viek peeset* Ajaan Phoumjai produces his ability to afford the low paid employment in the service of contributing to the goals of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party.

Low-paid employment in the production of Lao language literature and arts propaganda necessitates the *viek peeset* of Vannasin employees. In turn, their employment within the Ministry affords opportunities for *viek peeset* that are not available to those who do not work within this government media production unit. The administrators of Vannasin are able to leverage their editorial talents and permission granting authority to provide a pathway for those wishing to print their work in the Lao language. Mr. Vongkham is able to leverage the equipment that would otherwise be financially out of reach. Mrs. Anoumone is able to access a population within the gates of the Ministry that others selling the same products are unable to reach. Through his duties as the administrator of the Sinxay Culture Club, Ajaan Phoumjai is able transform select young people under his charge into commodities with a considerable amount of value in diverse relations of exchange. I presented the examples of *viek peeset* above to demonstrate how one's assigned duties in the divisions of labor for propaganda production afford different employees diverse opportunities for income accumulation; diverse forms of labor necessary for augmenting their official assigned low wage labor.<sup>24</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

The labor entailed in the Vannasin Magazine unit's production of literature and arts propaganda involves complex social relations that would be difficult to imagine if one's only interaction with the unit was limited to flipping through the pages of Vannasin's printed products. The unit, the intended labor of the Vannasin staff, and its goal of supporting the Lao People's Revolutionary Party's single-Party rule through literature and arts print propaganda were conceived and developed in an era of a socialist "centrally-planned system." From about a quarter of a century after its inception in 1979 the unit chugged away producing print material with production fully subsidized by the

State. The Party's promulgation of the "New Economic Mechanism" and the transition to practices of a "market-based economy" fundamentally transformed the practices of funding for print propaganda units such as Vannasin. The members of the Vannasin unit staff labored to produce changing conceptualizations of the Party and its institutions in the era of economic reform through its print propaganda, while they simultaneously had to augment their low wage labor through diverse forms of leveraging opportunities for income accumulation provided by their employment for the Ministry of Information and Culture. One aspect of the diverse practices of income augmentation entailed the incorporation of the labor of youth. Through the example of Vannasin we are able to see how the structures of the governance, of which their labor is a part, and large scale changes in practice initiated in different branches of the hierarchical structure necessitate transformations of practice within the unit, and contribute to the administration's perceived needs for the labor of youth.

The changes entailed with the economic transition included opening up opportunities for privately owned and operated magazines. In 2006 the skeletal and insufficiently paid staff of the Vannasin unit were ill-equipped for "market-based" competition with an increasing number of glossy and relatively well crafted Lao language publications available to a limited print media market in Lao PDR. This same year, in an attempt to make the Vannasin Magazine products more attractive to young Lao consumers and the potential advertisers targeting these consumers, Mr. Paengan and Mr. Dee launched concerted efforts to incorporate the labor of youth into the Vannasin production processes. During the course of my research the Vannasin staff engaged in five different forms of incorporating the labor of youth into the production of Vannasin's arts and literature propaganda. In the following chapter I detail these diverse forms through which the labor of young people were incorporated into the productive activities of the Vannasin Magazine unit.

Studying the divisions of labor within an organization as well as the needs of employees within that division of labor enables us to develop an understanding of how the social logic of an institutional dependency upon the incorporation of labor of youth is produced. This production will of course be as diverse and varied as the forms of production that exist within the community of practice. In the following chapter I detail the conditions within the Vannasin unit within which the social logic of a dependency on the labor of youth was produced.

---

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> (As an example of such outlines see Department of Public Administration and Civil Service 1996)

<sup>2</sup> An important aspect of producing a respect for hierarchical authority was determining which people would be invited to certain events. The production of invitation lists, discussion among staff in regard to the production of these lists, and the acts of dissemination of invitations made visible the social interrelations of those who constituted the hierarchical membership of the imagined organs of the social body.

<sup>3</sup> By the beginning of 2008, with promotions out of the unit and a change in the administration, the full-time staff was down to ten employees.

---

<sup>4</sup> Mr. Sisavath's aspirations in this respect have been partially fulfilled, as he has since received training abroad in both India and Malaysia.

<sup>5</sup> Such educational opportunities are not only offered through ASEAN member countries and India, Malaysia, China, and Japan, but also in the United States through its Fulbright and East-West Center programs.

<sup>6</sup> This movement out of a unit after receiving opportunities for higher education was one factor that led to a degree of combined resentment and envy among staff within units. It was well recognized that upon Mr. Thongsing's return with a higher degree, he would be promoted up and out of the Vannasin unit. Vannasin was still responsible for maintaining his desk and salary during the period of his education, even when he was not present or contributing to the labor of the Vannasin unit. The expressions of envy were personal, however the expressions tinted with resentment were not directed towards Mr. Thongsing, rather, it was a quiet resentment expressed indirectly towards the acknowledged probability that Mr. Thongsing would likely not return to contribute directly to the labor of the Vannasin unit once his higher education in Vietnam was complete. I present another example of this in chapter six when discussing the Lao National Film Archive and Video Center.

<sup>7</sup> In 2006 all associations in Lao PDR fell under the aegis of a responsible government institution. The Lao Writer's Association fell under the aegis of the Ministry of Information and Culture. To illustrate how such an organizational requirement resulted in conformity, I present the example of the Lao Disabled People's Association (LDPA). The LDPA (which, on the surface, appeared as an independent organization) fell under the aegis of the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare (Department of Veterans Affairs). Foreign experts wishing to volunteer within the LDPA would thus first have to be approved by the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare played a significant role in the selection of the leadership of the LDPA. To insure that the Lao Disabled People's Associations activities fell in line with the Party, officials of Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare vetted candidates for officer positions. Further, membership of the LDPA was controlled/determined by the heads of different units. In the Deaf-Mute Unit this enabled the Head of the Unit to exclude 'trouble makers' (i.e. those who had lifestyles and behaviors that did not conform to his expectations of proper Lao behavior, and those who did not agree with or opposed the actions of the Head). Such powers to exclude insured that the membership was composed of conformists, and conformists reaped the benefits of association membership. In the case of the LDPA's Deaf-Mute Unit, those who disagreed with the Head of the unit were excluded from the vocational training activities, employment opportunities, and participation in social events, etc organized through the Unit. The visible act of exclusion proved a powerful means of insuring the conformity of those who wished to receive benefits from association activities. Such organization of Associations enabled a considerable amount of political power to be concentrated in a select handful of like-minded people.

<sup>8</sup> In 2006 through the period of my research, nasal inhalers imported from Thailand were used by many young and old throughout the city of Vientiane as a remedy for headaches, colds, and lethargy. A number of these products contained ingredients that were deemed to be stimulants, causing the products to be banned from import into countries such as

---

Japan. The stimulating effect seemed to prove rather addictive for some young people. However, viewed by most in Lao PDR as a health product, the near constant use of the inhalers was not widely or commonly considered to be problematic. Hence an employee, such as Mrs. Viengmany could sit almost the entire day inhaling from a small plastic tube, staring blankly ahead with no one in the office considering such near constant use or the blank almost unblinking stare to be problematic or potentially detrimental to one's health or productivity.

<sup>9</sup> As noted in the previous chapter, the Lao English Language press uses the phrases “centrally planned system” to refer to the post revolutionary, pre-economic reform (i.e. pre-“New Economic Mechanism”, pre-1986) economic system in the Lao People's Democratic Republic, and the phrase “market-based economy” to refer to the post economic reform (i.e. post 1986) economic system (see Phouthonesy 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Here I draw not only upon my conversations with Ministry of Information and Culture employees, but also upon the published work of Lao Ministry of Information and Culture employee Thonglor Duangsavanh, who outlined the “impact of economic transition” on media production in Lao PDR providing considerable insight into the transformation of labor resulting from the economic reforms of the 1980's (Duangsavanh 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Duangsavanh attributes the rise of media reforms in the mid 1990's to Lao PDR's quest for ASEAN membership, and “Integrating with the outside world . . .” (Duangsavanh 2002 p. 110). Interestingly he notes that print runs of government publications fell after the reforms. For example, the Party's daily newspaper *Pasason* had a print run of 10,000 from 1986 to 1994, and after the reforms the print run was cut to 7,000 copies a day (Duangsavanh 2002 p. 111). In 2002, highlighting a potentially fatal flaw in the shift towards a market-based approach to propaganda production Duangsavanh wrote: “Presently, *Pasason* is not wildly popular among readers because its content is not attractive enough . . . The paper is uncritical and mostly publishes articles which project a good impression and avoid negativity”(Duangsavanh 2002 p. 111). At the time Duangsavanh was the Assistant Editor at the Vientiane Times (the State's English Language newspaper), and his assessment of the reason behind the uncritical texts was: “Journalists are still afraid to criticize and to suggest ways to improve social problems” (Duangsavanh 2002 p. 111). As the Lao State run media (including Vannasin) exists to promote and perpetuate the single-Party rule, it is not particularly surprising that such media generally lacks a critical voice.

<sup>12</sup> Mrs. Onchanh used the term “Soviet era” with me to refer to the period of time during which the Soviet Union provided considerable support for the Lao Government. Her tones when speaking of the “Soviet era” were clearly nostalgic. In conversations with the older generation of long-time Ministry employees one finds a considerable amount of ‘anti-imperialist nostalgia’ (a turn of the concept introduced by Rosaldo 1989) – a nostalgia (i.e. a fond memory/longing of a past historical period ‘with the pain removed’) for the era in which a new/revolutionary Lao elite took over political power from those who had been supported by France and then the US.

<sup>13</sup> Duangsavanh points out that due to challenges related to the transportation infrastructure and literacy rates, the primary market for Lao language print distribution is the population within the geographical area in and around the capital city of Vientiane (Duangsavanh 2002 pp. 108-109). The total population of Vientiane in 2006 was

---

estimated to be 711,000 (Lao National Statistics Center 2010). A 2001 UNESCO funded study on literacy rates found that only seventy-one percent (71%) of the total population of Lao PDR (that was approximately 3.7 million people of a total of 5.2 million at that time) spoke Lao as a “mother tongue.” This population tends to be congregated in the urban centers (such as Vientiane). It must be kept in mind, however, that the ability to *read* in Lao is even less widely spread, even among those born with the Lao language as a mother tongue. Drawing on the populations they studied, the researchers estimated that thirty-seven percent (37%) of the population between the ages of fifteen and fifty-nine had what they deemed to be a “functional literacy” (Ministry of Education Department of Non-formal Education 2004). If these figures are accurate, one could surmise that even if Vannasin Magazine available to populations distant from the urban centers, the text would be largely incomprehensible/inaccessible to more than sixty three percent (63%) of the total population of Lao PDR. In light of this information it would seem that other forms of media might be better suited for distributing the Party’s propaganda.

<sup>14</sup> ວັລະສານ ວັທະນະທຳ Culture Magazine is a publication of the Lao Language Newspapers Office, Ministry of Information and Culture.

<sup>15</sup> ວາລະສານທ່ອງທ່ຽວ ດິສໂຄເວີຣີ ລາວ Discover Laos Travel and Business Magazine is published in partnership between a private enterprise [BTS Services Laos] and the partially privatized Lao Airlines.

<sup>16</sup> ທ່ຽວມືອງລາວ Visiting Muong Lao is a tourism-oriented magazine produced once every two months by the Lao National Tourism Authority.

<sup>17</sup> A noteworthy exception to this trend in bilingual “business” and “lifestyle” publication was the 2007 début of the magazine ລານຄຳ. This Lao language magazine was produced by Dokked Books, which went on to become the first private publishing company authorized to operate in Lao PDR. Dokked is the penname of Douangdeuane Bounyavong, a prolific author and significant figure in the Lao literary world.

Madame Douangdeuane is the widow renowned Lao writer Outhine Bounyavong, and daughter of the late Maha Sila Viravong (an important literary figure widely credited for his contributions to the documentation and shaping of the Lao language, grammar, and history). Madame Douangdeuane is the sister of Madame Dara Kanlaya (penname Dok Champa) another important Lao literary figure who was at one time the Director and Editor-in-Chief of Vannasin Magazine. Under late French Colonial Rule Maha Sila Virivong worked as the administrative assistant to Prince Phetsarath during the period of the genesis of Lao language nationalistic propaganda. Prior to the revolution Maha Sila Viravong and his daughters published an early Lao literary and culture magazine (copies of which are archived as part of the collection in the private library erected in honor of Maha Sila Viravong and Outhine Bounyavong on the property of Madame Douangdeuane). After graduating as a member of the first graduating class of Dong Dok University (now the National University of Laos) Madame Douangdeuane went on to teach at the University and was one of the instructors of Mr. Dee (who served as the Deputy Director of Vannasin Magazine in 2006 and would be promoted to Director and Editor-in-Chief in 2007). Now, long after retiring from the University, she continues to play a significant role in Lao literary production through the publishing company she

---

runs with her daughter. The contents of their magazine, ລາມຄຳ, stood out among other private for-profit publications as being a Lao language literary and culture magazine, as their cover stated, “for everyone in the family.”

<sup>18</sup> Sadly much of the Vannasin staff’s scavenging from the archive of past issues was done through physically cutting and removing desired texts and graphics from the archived issues in the office, leaving pages of the office’s bound back volumes in tatters and incomplete.

<sup>19</sup> Low pay and delayed payment in Lao Government jobs is not uncommon or new. A recent article in the Vientiane Times examining the rapid loss of public school teachers noted: “The main reason so many teachers were resigning was the impossibly low pay they received . . .” (Sangsomboun 2010). To illustrate how foreign employees and Lao employees react differently to what is rather common in Lao PDR a Lao Aviation official (back when Lao Aviation was still fully government owned) told me of a foreign contracted pilot who had contracted his plane and his services as a pilot of that plane to Lao Aviation. The Lao Aviation official explained that this pilot was upset with ‘only a few months of delayed payment,’ and when flying a round-trip flight to Bangkok, Thailand never returned. The Lao Aviation official credited this irrationally disgruntled foreign pilot with spreading false and malicious safety concerns about Lao Aviation, which, purportedly, eventually contributed to Lao Aviation changing its name to “Lao Airlines.” The official was explaining this to me to illustrate how foreigners often fail to understand Lao culture and foreigners thoughtless and impetuous reactions can prove problematic. From the perspective of the Lao Aviation official, the pilot should have understood that a few months delay in payment did not garner such a rash response on behalf of the foreign pilot.

<sup>20</sup> The *pétanque* court was almost exclusively a male realm. A pathway leading to the annex housing the Accounting Department and Payroll Department crossed one end of the court. Female employees of these units had to walk through the court during breaks in the game, taking care not to accidentally kick *boules*. This quick and careful passing across the end of the court constituted the limited presence of female Ministry employees during the afternoon games. The daily migration of male Vannasin staff to the court made a gender divide in the labor quite visible – for the most part Daeng, Mrs. Viengmany and the three women from the front office were the only people actually present and laboring for the Ministry in the Vannasin offices past noon.

Generally the games were not simply a leisure activity; rather the male Ministry staff members approached *pétanque* as a gambling sport. Competitive male bravado could push the stakes for a game as high as \$3 U.S., which was approximately \$0.90 higher than the daily income of the highest paid Vannasin employee. Lower ranking employees were typically priced out of these higher stakes games and approached the high stakes matches as a spectator sport. The presence of any of the editorial staff members or the Head of the Technical Department in the Ministry compound after 3:30 pm was a fairly reliable indicator of their involvement in that day’s high stakes game of *pétanque*. Their success or failure in the game could be easily read upon their faces when they returned to the office to put away their *boules*, pack up and head home.

<sup>21</sup> *Viek peeset* is widely recognized as a necessity for Lao officials – as a recent article in the State-run English Language newspaper reported: “Most officials do not rely solely on

---

their government pay packet. Many of them have more than one job; for example, university lecturers often hold additional teaching jobs at private colleges to earn enough to maintain a good standard of living” (Inspectors want civil servants to declare their wealth 2010). Students mentioned to me that important information students might need for a university exam may be more fully covered by a university lecturer during such paid private college *viek peeset* – effectively insuring that such paid private college courses are well attended.

As the example above illustrates, it is important to note that the phrase *viek peeset* applies not only to forms of labor that take place during paid work hours, it also applies to forms of labor that take place outside of the regular office hours as well. For example, the employee of the Ministry of Information and Culture’s office of Foreign Relations who, after work hours, drives a pick-up truck to a number of the hotels downtown to collect discarded kitchen and restaurant waste in order to feed the hogs he raises to supplement his income, is also engaged in a form of *viek peeset*. So too is the Ministry’s cabinet member who built a guest-house on family land, found that visitors aren’t interested in lodging so far outside of the center of the city, converted the structure to a school and now rents the structure to a private school run by Korean evangelical Christian missionaries.

In late 2007 the same cabinet member developed the plan that transformed part of the Ministry’s storage shed into a café. The private-enterprise-in-a-government-space plan involved clearing out and discarding much of the obsolete and broken stored materials, adding plumbing, a couple of gas burners, a number of old school desks converted to tables, and contracting with the kin of a Ministry employee (a woman who worked as the cook for the Polish Embassy) to sell food and drinks. For a short time the Worholesque poster of Brezhnev and Kaysone adorned the wall of the café, but this was soon replaced with a poster advertising Pepsi.

The menu was priced in a range where a serving of many items was almost equal to the day’s wages of most Vannasin employees. In order to keep the café operating (i.e. in order to maintain the café as a source of income for the kin of Ministry employees within an environment where Ministry employees couldn’t afford to support the private enterprise) a rear gate to the Ministry was opened allowing outside customers (primarily medical students from a college located across the street) to enter and dine at the café. This transformed the security of the Ministry compound: rather than passing through the guarded front gate, anybody off the street was able to simply walk unsupervised through the back gate. Soon after the café opened for operation a motorcycle was stolen from within the Ministry’s gated compound. For this the guard (who was physically unable to secure two distant gates simultaneously) was summarily reprimanded and punished with a transfer of duty. The theft within the Ministry was shocking to all as previously no one imagined such a theft would occur within a government office compound. There was a considerable amount of buzz among staff about how this theft was indicative of negative changes taking place in Lao society, with a particular focus on the perceived negative behaviors of contemporary Lao youth.

Despite the theft no substantial changes were made to the practice of guarding of the Ministry compound, but staff, for the first time, began to use chains and locks on their motorcycles within the Ministry’s gates. The interior of the office of the Director of

---

Vannasin Magazine was visible from the café through the office’s glass paned French doors. Soon after the Ministry issued the Director of Vannasin a laptop computer it was brazenly lifted from his desk. This theft again proved shocking to those employed in the Ministry, and again generated much talk about the perceived negative and detrimental behaviors of contemporary Lao youth.

<sup>22</sup> Ceremonial occasions hosted by those from whom others may seek permission are events where guests are able to attend and engage in practices of exchange. The Lao term “*mad khaen*” (ມັດແຂນ) literally refers to the act of tying a string around the wrist of a recipient during a spirit calling ceremony. Spirit calling ceremonies can be held for a multitude of important occasions, such as weddings, ordinations, births, an illness, the visit of an esteemed guest, the departure of an individual or group who will travel a considerable distance, the new year, the construction of a new house, opening of a new business . . . . It is a custom at such events for guests to tie a short strand of string around the wrist of the intended recipient of the ceremony while the guest verbalizes positive wishes for the recipient. Often currency is tied in the string, or the guest hands an envelope with currency inside to the ceremony’s recipient as the guest ties the string upon the recipient’s wrist. Kin of the ceremonial recipient may also be subject to the receipt of wrist strings and currency. The guests’ names are generally labeled on the outside of the envelope (in the case of a wedding the envelope used may be the labeled envelope in which the invitation arrived, at other times the guest may provide his/her own envelope and write their own name clearly on the outside). The envelopes are not opened when the guests are present, but rather after they leave. The guest’s name on the outside of the envelope enables the recipient to know which guest has provided an envelope’s contents.

While literally the term *mad khaen* means to tie one’s wrist, the term is also used to refer to the act of exchange made during such ceremonies. The *mad khaen* ceremonies provide legitimate venues of exchange, where the amount given is customarily hidden from public view within a sealed envelope. As such the *mad khaen* ceremony is an ideal venue for lubricating the process of permission seeking. Those who enter the ceremony as guest seeking permission from a certain official are able to engage in a socially legitimate ceremony of exchange, concealing the actual monetary transaction from public view through the use of the envelope. In this way the exchanges that take place at the wedding of a daughter of a high level government official may extend into the permission granting authority of the official in the realm of his or her government employment. Readers wishing to examine this further can find information in the work of historian Martin Stuart-Fox (see Stuart-Fox 2006 p. 63).

<sup>23</sup> In the spirit of full disclosure I should mention I was a type b target of her deployment. Therefore my insight into her deployment comes not only from sitting at the table with Ajaan Phoumjai, the model and the Deputy Director as I conducted observations on the practices of deploying the model, but also through the experience of being the recipient of such deployment. I greatly enjoyed my opportunity to join her in a dance.

<sup>24</sup> An important note to keep in mind is that *viek peeset* is recognized as a necessity by the administrators in the Ministry. Public recognition of the need to *viek peeset* crops up in the English language press, as in this example from an article titled “Inspectors want civil servants to declare their wealth.” The article, also quoted in a footnote above, provide the example of university lecturers stating: “university lecturers often hold

---

additional teaching jobs at private colleges to earn enough to maintain a good standard of living” (Inspectors want civil servants to declare their wealth 2010). The management of the official labor of the staff by the Vannasin administrators and the hierarchy of administrators above them was made quite complex by the employees needs for *viek peeset*. Ministry administrators were saddled with the responsibility of providing their employees enough free reign to conduct their *viek peeset* (accumulating the necessary augmentation of their official income) while insuring that the staff members complete the minimal requirements of their assigned job.

## Chapter 4

### **Incorporating the Labor of Youth into the ongoing and transforming labor of the Vannasin Magazine unit**

#### **Introduction:**

In the previous chapter, through exploring the division of labor and the needs of those employed within that division of labor, I detailed how the perceived need for the incorporation of the labor of young people is produced within a community of practice. This brings us to the point of asking two related questions: 1) How is it that members of an older generation of practitioners produce opportunities for legitimate peripheral participation of young newcomers? 2) How do members of an older generation of practitioners employ peripheral participation as a means of mediating perceived threats to continuity of practice and displacement of practitioners when incorporating young people into a community of practice? In the following pages I reveal how, within a single community of practice employees may produce multiple diverse trajectories of legitimate peripheral participation for young people. Each of these trajectories entails equally diverse practices of providing and maintaining differing degrees of peripheral participation of young aspiring practitioners. Further, different trajectories and practices of legitimate peripheral participation are opened to ‘insiders’ (i.e. those young people somehow already involved in the community of practice of the workplace) and ‘outsiders’ (i.e. those young people who have no social connections or peripheral involvement in the community of practice). The ‘outsiders’ trajectories, as exemplified in the examples I provide in this chapter, are the primary avenues through which the members of the older generation of practitioners attempt to tackle the dilemmas of adaptive perpetuation. By juxtaposing two specific practices of incorporating the labor of young people from outside the established social relations of the community of practice, I demonstrate how the practices of incorporation of youth, and the practices of managing the degree of peripheral participation in the daily labor of the community are diverse. Those charged with overseeing the incorporation of young people into these practices employ equally diverse practices of managing/mitigating threats of continuity and displacement.

Lave and Wenger’s framing of the continuity-displacement contradiction provides considerable utility for exploring the complex changing social practices at the juncture of participation in labor where two generations intersect. Significantly it forces a move away from the inadequate and simplistic framing of learning to labor as the ‘acquisition of skill’ by the younger generation or ‘transmission of knowledge’ from the old generation to the young. The dilemma of continuity-displacement opens an understanding of what Marx termed the “*revolutionary practice*” of human activity<sup>1</sup> that not only obligates recognition of change inherent in human activity, but also opens understandings of the dialectic production/consumption of material life and social identity through labor. It is not only the older generation who are caught in the dilemma, as Lave and Wenger explain, newcomers need to “engage in the existing practice, which has developed over time: to understand it, to participate in it, and to become full members of the community in which it exists. On the other hand, they have a stake in its development as they begin to establish their own identity in its future.”<sup>2</sup> It is in this light

that we can open our explorations of how both generations are simultaneously dependent and threatened by each other through shared participation in institutions of the single Party State. In the examples I present in this dissertation, one must understand that “continuity” does not refer to an absolute reproduction or continuation-in-total of the past practices of labor of the staff of the institution as they existed under the “centrally planned system.” The Party has instituted a fundamental alteration of its political economy and the older generation is grappling with the problem of producing a continuity of single-Party rule within a context of substantially transforming labor. The examination of the continuity of the single-Party rule of the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party thus requires a focus on the change – the fundamental change in practice required by the transformation of the Lao political economy (changes that in many ways propagandists play important roles in producing). Identity production is an ongoing and elemental activity in which the Party is entailed throughout its reign. The laborers of the Party, through its Ministry of Information and Culture, are engaged in the social production of a transforming Party identity (i.e. a product of the labor of propagandists that maintains and reflects the Party as the just and legitimate political authority over the population encompassed within the borders) in a political economy they have set about to change. The newcomers (both ‘outsiders’ and ‘insiders’) entering labor for the Ministry do so here at a time of incredible flux, entering to perform the labor for the production of this new social identity while at the same time developing their own social identities in relation to this changing Party.

In order to explore the social practices of adaptive perpetuation in the training of young people for the purposes of literature and arts propaganda production, we must be aware that there were multiple modes of incorporating young people in to the labor of the Vannasin Magazine publishing unit. Each of these modes of incorporation entailed the older generation providing young people differing degrees of access to participation in the daily labor and social practices of propaganda production for the Ministry.

However, before we can move on to develop an understanding of the recruitment of young people into the labor of the Vannasin unit we must we must understand that the low pay of Vannasin staff insured a regular presence of the children of Ministry kin within the Vannasin Magazine unit. I open this chapter detailing how kinship provided two pathways into the labor of the unit – direct kinship enabled the daughter of the highest-level administrator a pathway into the labor of administration. Collateral kin relations (genealogical) provided a trajectory into lower level staff positions within the Ministry.

Kinship trajectories, however, proved insufficient for fulfilling all of Vannasin’s staffing needs. Significantly, kinship was an insufficient means of filling the older generation’s perceived needs for labor, labor necessary for producing the adaptations of the practices and products of the Vannasin unit for the changing ‘market-based economy.’ The transformations in the Lao political economy, specifically the unit’s need to generate an increasing percentage of its own operating expenses through advertising and sales, resulted in Vannasin’s increasing reliance on the labor of non-kin youth in order to make Vannasin Magazine marketable. Following the description of kinship trajectories I detail the five different modes of incorporating the labor of non-kin youth into the labor of the Vannasin Magazine unit from 2006 through 2008.

At the end of the chapter I devote a considerable amount of space to one particular form of incorporation, the practices of incorporation involved in the training of cultural models. The detailed description of the practices of incorporating young people as models provides us with a useful point of comparison/contrast as we move on to an even more detailed exploration the intergenerational tensions at the roots of political-economic transformation (explored through the training of young aspiring writers) in the subsequent chapters.

### **Low wages and the presence of kin:**

In the previous chapter I introduced the Vannasin division of labor and pay scale, in order to demonstrate how the low wages paid for Ministry employment necessitated the *viek peeset* of Ministry employees. An awareness of the pay scale of Ministry employees opens opportunities for us to understand the physical presence of children of Ministry employees within the Ministry of Information and Culture. The low wages of the Vannasin staff frequently resulted in situations in which staff members (i.e. staff members without family members at home capable of providing child care) were unable to afford childcare for their offspring during times of illness, or during regular school holidays. These employees were also unable to afford taking time off from their Ministry employment in order to attend to their children during such times. As a result young children of Vannasin employees were frequently present within the Ministry compound, accompanying their mothers or fathers to work when the children were out of school and no childcare was available at home.

Mrs. Anoumone's son was enrolled in a government run pre-school not too far from the Vannasin offices, as were the two pre-school aged boys of Mrs. Manivone. When any of these young boys came down with a cold or a fever and were unable to attend school their mothers would bring the children to the office. The mothers would set up cots or mats on the floor behind their desks, and the children would nap and play in the front office during their periods of recuperation. The presence of their young boys in the office during their times of illness was necessitated by the low wages of both Mrs. Anoumone and Mrs. Manivone; by 2007 Mrs. Anoumone was only earning about \$42 per month, and Mrs. Manivone was earning almost \$48. In the previous chapter I mentioned that Mrs. Anoumone supplemented her meager government wages with *viek peeset*. With her ill son present in the workplace, Mrs. Anoumone was able to continue both her bookkeeping work for Vannasin and her *viek peeset* of selling government lottery tickets and fried crickets to Ministry employees. By bringing her ill son to work she was insuring that she had income to devote to her son's medication and food.

Mr. Dee (the Deputy Director) and Mr. Khamphon (the most senior member of the editorial staff) both had daughters older than the children of Mrs. Anoumone and Mrs. Manivone. In 2006 Mr. Dee's daughter was eight years old, and Mr. Khamphon's daughter was eleven. Mr. Dee's wife worked for the Ministry of Information and Culture. She was employed as a producer and on-screen host with Lao National Television (LNTV). Mr. Khamphon's wife worked in a small private medical clinic. Neither the LNTV studios nor the clinic were suitable locations for the young daughters to spend their free time during school holidays when no adults were at home to provide supervision.

While the institutions (i.e. public schools) of the Ministry of Education (MoE) were primarily responsible for the healthy children of Ministry of Information and Culture (MIC) employees during the school year, the MIC oversaw a number of programs for youth during the school holidays. The daughters of both Mr. Dee and Mr. Khamphon were enrolled in youth arts and music programs offered through the MIC's schools for the arts and music; Mr. Dee's daughter was enrolled in art and dance courses that occupied a considerable amount of her free time, and Mr. Khamphon's daughter spent her school breaks learning to play Lao musical instruments. During the periods when the structured educational courses of the MoE or MIC were not in session, and no one at home was able to watch them, the two girls spent their time in the Vannasin offices with their fathers.

In this manner, as a result of the low wages and the need for childcare, the Ministry is insured the presence of young children of Ministry employees within the Ministry compound (during time of illness and school holidays) and the presence of the children of Ministry employees enrolled within Ministry hosted youth programs. Present from an early age, the children of Ministry employees are immersed in the social practices of the workplace. In the section below I describe how the children of the Vannasin staff are gradually incorporated into providing contributions to the labor of this Ministry work unit during school breaks.

### **The gradual incorporation of the labor of young kin into the work of the Ministry:**

The Vannasin employees who bring their children to the office must strike a balance between their time devoted to child-care in the office, and their time devoted to their assigned duties. Children of Ministry employees present in the Vannasin Unit are routinely assigned small tasks to "help" their parents and the Vannasin staff in their job responsibilities. When they are elementary school aged (starting around five years old) the children of Vannasin staff are assigned very simple tasks, such as posing for the cover of the magazine (see image 4.1 below). Engaged in the activity of dressing in formal Lao clothing, having one's hair done, putting on make-up, taking direction from Ajaan Phoumjai as he composes the shot, are all part of how the children begin to experience aspects of the labor of magazine production.



Figure 4.1: With her hair, make-up, clothing and pose carefully arranged, the six year old daughter of a Vannasin employee graces the cover of a 2004 issue of Vannasin Magazine.

The majority of the initial activities assigned children are primarily designed to occupy the child's time, thus enabling the parent to work on separate tasks. For example, when Mr. Dee was busy working on a task related to his duties as Deputy Director, it was not uncommon for him to ask his daughter to help arrange stacks of paperwork. This arrangement of papers was a task that occupied the eight year old for a considerable amount of time, freeing her father to complete the tasks he needed to finish. It was not the actual task of arranging the papers that consumed the most time, but rather much of her time at this task was spent perusing through the text on the papers as she did the arranging. Typically these stacks of papers included drafts of poems, short stories, and other items that were submitted for publishing by various contributors, or lessons on poetic structure and writing that Mr. Dee himself had delivered to students. As she stacked the materials, the eight year old examined her father's editorial marks, she slowly read the poems he and others had composed, she quietly explored his writing on Lao poetic structure (see figure 4.2 below). While only peripherally engaged in the primary labor of her father, her familiarity with what that labor entailed expanded with each slip of paper she held up for inspection prior to arranging it upon his desk.



Figure 4.2: Mr. Dee's eight-year-old daughter, assigned the task of collating the visual aids used by her father during his training of young writers, carefully examines the text of the lesson prior to adding each sheet of paper to the assembled roll.

As these children of Ministry employees grow older they may be assigned increasing levels of responsibility related to the labor of their parents. In 2006 Mr. Paengan's daughter was approaching her final year of studies at the National University of Laos. During the break between semesters she was present in the Vannasin offices on an almost daily basis. Her assigned responsibilities varied from day to day, and these assigned tasks constituted a substantial contribution to the labor of the work unit. Much of her work was data entry, assisting Mrs. Onchanh and the staff of Vannasin's front office. As the year progressed, and Vannasin convened the unit's first writers training program, Mr. Paengan's daughter's responsibilities grew to involve organization and administration of educational field trips for the writers training students.

In 2007 as his daughter began her senior year internship in the Vannasin offices her administrative responsibilities increased. As she explained to me, her goal after graduation was to gain employment in the administration of the Ministry of Information and Culture. Her access into the social relations of the Ministry through her father enabled her and two classmates to have an undergraduate research internship aimed at exploring: "The Role of newspaper to encourage Party Policy" (see figure 4.3 below). A good portion of her internship was spent in the Vannasin offices. Mrs. Onchanh assigned her considerable responsibilities related to overseeing the organizing of Vannasin's computerized records for accounting and bookkeeping.

By the end of her internship her relations and interactions with the lower ranking staff members were changing. With a father immersed in the social relations of the higher-level Ministry officials, she never was simply a little girl merely accompanying her father to his office; she always was the daughter of the Director, which gave her an unparalleled degree of freedom of movement and interaction around the office. Unlike the other children of Vannasin employees she had free range of every workspace, including the office of the Director, and could enter and exit that office at will. By 2007

she was joining her father at the Vannasin staff meetings, taking minutes as he and his staff talked.

A behavior that was most noticeably changing in 2007 was the fact that she increasingly expressed a degree of authority, telling the young and lower ranking staff members what labor she thought they should do. One morning, disgusted with the build-up of filth and dust, she appointed herself in charge of organizing and directing the lower ranking staff in cleaning of the Editorial and Technical Department's office. As her father was the director of the unit, the lower ranking staff did not verbally question her assumed authority in telling them what labor they were to do: she told them what to clean, suggested the tools and manner of cleaning, and they cleaned it. As she was assigning duties, however, some of the older staff members quietly slipped out the door and retreated to the male refuge from labor: the *pétanque* court.

The daughter of the Director of Vannasin grew up within the social relations of the Ministry and her father gradually incorporated her labor into the service of fulfilling his responsibilities administering the unit. As she grew older her father enabled her to engage in increased participation in his labor for the work unit he directed, and her relations with the members of the Vannasin staff transformed to be much more akin to how he interacted with the staff. The stratified hierarchy of the Ministry's top down administration of labor resulted in stratified practices of incorporating kin. The Director's daughter's trajectory into the labor of the Ministry (replete with opportunities for hands-on-practice with administrative responsibilities) was a kinship trajectory of administration. Due to the fact that her father was the Director, the hands-on opportunities afforded Mr. Paengan's daughter were of an administrative nature that were fundamentally different than those that would have been available to the same-aged children of any other member of the Vannasin staff.



Figure 4.3: Mr. Paengan’s daughter’s access to the Ministry for conducting research on “The Role of newspaper to encourage Party Policy” was made possible through his employment and rank within the Ministry of Information and Culture.

Through the examples above we see that the low wage labor of Ministry employees contributes to the presence and participation of Ministry kin in the labor and activities of the Vannasin office. Accompanying their parents to the office children constitutes a form of legitimate peripheral participation as the children of Ministry employees are incorporated into the labor and social relations of the workplace from an early age. Their presence and participation constitutes one pathway (a direct filial trajectory) into ministry labor and administration opened exclusively to kin of Ministry employees. This gradual incorporation through kinship is advantageous for the Party, as it insures that one body of young people entering into labor for the Ministry have long developed experience based on familiarity with the labor and social relations within and constituting the institution. The kin-administrative pathway provides a means of helping to insure a degree of stability in the perpetuation of the social hierarchy in the institutions of the single-Party State.

**Broader kin relations and pathways into labor for the Ministry:**

In the section above I briefly described the presence of children of Vannasin employees in the Vannasin offices, and how such presence of children may constitute pathways into the hierarchical forms of labor within the Ministry. The presence of Mrs. Viengmany, the typist and staff member of Vannasin’s Technical Department, is the result of a kinship pathway into labor for the Ministry that is broader than the direct filial trajectories described above. Mrs. Viengmany is not the child of a Ministry of

Information and Culture employee, rather her mother works for another branch of the Lao government, the customs police. Mrs. Viengmany's mother, however, is the elder sister of Mrs. Onchanh. Mrs. Onchanh was sufficiently positioned in the hierarchy of Vannasin to facilitate the employment of her niece; Mrs. Viengmany gained her employment with Vannasin through her relation to her aunt. Mrs. Viengmany's trajectory into employment for the Ministry is an example of a matrilineal trajectory into employment. Like the direct filial trajectories, matrilineal/patrilineal trajectories into employment for the Ministry are also dependent upon the hierarchical employment status of the young person's already employed matrilineal or patrilineal kin.

In 2007 Mrs. Viengmany's younger sister, Ms. Pany, also joined the labor force for the Ministry of Information and Culture, as a probationary employee in the National Library of Laos. The National Library of Laos, like Vannasin Magazine, is a division of the Ministry's Department of Publishing and Libraries. Ms. Pany's ability to gain probationary employment with the Library was in no small part the result of her kinship relation with Mrs. Onchanh and Mrs. Onchanh's social relations with others working for the Department of Publishing and Libraries.

Mrs. Onchanh repeatedly chastised her niece, Mrs. Viengmany for being "lazy." Mrs. Viengmany's lack of exertion in the workplace, however would not genuinely threaten her ability to maintain employment with Vannasin. As a relative of Mrs. Onchanh (who in 2007 was promoted to the position of Deputy Director of Vannasin) Mrs. Viengmany was endowed with kinship both as a trajectory into employment, and as a form of job security. As the lowest paid member of the Vannasin staff there were no compelling financial incentives to put effort into her work. No other Vannasin staff members were as able to blatantly avoid their assigned job responsibilities; the combination of hours spent playing video games on the office computer, idle chat, copious napping, and staring blankly into space with a tube of nasal inhalant lodged in one nostril would not have been tolerated work-place behavior for any non-kin employee. And, with the presence of Mr. Paengan's daughter and the two university student interns who provided temporary labor to Vannasin, there were reliable others present and capable of fulfilling Mrs. Viengmany's job responsibilities.

Ms. Pany, however, was not working under the direct supervision of a loving aunt. In her position as a probationary employee at the Library, Ms. Pany had to prove herself worthy of the job. Each afternoon Ms. Pany would stop by the Vannasin offices, exhausted from a day filled with menial Library related tasks. Unlike her older sister, Ms. Pany was unable to approach her assigned duties in a lackadaisical manner.

Mrs. Onchanh's biological daughter was slightly younger than her cousins. Like Mr. Paengan's daughter she was working on a degree at the National University of Laos and had the assignment of producing a "case study" on a Lao Government institution. Through her aunt (Mrs. Onchanh's elder sister, the mother of Mrs. Viengmany and Ms. Pany) who worked as a customs officer in the Lao Post Office, Mrs. Onchanh's daughter was able to leverage social relations for the access she needed to study the Lao postal administration. Even with family relations within the social body of the institution, and a mother employed as an office administrator in an institution of the Government, it was a struggle for Mrs. Onchanh's daughter to gain the necessary permission to conduct her internship/research. Such access would have been much more

challenging if she had no kinship affiliation within the institutions of the State and the Party.

Through kinship Mrs. Onchanh's daughter and nieces have pathways into the social relations that constitute State and Party institutions. For Mrs. Viengmany kinship not only provided her a pathway into Government employment, kinship also constitutes a form of job security, helping to insure her employment despite a lackadaisical job performance. Mrs. Viengmany's kinship path to Government employment is fundamentally different than that of Mr. Paengan's daughter in two important respects: Mrs. Viengmany is neither on a direct child-parent track into an institution in which her parents are employed, nor is she on a pathway into the top levels of an administrative hierarchy. Her presence in the Vannasin unit was evidence of the second, broader form (collateral kinship trajectories), of incorporating the labor of youthful kin into the work of the Ministry evident in the Vannasin Unit during the course of my research.

**Transitions from the “centrally planned system” to the “market-based economy” necessitates Vannasin’s incorporation of non-kin youth:**

By 2006 the direct filial trajectories and the collateral kinship trajectories were proving insufficient for staffing all of the labor needs of the Vannasin unit. As described in previous chapters, a golden hammer and sickle upon a crimson banner has represented the single Party's rule over the Lao People's Democratic Republic since 1975, but in the 1980's the Party initiated a series of sweeping economic reforms, maintaining much of the single-Party democratic centralism while attempting to undertake a gradual transition from the revolutionary “centrally planned system” into a “market-based economy.” With the implementation of economic reforms, the labor entailed in perpetuating the single-Party rule over the Lao PDR continues to transform.

As explained in chapter three, in 2006, twenty-five years after the Party initiated the gradual implementation of the market-based reforms, the administrators of the Vannasin Magazine unit found the survival and the perpetuation of the unit dependent upon the young post-economic reform generation. As a result of the revenue generation reforms in the area of publishing, Vannasin was responsible for generating funds to cover forty-percent of its production costs through sales and advertising. Gone were the days when the magazine was fully subsidized, by 2006 the administrators of Vannasin were increasingly dependent upon the staff's ability to produce print materials that would actually prove marketable to youthful consumers among the post-economic reform generation. In general, the Vannasin staff members were engaged in rather deeply entrenched practices of labor necessary to supplement their low-salaries (*viek peeset*) and practices of propaganda production that developed under the “centrally planned system” during the period of dwindling staff and resources. These practices of Vannasin staff labor, while sufficient for the perpetuation of the institution and its products under the “centrally planned system” were not well suited for the emerging conditions of the “market-based economy.”

Faced with the requirements of income generation mandated from the top levels of the Ministry's hierarchy, Mr. Paengan (the Director/Editor-in-Chief), Mr. Dee (the Deputy Director), and Mrs. Onchanh (the head of Accounting), all recognized the need to transform Vannasin's print production. They recognized both that such transformations would necessitate changes in the practices of labor and print production in the office, and

that those then employed with Vannasin were not capable (due in no small part to a combination of age of employees, a lack of understanding of what was popular among the emerging younger generation of consumers, and the necessity of *viek peeset*) of undertaking the labor necessary to produce print materials that would prove marketable and competitive in the emerging and changing Lao print marketplace.

While the practices of incorporating kin into the labor of the Ministry might have proved sufficient for content production when the unit's products were fully subsidized by the Ministry, it was increasingly apparent that a reliance upon kin and the current staff and contributors would not suffice for the production of marketable content. Out of desperation caused by a severe lack of print content, the staff was already resorting to combing through the magazine's archives recycling any material that seemed fit for reprinting. These old articles were written in and for another time period – their content did not constitute the contemporary subject matter found in Vannasin's emerging print competition. Together Mr. Paengan, Mr. Dee, and Mrs. Onchanh recognized that in order to implement the changes in production needed, and produce products marketable to the emerging population of youthful consumers, they would need to incorporate the labor of young people capable of producing products that would be marketable to their peers. This required developing pathways for incorporating the labor of non-kin youth into the productive practices of the Vannasin unit.

#### **Five primary modes of incorporating non-kin youth into labor arts and literature propaganda production:**

In the Vannasin Magazine Unit during the years 2006 through 2008 there were five primary modes of incorporating the labor of young people who fell outside the kinship ties of the Ministry – each mode of incorporation was rooted in a form of dependency (resulting largely from the changing needs for labor accompanying the economic transitions of media production in Lao PDR) – and each mode entailed a form of supervision as a means for senior staff members to buffer against the potential unwanted influence<sup>3</sup> of the younger generation on the central social practices of the senior Vannasin employees. These five modes of non-kin incorporation of the labor of youth in to the productive activities of the unit were: kin affiliated internships for non-kin study partners of Ministry kin; probationary employment through a period of apprenticeship; coercive core technological incorporation; cyclical transitory peripheral incorporation; and core productive incorporation. Collectively the examples below together with the description of the kinship trajectories above, demonstrate that even within the single institution, practices of legitimate peripheral participation of young people are different across different forms of labor. A logical corollary arising from this is that the tensions between generations that arise through practices of legitimate peripheral participation play out and are mediated differently across different forms of labor.

I briefly describe each of these five modes of incorporation below, devoting considerably more space to both coercive core technological incorporation and cyclical transitory peripheral incorporation for the following reasons: Coercive core technological incorporation was a novel social practice that emerged at a unique historical moment of economic transition through a nexus of private capital, the authorization granting powers of the Ministry, and the desperate technological needs of

the Vannasin Magazine unit. The practices of coercive core technological incorporation reveal how the tensions between generations around dependency and threat are played out, made visible, and mediated at this historical moment of socioeconomic transition.

I devote a relatively large amount of space to the description of the practices of cyclical transitory peripheral incorporation, as this was the mode of incorporation used to bring the largest number of young people into the labor of the unit. Cyclical transitory peripheral incorporation and core productive incorporation were both forms of mass incorporation of the labor of youth, and staff members viewed the labor of youth entailed through both modes as central to the unit's ability to market products to contemporary youth. While the incorporation of the labor of youth through cyclical transitory peripheral incorporation was short in duration, the labor of these young people constitutes a central component of the marketing of the magazine and relations of exchange of the unit. Despite their importance, to the perpetuation of the unit, the young people themselves, who's labor was incorporated through cyclical transitory incorporation, were kept at the periphery of on-going daily social relations of the staff of the Vannasin unit.

My description of core productive incorporation at the conclusion of this chapter serves as a brief introduction to the subject to which I devote the remaining four chapters of my dissertation. The core productive incorporation of the labor of youth into the Vannasin Magazine unit is where one vividly sees the tensions of adaptive-perpetuation come to the fore.

#### **Kin affiliated internships for non-kin study partners of Ministry kin:**

Mr. Paengan's daughter's study of "The Role of newspaper to encourage Party Policy" was not an independent project but rather a group project, conducted in collaboration with two other National University students. Through her kinship affiliation with the social relations of the Ministry, Mr. Paengan's daughter provided the group access to the sites of research for their case study. The project temporarily brought the two non-kin study-partners into the labor of the Ministry during the period in which the kin and non-kin study partners collectively worked together performing various duties for Vannasin<sup>4</sup> and researching the topic related to the functions of Lao government.

Mr. Paengan's daughter and the two non-kin study partners were under the direct supervision of Mr. Paengan, and were likewise incorporated into the labor of administration. All three of the young women attended staff meetings, though unlike Mr. Paengan's daughter the two other students tended to sit at the periphery of the group of Vannasin staff.<sup>5</sup> It was not uncommon for Mrs. Onchanh to encourage input on agenda items from all, but, for the most part, the two young women remained silent observers throughout the course of the staff meetings.

Unlike Mr. Paengan's daughter, their incorporation into the labor of the unit was only temporary, lasting only as long as the internship/case study. In this respect their presence can be viewed as a corollary of the direct filial kin-administrative pathway – unlike the kin of Ministry employees, these students are not on a trajectory of long-term presence. Rather the two non-kin students had a participatory trajectory that grazed the periphery of the administrative practices; theirs constituted a transitory presence of contributing their labor to the administrative duties for only a short period of time (a few months).

Interestingly, as friends of the Vannasin-kin, they were included in the social gatherings both inside and outside of the workplace. Unlike Mr. Paengan's daughter who could navigate through each of the clusters of social grouping during Vannasin social gatherings, the two young women contributed their labor at the social gatherings in a manner similar to that of the lowest ranking probationary employees. During such events both women spent most of their time with the lower ranking staff members in and around the kitchen facilities preparing food and assisting with clean up. When they did venture into the rooms where senior Ministry employees were present they tended to remain at a distance from where the higher-ranking Ministry officials congregated (except when venturing forward to pour drinks for the higher-ranking guests). This was in contrast with Mr. Paengan's daughter, who was already incorporated into the social relations of Vannasin and the Ministry through her father and a life-long presence at Ministry affiliated social gatherings. In contrast to the self-consciously restricted movements of the non-kin interns, Mr. Paengan's daughter was figuratively (and occasionally literally) at home during such Ministry-related social gatherings.

Unlike Mr. Paengan's daughter, her two classmates were not in a position to direct anyone on the Vannasin staff. When the Director's daughter decided to embark upon (and direct) the cleaning of the editorial and technical department's room, the two interns joined the ranks of the lower ranking staff members, and picked up brooms to sweep and dust in accord to the directions of Mr. Paengan's daughter. Her established orbit within the kinship and social relations of the Ministry was very different than the short-term glancing-through-the-periphery participation of her study partners. There is very little likelihood that either of the two study partners would have participated in the labor of Vannasin if it were not for the fact that they were teamed as study partners with the daughter of the director of the unit. Their time-limited peripheral participation was a corollary of the direct filial trajectory and administrative training of Mr. Paengan's daughter.

### **Probationary employment of non-kin job candidates through a period of apprenticeship:**

The trajectory of the kin-associated interns was a brief time-limited participation in the labor of the Vannasin unit; theirs was a glancing peripheral participation. "Probationary employment" of young job applicants applying for salaried daily work in the Ministry was another form of peripheral participation in the labor of the Vannasin unit, and unlike that of the interns, the ultimate aim of probationary employment (acknowledged by both the probationary employee and the Vannasin administrators) was ongoing long-term employment within the Ministry. Probationary employment was organized as a form of low wage apprenticeship, through which employment candidates were assigned to work under the direct supervision of a senior member of the Vannasin staff who would provide them guidance in their assigned duties, supervise their work, and evaluate their performance. During the period of probationary employment the probationary employee received only a fraction of the monthly salary they would eventually earn if accepted into full-time employment.

In 2006 Mr. Sisavath had just completed his period of probationary employment under the direct supervision of Mr. Dee (the Deputy Director and head of the editorial staff). After completing his probationary employment Mr. Sisavath became the youngest

and lowest ranking journalist in Vannasin's editorial department. Towards the middle of 2006 Mr. Deang was engaged as a probationary employee under the supervision of Ajaan Phoumjai. The Vannasin administration had yet to determine the exact ultimate employment of Mr. Deang after he completed the period of probation, but acknowledged it would be related to the duties of one of the two front offices (the offices of reception/marketing and accounting/bookkeeping). Both Mr. Sisavath and Mr. Deang entered probationary employment from outside the kinship networks of the Ministry of Information and Culture; neither had family members directly employed in the Ministry.

Probationary employees were expected to assist the senior staff member with his/her job duties both during and outside of the regular hours of the Vannasin office. This resulted in particularly long hours for Mr. Deang. Mr. Phoumjai frequently directed Sinxay Culture Club activities and modeling events late into the night and on weekends, and Mr. Deang, as his assistant, was expected to be present lending a hand. Probationary employees were also subject to performing labor assigned by other senior staff members when their appointed supervisor was out of the office or when assigned a task by other staff members who held a ranking higher than that of their immediate supervisor. This meant that Mr. Deang was not only subject to labor assignments from Ajaan Phoumjai, he was also frequently subject to assigned labor from Mrs. Onchanh, Mr. Dee, and Mr. Paengan.

The participation of the probationary employees combined low wages and assigned tasks/labor that were often the menial, monotonous and unpleasant job duties of their immediate senior-staff supervisors. For example, Mr. Deang was most often responsible for taking lunch orders and going out under the scorching sun or poring rain to purchase the meals for the Vannasin staff. At Vannasin events (when Sinxay Culture Club models were not present) the probationary employees would often perform the labor of pouring drinks for the higher-ranking Ministry guests. Like the interns, probationary recruits were included in (though made few verbal contributions to) the regular staff meetings. Each Friday the probationary employees, like the lower ranking and young Vannasin employees, had to wear the blue button up shirts of the Lao People's Revolutionary Youth Union and attend the Ministry's youth union meetings for the Party. Over time as they advanced through the probationary period, their participation in the Unit's productive and social activities increased.

Probationary employment was a means of gradually incorporating single new staff members, one-at-a-time, into the ongoing production of the magazine unit under the direct supervision and guidance of a responsible and experienced senior member of the Vannasin staff. Through probationary employment the Vannasin administrators were able to assess how a potential employee would react and apply themselves to the most menial and unpleasant low wage labor of the unit. Mr. Deang's probationary employment also meant that Ajaan Phoumjai had a minion to whom he could assign his time consuming tasks (e.g. sitting in the office answering the telephone), thus freeing his schedule for more lucrative *viek peeset*. The long hours, assigned responsibilities, and low rank meant probationary employees were unable to engage in *viek peeset*, and as a consequence the period of probationary employment was a period of rather extreme financial hardship for both Mr. Sisavath and Mr. Deang.<sup>6</sup>

### **Coercive core technological incorporation governed through permission granting authority:**

A third form of non-kin incorporation of young people into the labor of the Vannasin unit was a coercive incorporation into the core technological practices of the unit, made possible through the leveraging of the combination of Ministry's permission granting authority and the aspirations of entrepreneurial youth. As explained in chapter two, the Ministry's office of Publishing and Libraries was responsible for reviewing and granting authorization for printing Lao Language print material. Those working in this approvals process were able to leverage their permission granting authority for personal and/or institutional benefits. Below I explain how such practices of leveraging resulted in the formation of Vannasin's "Marketing Department", the transformation of the division of labor of the unit, and the transformation of the practices of marketing, layout and graphic design.

In late 2006 a young man named Mr. Phoumy visited the office of the primary print censor in the Ministry's Department of Publishing and Libraries. Mr. Phoumy came seeking authorization to print a new Lao language magazine, he brought with him an impressive glossy mock-up of the marketing magazine he had hopes of producing and selling in Lao PDR. With the financial assistance of Lao relatives living abroad, Mr. Phoumy had purchased computer technology superior to the outdated technology used by the Vannasin Technical Department. Mr. Phoumy's two PCs were nothing particularly fancy, but they had ample RAM, and were running contemporary versions of Adobe's Creative Suite software. He also owned a good quality color copier/scanner/printer.

To produce the mock-up for the proposed marketing magazine Mr. Phoumy collaborated with a talented friend, a young man who had taken courses across the river in Thailand gaining hands-on experience in the application of digital software for photo-editing, graphic design and layout. This young man's understanding of software and his comfort in using it was visible in the high quality work he was able to quickly produce on Mr. Phoumy's equipment. Emulating glossy publications from neighboring Thailand, Mr. Phoumy's mock-up had a professionally produced appearance. Placed side-by-side with the latest issue of Vannasin Magazine it was clear that the mock-up exhibited a level of contemporary craftsmanship that Vannasin Magazine had yet to achieve.

Mr. Silavanh, the print censor, was well aware that Mr. Phoumy's mock-up was produced with technology and technological know-how superior to what was then in use for the production of Vannasin Magazine. Mr. Silavanh did not grant approval for Mr. Phoumy's publication to go into print; rather, he suggested that he and Mr. Phoumy meet together with the administrators of Vannasin to discuss possibilities for collaboration.<sup>7</sup> They met around a wicker coffee table in the office of the Director of Vannasin, and discussed a number of ways in which Mr. Phoumy and Vannasin could collaborate. An initial idea was that Vannasin and Mr. Phoumy would produce essentially two magazines, publications conjoined back-to-back and sold as one print product. Readers would be able to read through one, turning the pages normally until they reached the juncture midway through the product, then flip the product over and read through the second magazine attached on the backside. A major difficulty with that idea was that Mr. Phoumy's mock-up was composed almost entirely of advertisements, it was fairly devoid of content beyond the promotion of products, and the resulting pairing appeared rather odd.

Mr. Silavanh, Mr. Dee, Mrs. Onchanh and Mr. Phoumy eventually agreed upon an arrangement wherein Mr. Phoumy would establish workspace within the room of Vannasin's Technical Department, bringing his computers and scanner, as well as a young man to operate the equipment. Mr. Phoumy would establish and manage "the Marketing Department" for Vannasin Magazine; he would be responsible for generating his own income and the income needed to support the Marketing Department and its staff through the sales and production of advertising for Vannasin Magazine. He and the Marketing Department staff would not be Ministry employees; rather the Marketing Department would operate as a private contractor working within the offices of Vannasin under the editorial control of the Director and Editor-in-Chief of the Vannasin Magazine unit.

The introduction of the Marketing Department resulted in a physical transformation of the workspace for Vannasin's technical staff. At the time of the introduction of the Marketing Department the Technical Department alone occupied the portion of the Editorial/Technical office on the south side of the glass wall that divided the large room. With the creation of the Marketing Department Mr. Vongkham had to cede a portion of this realm to Mr. Phoumy.

Mr. Phoumy's wife took charge of transforming the look of what had been the Technical Department's office. Mr. Phoumy's younger sister provided her assistance in making these changes. Under Mr. Phoumy's wife's direction the red carpeting, which typically remained elevated on chairs until the end of the rainy season, was rolled down on the floor despite the fact that the rainy season was not yet over (an action everyone would later regret). Mr. Phoumy's wife placed lace coverings over every desktop on this side of the room, including those of the Technical Department. In consultation with Mr. Vongkham and with the help of some of Vannasin's staff, Mr. Phoumy and his wife re-arranged the furniture in the room to provide space for the influx of new bodies, computers, a telephone, and the scanner/printer. His wife placed a thermos style hot water dispenser, a selection of assorted tea bags, a large tin of biscuits, a big red jar of Ovaltine, and mugs on a table next to the room's water cooler. A working clock was hung on the wall. Last but not least Mr. Phoumy's wife added a number of air fresheners, which helped to mask the smell of the mildew and musty red carpet.

Mr. Phoumy's wife's presence was only temporary, though his younger sister stayed on to work in the office on a daily basis as Mr. Phoumy's assistant. Mr. Phoumy recruited two handsome and outgoing young men, and two pretty and outgoing young women, and personally trained them in his techniques for marketing magazine advertisements to Lao entrepreneurs and business people. Mr. Phoumy was responsible for paying the monthly salary of each of these four young employees of the Marketing Department, and he provided them commission for each advertising agreement they were able to generate. The most enduring of these initial four young marketers remained for only a few months, commencing a cycle of training and replacement through which attractive and outgoing young people entered then departed as they sought increasingly lucrative employment and less mobile and strenuous labor.

The introduction of privately owned equipment and a for-profit enterprise into the workspace and divisions of labor of the Arts and Literature propaganda publishing wing of the Lao Ministry of Information and Culture created a number of tensions related to social identity. For outside visitors entering the office it was difficult to distinguish

Vannasin (i.e. Ministry) employees from the Marketing staff. Vannasin staff members, who had long occupied the office in government jobs of considerable prestige, were now on a daily basis seated among a revolving body of attractive and outgoing young people from outside of the social networks and ranks of the Party and employees of the single-Party State.

The introduction of the Marketing Department resulted in major transformations of the division of labor within the Vannasin office. The timing of the establishment of the Marketing Department happened to be just as Mr. Vongkham left for Indian government-sponsored computer network training in New Delhi.<sup>8</sup> The degree of transformation of the division of labor that was produced could not have occurred without this unplanned coincidence. Mr. Vongkham's departure enabled Mr. Phoumy and his staff to literally take over the entire duties of layout and design.

The degree of Mr. Phoumy's team's take-over of the labor of the Technical Department was inadvertently made possible by Mr. Vongkham's attempt to prevent a take-over of his job responsibilities. Here it is important for the reader to understand that subtle acts of sabotage were one way in which Vannasin staff members were able to heighten the sense among others that they were indispensable.<sup>9</sup> By creating a situation of turmoil to occur in one's absence and then being able to return and rectify that situation (thus alleviating the turmoil) was a method occasionally deployed in the social production of the sense of one's indispensability. After Mr. Vongkham departed for his training in India the staff soon discovered that all of the magazine and advertisement layouts were missing. They were no longer on the computer Mr. Vongkham used to create them; the back-up discs containing the files were missing from the drawer where they were normally stored as well. With the files the staff would have had the magazine template needed to produce the next issue of Vannasin, complete with all of the ongoing advertisements that had already been purchased and produced. Without the files the staff would be required to reproduce everything (including the already purchased advertisements) from scratch. It was no coincidence that these materials disappeared at the exact time of Mr. Vongkham's departure; in this manner Mr. Vongkham was able to draw considerable attention to the unit's dependence on Mr. Vongkham for magazine production.

To the administrators and staff of Vannasin, it looked as if the magazine would have to halt its production until Mr. Vongkham returned from his training abroad. It was at this point, however that Mr. Phoumy was able to step forward and prove himself invaluable. Mr. Phoumy called in the young graphic artist mentioned above (the young man who had trained in Thailand) and together they produced a new Vannasin Magazine template and recreated every one of the missing already purchased advertisements. In addition to doing this Mr. Phoumy and his staff were able to draw in revenue from new advertisers, and provide Vannasin with a transformed page layout and cover design reflecting design aspects of popular magazines from neighboring Thailand.

Because Mr. Phoumy's staff proved so capable of handling the layout and design of the magazine, upon his return from India Mr. Vongkham found that he had more free time to devote to both perfecting his game of *pétanque* and engaging in his work-time *viek peeset*. The amount of time devoted to layout and graphic design was completely transformed. Before Mr. Phoumy came, the majority of the work on the magazine's layout and graphic design was done the week the magazine was due at the printer. After

the establishment of the Marketing Department, Mr. Phoumy and his graphic designer worked full-time producing advertisements and layout throughout the month. As the Marketing Department staff did a considerable amount of their own inputting of text, Mrs. Viengmany's leisure time during the workday also increased, as did her scores on various computer games.

Ajaan Phoumjai was another employee whose labor (both salaried Ministry labor and *viek peeset*) was fundamentally altered by the introduction of the Marketing Department. First, the introduction of the Marketing Department forced an accounting for advertising revenues. Prior to the arrival of Mr. Phoumy the administration had not instituted an accounting procedure to insure that all funds (or items of exchange) generated through the sales of advertising space actually made it into Vannasin's coffers. During the first staff meeting after the establishment of the Marketing Department, Mrs. Onchanh and Mr. Dee pointed out that they had noticed that certain advertisements continued to run in each monthly issue of Vannasin without any clear source of revenue coming into Vannasin's accounts for these particular advertisements. By making this statement the administrators were both making it clear that they were aware of irregularities in the receipt of payments, and, without singling anyone out, warning the staff against engaging in private profiting through exchanges related to advertising in the magazine.

As Mr. Phoumy and his staff continued to prove themselves capable of performing labor beneficial to Vannasin Magazine, the Vannasin administrators paid increasing attention to Mr. Phoumy's suggestions for transforming the content and layout of the magazine in order to tap into the interests of what they perceived as a growing body of young Lao media consumers. With Mr. Phoumy's input, the staff experimented with changes to the physical dimensions of the magazine, the graphic design and layout of the cover and text, and augmenting (not replacing) the longstanding literary and Party-message content with content that might prove appealing in different ways to younger Lao citizens with expendable incomes.<sup>10</sup>

The constant presence of non-Ministry employees within a Ministry office instigated a move to visibly demark social membership. A few weeks after the arrival of the Marketing Department, Ajaan Phoumjai posted a notice on the sliding glass door that separated the Technical Department/Marketing Department from the side of the room of the Editorial staff. The notice was an office-wide directive from Mr. Dee, and announced a uniform schedule for Vannasin staff members. Prior to the inception of the Marketing Department the Vannasin staff members did not have a uniform. After posting the notice Ajaan Phoumjai went to the desk of each of the male Vannasin staff members in the room, and delivered to each two "Arrow" brand (knock-off) button up shirts, one mustard colored, the other a rich maroon. The posted announcement stated that the maroon shirts were to be worn by male staff members on Tuesdays, the yellow shirts were to be worn by male Vannasin staff members on Wednesdays.<sup>11</sup>

The Vannasin administrators purchased two large bolts of fabric in colors that complemented the male staff member's shirts and custom tailored blouses for the female members of the Vannasin staff. The women were able to choose individual designs. While most of the women on staff chose relatively conservative designs, Mrs. Viengmany had hers cut in a fashionable style then growing in popularity among young people in the city, a style that provided others just a glimpse of the wearer's midriff.

Within a year another color and another uniform day was added to the staff's uniform calendar.

This was not a Ministry-wide uniform; it was a uniform just for the staff of the Vannasin unit. Mr. Sisavath and Mr. Dee and Mr. Vongkham explained to me that the uniform was to provide a visual display of unity among the staff, a sense of commonality and togetherness. Mrs. Viengmany explained, with a giggle, that the uniforms were to "make us look good." Within the Ministry compound the uniforms functioned as a visual representation of social identity as a member of the Vannasin work unit; in the newly built storage shed café, on the *pétanque* courts, and in Ministry-wide meetings the visual unity of the uniforms was vividly apparent. The uniforms visually reinforced a social territoriality, a concept of membership in the social unit, an "us" and "not us" or "them." Importantly no one in the new Marketing Department was issued a uniform, not even Mr. Phoumy who was by then attending Vannasin's regular staff meetings. No matter how much work they did, no matter their contribution to the finances and production of the magazine, the members of the Marketing Department were peripheral to, and not included among, the uniformed "us"; they were peripheral to the core social relations that constituted the Vannasin Magazine Unit.<sup>12</sup>

This separation was so clear to the young employees of the Marketing Department that they did not even venture into the Vannasin front office to use the office's sink to clean their lunch plates. Rather, the young female employees of the Marketing Department squatted at an outdoor spigot in the alleyway behind the building to clean their plates and utensils. This self-imposed segregation on behalf of the young people went beyond what the Vannasin Administrators had intended, and Mrs. Onchanh informed Mr. Phoumy during a staff meeting that the employees of the Marketing Department were welcome to use the Vannasin's main office sink.

The structure of the Party's controls over the Media (through the institution of the Ministry of Information and Culture) enabled this incorporation of both youthful labor and private capital. The transition to self-sufficiency (i.e. decreasing state financing and increasing push for self-supporting propaganda production through the generation of advertising revenues) set the conditions that instigated this form of coercive core technological incorporation. The permission granting authority of the Ministry's Department of Publishing and Libraries was the key coercive capacity enabling the Government facility to incorporate both the privately owned technology, and the young people needed to efficiently operate the technology, into labor in support of propaganda production for perpetuating the single-Party State.

As was mentioned above, while Mr. Phoumy his younger sister, and the young man who performed the layout and graphic design for Mr. Phoumy constituted the staff of the Marketing Department present in the office throughout each day, there were four additional young people working under Mr. Phoumy to sell advertising space in the magazine. These young people met each morning in the office, and then the four spent much of each day either on the phone or outside of the office, attempting to generate advertising sales. Though the labor of these young people constituted the major practice of income generation supporting forty percent of the production costs of the magazine, Mr. Phoumy (who was not an employee of the Ministry) was solely responsible for their hiring, training, supervision and pay.

These four initial sales agents working under Mr. Phoumy did not remain employed for long, after a couple of months Mr. Phoumy was already training the second group of attractive and outgoing young people who would fill the spots vacated by the first.<sup>13</sup> While the incorporation of Mr. Phoumy, his sister, and the young graphic designer can best be understood as coercive core technological incorporation governed through the Ministry's permission granting authority his revolving staff of attractive and outgoing young sales agents constitute one form of cyclical-transitory peripheral incorporation of non-kin youth, the fourth type of incorporation that is described in more detail below.

### **Cyclical-transitory peripheral incorporation of non-kin youth:**

The fourth form of incorporating non-kin youth into the labor of the Vannasin Magazine unit was cyclical-transitory peripheral incorporation of young people. The limited duration incorporation of the labor of the young outgoing and attractive sales staff of the Marketing Department is one of the two instances of this form of peripheral incorporation, and the employment of the Sinxay Culture Club models is the other. Below, to illustrate this form of incorporation, I present a description of the practices of cyclical-transitory peripheral incorporation of non-kin youth through the Sinxay Culture Club under the management of Ajaan Phoumjai.

Ostensibly the Sixay Culture Club exists to engage young people in the promotion of Lao culture. It is not uncommon for the Ministry of Information and Culture (MIC) to receive public edicts from higher branches of the government expressing the need to, “correct misplaced thinking that goes against the fine values of Lao culture, and fight against meaningless customs that degenerate traditional values.”<sup>14</sup> Operating under the aegis of the Vannasin Magazine unit, the Sinxay Culture Club exists to serve such goals through training young people to visually represent and perform for the public ‘the fine values of Lao culture.’ While recruitment for the club made mention of a range of activities (including classical and modern dance, singing, and drama), the club's primary activities focused on the training of models, cultural models who will be featured on the cover and within the advertising of Vannasin Magazine, and upon the fashion show catwalk in a range of cultural promotion and marketing events.

The club's activities and the models were an important part of the Ministry's diplomatic and cultural mission. Both within Lao PDR, and abroad, the Sinxay Culture Club members were the models who frequently served as cultural envoys, representing Lao PDR through the modeling of clothing and costumes of diverse ethnic groups and the products of contemporary Lao entrepreneurs. Under Ajaan Phoumjai's tutelage, select senior members have traveled to Thailand, Russia, Japan, Malaysia, China and Vietnam in order to represent Lao P.D.R. through modeling. Describing the Sinxay Club's tour to China, the Lao press in foreign languages reported that this type of activity “forms part of Laos's efforts to extend the good relationship between Lao and Chinese governments as well as the diplomatic relationship between the two countries.”<sup>15</sup>

The Sinxay Culture Club trains more young people to labor in support of the Vannasin unit than all of the other forms of incorporation combined. The labor of the young Sinxay Culture Club models is a central component of the marketing of the unit's primary product (Vannasin Magazine), and the models constitute an important aspect of the unit's relations of exchange (the deployment of models in relations of exchange is

described in chapter three). However, despite their importance for the Vannasin Unit, the social relations of the young people involved in the Sinxay Culture Club remain peripheral to all but a few of the ongoing and daily social interactions of the Vannasin staff. Though their labor is essential for the unit's perpetuation, the social interactions of these young people are, for the most part, peripheral to the ongoing daily social interactions and labor of the staff members of the Vannasin Unit. Further, for the vast majority, their participation in Sinxay Culture Club activities generally extends no further than a few years. This relatively short duration of involvement with the club is primarily the result of two factors, a) the limited amount of free time young people have to devote to such activities prior to finding full time employment, and b) the fleeting nature of youthful beauty (a key marketable quality for the labor in which Sinxay Culture Club models are employed).

The short duration of involvement with the club results in ongoing cycles of recruitment and training of young people, and a relatively steady circulation of young people in and out of labor for Vannasin. In January 2006 the Sinxay Culture Club had more than twenty “members” (ສະມາຊິກສິນໄຊ), all between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five. In March of 2006 eighty young people enrolled as “students” (ນັກຮຽນ) in Vannasin's Sinxay Culture Club model training course. They each paid a 4,500 Kip fee (roughly \$4.50 at the exchange rate of that time) to partake in a course that culminated with a fashion show and certificate of completion.

The model recruits in the training program were distinguished from the senior members by title. Through titling the students were not merely students of Ajaan Phoumjai, but were also positioned as students of the senior members of the club. The phrase used to refer to the recruits was “Sinxay Students” (ນັກຮຽນສິນໄຊ) - positioned as students of the club the students were subject to the instruction of “Sinxay Members” (ສະມາຊິກສິນໄຊ), the veteran experienced young people who constituted the members of the club. As students of the Sinxay Culture Club their instruction became a social responsibility, thus distributing the responsibilities and the labor of instruction throughout the membership and administration of the club. Sinxay students were distinguished from Sinxay members both by title, and by ‘uniform’ – the students were expected to attend trainings wearing white polo style shirts emblazoned on the breast with the Sinxay Culture Club logo. The senior members involved in the training typically wore yellow polo style shirts emblazoned with the same club logo.

The social practices of instruction reflected the hierarchical differentiation between the students and the senior members. During the training sessions the active and experienced senior members did not merely model the characteristics, poses, and movements Ajaan Phoumjai strove to produce; they drew advice and tips from their personal experience, describing what they experienced in past performances with the Club, and actively engaged students upon the practice runway telling them how to adjust their bodies and movements to meet the expectations of Ajaan Phoumjai.

The culminating event for the training program was a fashion show/certification ceremony performed in front of an assembled press corps, sponsors, distinguished guests from the Ministry, and the models' family members. During the final days of training there was some confusion as to who would receive a certificate; one of the most experienced senior members mistakenly informed some of the students that only those

with sufficient proficiency on the runway would receive the certificate. This caused a minor panic among some of the students. The panic lasted until Mrs. Onchanh clarified that all students who participated in the training would receive a certificate.

The certificate, therefore, did not represent proficiency or skill, but rather it was merely an indicator of enrollment in the training program. Likewise possession of the certificate did not necessarily mean that all of the new recruits would receive employment as models through the Ministry of Information and Culture. The certificate ceremony was a ceremonial rite of passage. In this culminating event of the training, the white shirts (signifier of student status) were removed, and replaced with the attire of Ministry-approved-cultural-models. The receipt of the certificates was a public display marking the legitimate peripheral participation of the young people in the social practices of the club. However, it must be emphasized that this was a passage into the *periphery* of the social practices of the group. The ceremonial passage across the threshold of the stage door, performance, and receipt of a certificate was not an act of establishing a covenant or contract that would lead to employment as a model. For many this ceremony would be the last Sinxay Club fashion show in which they were employed; the vast majority of Sinxay students remained peripheral participants in the social practices that constitute the Sinxay Culture Club. Further, the activities of the social practices of the club were most frequently peripheral to the every day labor and social practices of the vast majority of the Vannasin staff.

Though a frequent topic during training, and spoken of (by Ajaan Phoumjai and the Senior members) as the imagined culminating result of inclusion in the Sinxay Cultural Club, the coveted positions for the Ministry's cultural performances abroad were infrequent and few in number. Generally it was members of a select group of senior Sinxay Club members that were most frequently selected for employment through Ajaan Phoumjai. The largest group of Sinxay Club members to travel abroad for a performance was composed of twenty models that traveled to Russia in July 2006, ostensibly to represent Lao ethnic groups during Moscow Day celebrations. This number included at least one model privately funded by a Vientiane jeweler, insuring that his products would be on display in Moscow.

Typical of the foreign modeling excursions were the rather frequent cultural exchanges with Khon Kaen University (across the river in north-eastern Thailand) in which twelve models participated. The commemoration ceremonies for the forty-fifth anniversary of diplomatic relations between Laos and Vietnam in Hanoi included ten models from the Sinxay Cultural Club traveling with thirty-five singers, dancers and musicians from the Ministry's performing arts troupe. Fashion shows staged in Vientiane in conjunction with music and product promotions included more Sinxay Club members, such as a promotional event for a recording studio that incorporated twenty-five models from the Sinxay Culture Club. The largest regularly scheduled event in which Sinxay Models play a central role is the fashion show during the evening gala for the Lao Handicraft Association's annual Handicraft Festival. Even this large show, however, does not incorporate all those who passed through the certification program.

Of the eighty models that received training and a certificate from Ajaan Phoumjai, only a small fraction would actually be featured in the advertisements and cover art of the Vannasin Magazine. While select members of this community of practice were essential commodities in the Vannasin Magazine unit's relations of exchange and marketing, their

incorporation into the ongoing social relations and the labor of propaganda production of the unit, were both fleeting and peripheral.

### **Core productive incorporation:**

The fifth form of incorporating non-kin youth into the labor of the Vannasin unit was core productive incorporation. Like cyclical transitory peripheral incorporation, core productive incorporation was designed as a form of en masse incorporation. This type of incorporation involved bringing a large group of young writers (i.e. non-Ministry kin aspiring writers) into the core productive labor of the unit in order to produce the actual ideological content (i.e. text/Party propaganda – the core productive output of the Party run unit), with the intention that their output would target/influence the same-age peers of these new young writers.

With the transition to the New Economic Mechanism, and the unit's reliance upon generating forty percent of its production costs from advertising revenues and sales, the labor of these young writers was to convey the messages of the Party through the production of written material that proved attractive (marketable) to their same-aged peers. The incorporation of their labor was at the core of the Vannasin Unit's contribution to the adaptive-perpetuation of the Party and its institutions. As such, the older generation of writers and the administrators of Vannasin Magazine put a considerable amount of concerted effort into the social production of these young writers, in the attempt to shape their output (in terms of structure, and content) and the young people's social identity as aspiring participants in a community of writers loyal to and supportive of the Party and its institutions of governance. In comparison to the other forms of incorporating non-kin youth into the labor of the Ministry, far more labor and resources were devoted to core productive incorporation.

Like cyclical-transitory peripheral incorporation, the incorporation of aspiring writers was a form of mass incorporation, implemented through a training program format: the Sinxay Pen's Camp. Where the Sinxay Culture Club training relied upon the labor of senior models who remained largely peripheral to the daily labor and social activities of the Vannasin staff and administration, the Pen's Camp relied upon the labor of representatives selected from the social body of an older generation of writers (i.e. those already approved and engaged in the production of ideological content and print propaganda for the Ministry). Unlike the models engaged in inculcation through the Culture Club, the older generation of published writers engaged in the inculcation of aspiring young writers through the Sinxay Pen's Camp, maintained long term sustained engagements within the primary productive activities and social relations of the Ministry through the Vannasin Unit.

Writing, like modeling, and unlike administration, was recognized by the administrators of Vannasin to be a form of labor where qualifications, beyond that of family and Party relations, were requisite. The training of writers entailed the incorporation of young people who, for the most part, were external to the kinship and social relations of the established employees of the Ministry. The practice of drawing in young people from outside the relations of the Party to produce en masse a social body of young writers who would provide long-term contributions to the production of propaganda in support of the Party was replete with intergenerational tensions which I explore in-depth in the following chapters.

### **Conclusion - Changing social practice, dependence upon non-kin youth and the dilemma of adaptive-perpetuation:**

In the Vannasin Magazine unit of the Ministry of Information and Culture we find multiple trajectories into the labor of the Ministry afforded through kinship alone. While kinship as a mode of incorporating the labor of youth into the production of the unit was replete with diverse threats to the perpetuation of social practice of the unit (as exemplified by Mrs. Viengmany's lackadaisical approach to her employment responsibilities), the employment of kin did afford familial continuity and the concomitant social continuity. Within the forms of incorporating the labor of youth beyond the trajectories afforded by kinship one finds diverse and varied practices mediating the threats of complex practices undergoing rapid transformation.

The dependence upon the labor of non-kin youth brought to the fore a dilemma that is not unique to the Vannasin unit alone. A generation beyond the post-revolutionary economic reforms, the older generation (represented in the Vannasin unit by the administrators Mr. Paengan, Mr. Dee, and Mrs. Onchanh and those in the Ministry's hierarchy above them), who constitute the social-body of the Party, were faced with a dilemma of adaptive-perpetuation. That is, in order to perpetuate the social practices through which the older generation produces their political dominance,<sup>16</sup> the revolutionary Party must adapt these social practices to the continuing transformations of the political economy and younger generations of Lao citizens, as the young lead very different lives than their elders.

Compounding the Party's dilemma of adaptive-perpetuation is a significant problem posed by a transformation in the labor force available and needed to produce the adaptations. Twenty-five years after the Party initiated the gradual implementation of the market-based reforms, the Party and its institutions are dependent upon the labor of a young (post-economic reform) generation for the production of the adaptations required for the perpetuation of the Party, its institutions, and its single-Party rule. Unlike the older generation they are succeeding, the young people who constitute the requisite labor for the perpetuation of the Party increasingly: a) fall outside of the established social relations that constitute the Party, and b) are detached from the lived-experience of the revolutionary struggle through which the older generation produced the revolutionary Party, its State, its Government<sup>17</sup>, and its institutions of single-Party rule.

There exists a substantial problem at the junctures of mutually dependent labor where the two generations intersect: in different ways both generations simultaneously need each other, and both simultaneously are threatened by each other, and here in lies the real challenges for the perpetuation of the Party, the single-Party State<sup>18</sup> and its institutions of Government. The transformative potential of the labor of the younger generation constitutes a potential threat to the adaptation of the social practices for perpetuating the single-Party State political domination of the older generation. Those currently engaged in the transforming labor for the Party are faced with the challenge of incorporating the needed labor of young people into the changing practices of labor for the Party, while working to insure that those young people brought in contribute to the perpetuation of the Party, and also with postponing the older generation's inevitable displacement.

The Sinxay Pens' Camp writer's training program constitutes an ideal juncture between generations in which we can explore the dilemma of adaptive perpetuation. Within the camp the older generation of Party propagandists, and young with aspirations of becoming writers collide and engage in the labor of mediating their conflicting and mutual interests, dependencies, and social identities. In the following four chapters I delve into the practices of core productive incorporation through the Sinxay Pens's Camp detailing the labor entailed in working through the dilemma of adaptive perpetuation.

---

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> (See Marx et al. 1970 p. 121)

<sup>2</sup> (See Lave and Wenger 1991 p. 115)

<sup>3</sup> Unwanted influences were differentiated from the wanted/needed influence for which the young people were recruited.

<sup>4</sup> The range of duties the interns performed were rather broad, ranging from washing the dishes of staff members after lunch, to inputting marketing data into spreadsheets for the accounting department.

<sup>5</sup> Staff meetings were held with each member of Vannasin's staff sitting side by side around a large rectangular table in the office of Vannasin's receptionist. The Director and Deputy Director tended to sit at one end of the table. When present Mr. Paengan's daughter sat by his side. The two other interns typically sat away from the table behind the row of Vannasin staff.

<sup>6</sup> Even after his period of probationary employment Mr. Sisavath found it difficult to generate a sufficient income. Through error he quickly learned that one does not request permission from one's supervisor to engage in *viek peeset*. Soon after completing his probationary employment Mr. Sisavath worked up the nerve to approach Mr. Dee and ask if he could adjust his work hours in order to teach English classes in the late afternoon. After meeting with Mr. Dee, Mr. Sisavath returned to his desk looking very dejected. Mr. Sisavath quietly explained to me that Mr. Dee said he would not permit Mr. Sisavath to engage in the English teaching *viek peeset*. One of the staff members, overhearing our conversation, laughed and then said, "Why did you ask?" Without waiting for Mr. Sisavath to respond the staff member explained: "If you don't ask he can't tell you 'no.'" Within a couple of months Mr. Sisavath was leaving the office rather quickly in the afternoons in order to make it to the Japanese language classes he was teaching. Mr. Dee, Mrs. Onchanh, and everyone else in the office were quietly aware that Mr. Sisavath was teaching Japanese to augment his income. Mr. Dee had told Mr. Sisavath he couldn't teach English. Mr. Sisavath hadn't asked about teaching Japanese.

<sup>7</sup> By this time Mr. Paengan had been promoted up and out of the Publishing and Libraries Department. Mr. Dee was promoted to the position of Director/Editor-in-Chief, and Mrs. Onchanh was the Deputy Director. Mr. Dee, Mrs. Onchanh, Mr. Silavanh, Mr. Vongkham (the Head of the Technical Department) and Mr. Phoumy were the people present for the negotiations about collaboration. While all of us who walked by the room could observe the meetings in progress through the glass doors of the Director's office, the details of the meeting emerged after the meetings when Mr. Phoumy Mr. Dee, Mrs. Onchanh and Mr. Vongkham shared the ideas that had been discussed.

---

<sup>8</sup> It would appear that many of the educational opportunities abroad offered by foreign countries to Lao government employees provide little or no practical benefits for the employee's assigned job duties, however such opportunities do open up ample pathways for increasing *viek peeset*. For example, the Vannasin offices had little to network – network training of the head of the technical department was not a pressing need facing the Ministry. But networking training was what India was offering, and that was the program to which Mr. Vongkham applied. When Mr. Vongkham returned from India his first task was not to network the few computers in the Vannasin offices, but rather to work with his brother to network a private Internet shop located out across the road from the National University of Laos campus. The shop, operated by the two brothers, was a source of supplementary income augmenting the low wage government employment of both. By 2008 I would frequently have to drive out to the shop, not in to the Vannasin offices, in order to meet with Mr. Vongkham during his paid work hours at the Ministry. The government sponsored training in India enabled Mr. Vongkham to develop an understanding of networking that he applied to his *viek peeset*. Mr. Vongkham's training abroad must be understood as benefitting the Ministry not in a sense of a direct applicability of skills acquired to his assigned job duties, but rather as a contribution to his ability to afford his low wage labor for an institution of the single-Party State.

<sup>9</sup> Ajaan Phoumjai was one of the most skillful deplorers of sabotage and rectification as a means of effectively making himself indispensable and maintaining his social position. His position as the primary director of models within the country was not uncontested or unchallenged. As his supplementary income through *viek peeset* was dependent up on this model related labor, he was constantly engaged in the practice of maintaining this social positioning for himself.

During the rehearsals for the Lao Handicraft Association's annual fashion show in 2007, Ajaan Phoumjai found his position as the choreographer and director of models challenged by a designer, Mr. Ponmek, who was determined to train, choreograph and employ his own models, so that the display of his fashions would be under his complete control. Mr. Ponmek had personally selected his own music, and spent a considerable amount of time training a group of young people to model his clothes to the specific beat he had chosen. The tension between the two grew steadily during the afternoon rehearsals in the grand convention hall of the Don Chan Palace Hotel, as each made subtle maneuvers and verbal jabs to throw each other's models off. For example, as Mr. Ponmek's models were in the midst of practicing their runway walks Ajaan Phoumjai directed a stagehand to start removing some stage designs in the middle of the catwalk. Mr. Ponmek's models had to stop mid-walk, to maneuver around the crouching stagehand in their path.

Eventually Ajaan Phoumjai and Mr. Ponmek staked claim to opposite sides of the back-stage dressing room – the tension between the two kept either from venturing too far into the others territory. The Handicraft Association had officially put Ajaan Phoumjai in charge of the recorded musical arrangement and scheduling of the models presentations. During dress rehearsals Mr. Ponmek had personally handed a copy of his selected music to Ajaan Phoumjai for inclusion on the CD of the nights runway music, and this is what Ajaan Phoumjai used to gain the winning hand. After dress rehearsals and shortly before the fashion show was to begin Ajaan Phoumjai quietly posted a change

---

to the schedule and music cues on the wall on his side of the dressing room. Mr. Ponmek, who had laid claim to the opposite side of the dressing room, remained unaware of the changed music and performance schedule.

Under Ajaan Phoumjai's direction from behind the curtains, groups of models made their way from the dressing room to the wings of the stage, and then on a verbal cue from the masters of ceremony, and in time to the beat of the soundtrack, stepped onto the catwalk and into the lights. Displaying the textiles of their assigned designers pacing their steps, pauses, and turns to the beat of the music the models walked to the midpoint of the wide stage, then down a staircase to display the textiles on a catwalk stretching out into the midst of an assembly of distinguished guests and dignitaries.

Everything flowed seamlessly smooth until the masters of ceremony announced Mr. Ponmek's collection. The recorded music continued to play, but it was not the music to which Mr. Ponmek had trained his models to walk. It was an unfamiliar tune, with a completely different timing and beat. The models froze in the wings. The two masters of ceremony stood looking at the empty stage and the audience sat in wait for Mr. Ponmek's models to emerge from the wings and display his collection. After a moment the masters of ceremony again announced Mr. Ponmek's collection. The music continued to play. No models came onto the stage the photographers at the end of the runway relaxed, lowering their cameras. As members of the audience took the opportunity to engage in conversation the murmur of voices began to fill the grand conference hall. It was sabotage. Ajaan Phoumjai had quite successfully thrown them off – by changing the music he had produced an opportunity to make Mr. Ponmek appear unprepared. Ajaan Phoumjai had disrupted the well-rehearsed movements and self-assuredness that Mr. Ponmek had carefully worked to craft in the performance of those displaying his clothing. When Mr. Ponmek's models eventually did emerge from the wings marching to the beat of unfamiliar music, gone was the polished grace, confidence, and comfort they had honed during dress rehearsals. In contrast, the models Ajaan Phoumjai had trained, including the students from Vientiane International School, looked highly professional.

At the conclusion of the show Mr. Ponmek stormed into the dressing room shaking with a fury that one seldom sees on public display in Lao PDR. The veins and tendons bulge from his neck as he shouted "THANK YOU MR. PHOUMJAI! THANK YOU!" With an unbridled vehemence, Mr. Ponmek vowed that he would insure that this would be Ajaan Phoumjai's very last opportunity to direct the modeling for the Lao Handicraft Association.

Mr. Ponmek's public furor made Mr. Ponmek himself appear irrational. Compounding the appearance of irrationality is the fact that others in the staging room (most of the models, and other members of the Lao Handicraft Association) and all in the audience were unaware of the successful act of sabotage skillfully pulled off by Ajaan Phoumjai. Ajaan Phoumjai, maintained a cool and calm composure. Knowing nothing of what Ajaan Phoumjai accomplished by way of sabotage, Ajaan Phoumjai appeared, to almost everyone present, to be the unfortunate victim of the apparently irrational furor of Mr. Ponmek.

Ajaan Phoumjai's lack of visible shock or startled expression, however, provided a subtle hint that he may have predicted such a response from Mr. Ponmek. Cool, calm, and collected, practically oozing with nonchalance, Ajaan Phoumjai was able to walk

---

from the room with a gentle grace, casually pointing to the fact that the change in the music cues and schedule had been (and still were) posted for all to see upon the wall (on Ajaan Phoumjai's side of the dressing room). This was the final act of Ajaan Phoumjai's skillfully choreographed public fiasco and meltdown for Mr. Ponmek. Mr. Ponmek had insisted that he control his own models and presentation of his textiles, by throwing Mr. Ponmek's presentation off kilter Ajaan Phoumjai reinforced the appearance of Ajaan Phoumjai's competence and superiority in model training. The following year Ajaan Phoumjai was, once again, invited to direct the models for the Handicraft Association's fashion show.

<sup>10</sup> Among notable changes in the first issue after the establishment of the Marketing Department were two bi-lingual English/Lao 'articles' (one was essentially a paid promotional piece for a travel company, the other a list of "good ideas" including "Find the people who make you smile, because smiling makes sadness dissipate and pleasure grow"), five pages devoted to Lao pop music, a photo corner showing people's improper behaviors – this one posting of signs on public property, full color pages distributed throughout the magazine, and a "peel and win game" with a grand prize of roundtrip airline tickets on Lao Aviation.

<sup>11</sup> One of the reasons Fridays were not chosen as an office uniform day was because the younger staff members already had to wear the blue shirt Party 'uniform' every Friday.

<sup>12</sup> I have little doubt that the constantly reinforced sense of being an outsider while working within the Vannasin unit and making significant contributions to the perpetuation of the unit's central publication proved quite taxing for a number of the young marketing employees who eventually left. One part of my duties within the Ministry was teaching English to the staff. I conducted these lessons in the editorial department, after the staff members woke from their post-lunch naps, on the opposite side of the glass wall separating the editorial department from the Marketing/Technical Department. A number of the members of the Marketing Department asked me if they could join the classes I taught, they were reticent about asking the Vannasin administrators themselves. When I broached the subject with Mrs. Onchanh, she informed me that the lessons were for Vannasin staff, the young people were not part of the Vannasin staff, and were expected to be working at this time, not learning English. So, even on days when they were not out making calls drumming up sales for advertising, the young people in the Marketing Department could only watch the lessons from the opposite side of the glass partition, often, I should add, with sad wistful expressions on their faces.

<sup>13</sup> The young people employed by Mr. Phoumy to drum up sales of advertising had to spend a considerable amount of time out of the office driving to various locations around the city to meet with potential advertisers. Conducting this work, driving from location to location on a motorcycle under the hot sun or in the pouring rain (or a combination of both) was clearly exhausting. The first two young women lasted longer at the job than the first two young men, but they usually returned to the relative cool of the office mid-way through the day, and sat at a table staring blankly ahead, wiping the city's dust from their faces and sweat from their brows. The longest lasting of this first cohort of marketing employees was a young woman who eventually found greener pastures in the relatively cool climate behind the check-in counter at the Wattai Airport.

---

<sup>14</sup> (Government calls for correct understanding of Valentine's Day 2009)

<sup>15</sup> (Phengphachan 2006)

<sup>16</sup> For example, the social practices entailed in the single Party rule over the population within the borders of Lao PDR and practices of patronage and political-economic advancement through kinship ties through which families perpetuate the family's position in relationships of exchange. Historian Martin Stuart-Fox provides considerable insight into how the political elite have adapted practices of kinship and patronage to changing political-economic conditions in Lao PDR (see Stuart-Fox 2006, 2005).

<sup>17</sup> It is important to note that under the form of single-Party democratic centralism in place in Lao PDR, "the Lao Government" must be understood as a subset of the administrative organization of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party. A recent press release from the Lao News Agency summarized the Government as follows: "The Government is the administrative organization of the state. The Government manages, in a unified manner, the implementation of the duties of the state in all fields: political, economic, cultural, social, national defence [sic] and security and foreign affairs. The government consists of the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Ministers, Ministers and chairs of the ministry-equivalent committees" (Lao News Agency 2010). The President of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party appoints the Prime Minister with the approval of the National Assembly, and the terms of office for the Government and the National Assembly is five years.

<sup>18</sup> I am purposefully writing "single-Party State" as a unit that is not divisible. In doing so I am following the conflation (of the Party and the State) employed by the Lao People's Revolutionary Party within the Lao constitution (see chapter one of the constitution Constitution of the Lao PDR 2005). As explained in chapter two, there is just one party monopolizing the positions within the Government institutions of Lao PDR. I am also conflating "the Party" with the older generation of employees within the Ministry of Information and Culture – as it is primarily the Party members who make up the older generation of administrators of the institution. In turn, I am conflating the families of the older generation with the Party, as it is politically prominent families that constitute the social relations, which make up the Party as a social body.

## Chapter 5

### **Inculcation and intergenerational tensions - components of adaptive-perpetuation: “We want these new writers to work effectively and to follow government policy with regard to content”**



Figure 5.1 Writing students assembled in the Ministry of Information and Culture’s large meeting hall, listening to the self-introductions of select members of the Lao Writer’s Association on the opening day of the Sinxay Pen’s Camp.

#### **Introduction:**

To develop an understanding of the practices of change we must delve into an exploration of where and how the young aspiring practitioners and the older generation of practitioners meet on a field of mutual dependency and shared interest in the practice around which the community has formed. As was illustrated in the examples presented in the last chapter, stasis and a simple reproduction of social practices are not the focus of the older generation seeking adaptive perpetuation. Rather, the focus is change. In the context of fundamental transformations of social practices, change inherently presents potential threats to continuity and displacement, and these threats are often manifest in the form of intergenerational tensions. These circumstances lead us to the question explored in this chapter: How do intergenerational tensions come to a head through mutual dependency and the practices of adaptive perpetuation?

The social practices of adaptive-perpetuation arise through interactions of members of the older generation who develop the recognition that without an influx of younger practitioners, the older generation’s positions in society are threatened. This recognition of the need for a new generation of practitioners (a successor generation of practitioners) entails the realization (on behalf of the older generation) that as a result of

the nature of their labor and the qualities of the products that must be produced, the older generation is not able to simply rely upon practices of kin-affiliated incorporation.

With this recognition members of the older generation create opportunities to bring together: 1) members of the older generation who constitute representatives of the ongoing community of practice, and 2) members of a younger generation who are aspiring practitioners, approaching the older generation's practice from outside the established social relations of the older generation. The two generations intersect through the form of labor in which the older generation is legitimately engaged. The older generation's need for the labor of youth is not necessarily rooted in an earnest interest in the creative products of the young recruits. The interest in the labor of young people must be understood as reflective of the older generation's self-interest, a vested interest in the adaptive-perpetuation of the community of practice. The intersection of the older generation's self-interest and the younger generation's aspirations set the stage for the mutual production of intergenerational tensions. Tensions between the generations arise through the practices of inculcation as the older generation attempts to govern products of the aspiring practitioners.

In this chapter I introduce the Sinxay Writer's Training Camp (also known as the Sinxay Pen's Camp) in order to provide the reader insight into the conditions of adaptive-perpetuation that I presented in the two paragraphs above. My purpose is to help the reader comprehend the processes described above via a description of a real-life situation in which two generations intersect through a form of labor in which the older generation was actively engaged. The Sinxay Writer's Training Camp provides us a venue through which we can explore the social practices of inculcation and incorporation of youth into the ongoing practices of propaganda production within the Lao Ministry of Information and Culture. Through biographical sketches I present both the older generation of established writers, and the body of students from which the older generation seeks to develop its successors. This background information on the members of the two generations coming head to head in the context of the Pen's Camp is necessary for understanding aspects of the social practices of the dilemma of adaptive perpetuation that are explored in detail in chapters six, seven and eight.

The establishment of the Sinxay Writer's Training Camp was an initial step in the process of forming the Sinxay Young Writer's Club.<sup>1</sup> As with the Sinxay Culture Club, the Vannasin staff and administrators would rely upon the labor of young members of the Young Writer's Club to make marketable contributions to the production of Vannasin Magazine. The productive contributions of Sinxay Young Writer's Club members, however, were substantially different than those of the Culture Club members. While the models of the Culture Club had the responsibility of physically embodying the unit's ideals of Lao culture and beauty in order to visually attract young consumers to the publication, the Young Writer's contributions were to be the actual written ideological content of the magazine; the labor of the members of the Sinxay Young Writer's Club were to be at the core of the Vannasin Unit's productive responsibilities in the area of ideological content. As a result, the Vannasin administrators devoted a comparatively large amount of labor and resources to the production of both a stable body of members of the Sinxay Young Writer's Club, and a continuity of the social practices of the established older generation.

Those administrators and staff members responsible for the other modes of incorporation (described in chapter four) controlled for and mediated potential threats of displacement in diverse ways. While models and kin-affiliated interns provided essential labor for the Vannasin Unit, their interactions were part of a short-term glancing employment trajectory that just grazed the periphery of the unit's social relations. The productive output of the Marketing Department was under the strict and constant editorial supervision of the Vannasin Administration, and concerted efforts were made to visually (e.g. with uniforms) and spatially (e.g. placing the Marketing Department on one side of a glass wall) demark the boundaries between the social practices of the Marketing Department's staff and the staff of the Vannasin Unit. The permission granting authority of the Publishing and Library's Department was the coercive glue that kept the Marketing Department's labor affixed to the Vannasin Unit. The low-paid probationary labor entailed practices of vetting that ensured each person entering into employment for the Vannasin Unit through this procedure would have direct supervision in conforming their behaviors and labor to the ongoing social practices of the Vannasin Unit.

The modes of incorporation described in chapter four were suited to incorporating the labor of young people who served the unit as an editorial staff member, a typist, a receptionist, data entry personnel, an administrator-in-training, a layout and advertising supervisor, and a bevy of attractive young models, all the while mediating against potential threats of displacement. These modes of incorporation, while specialized and well suited to fulfilling specific labor needs of the Vannasin unit, were not tailored to the unit's central essential need: the need for pool of young writers to replace members of the older generation of writers, young writers capable of producing text that would attract, maintain, and help to shape the thinking and behaviors of an audience of youthful Lao consumers, while simultaneously contributing to the perpetuation, rather than displacement, of the Party, its social institutions, the hierarchical social positioning of its members, and their single-Party rule over the Lao People's Democratic Republic. In order to produce a large body of young writers, and simultaneously mediate the dilemma of adaptive perpetuation entailed in bringing non-kin youth into the core practices of the Vannasin unit's propaganda production, the administrators of Vannasin established the Sinxay Pen's Camp.

### **The need for and purpose of the Sinxay Pen's Camp from the perspective of the Vannasin administrators:**

Vannasin Magazine's Sinxay Pen's Camp writer's training program was organized under the personal direction and oversight of Mr. Paengan, the Director/Editor-in-Chief of Vannasin Magazine and Secretary General of the Lao Writer's Association. With the aim of drawing talented young writers into service for the Ministry the writer's training camp was scheduled to coincide with the July through August school/university rainy season break, providing aspiring young writers specialized training in various aspects of writing for the Ministry of Information and Culture during their free time between studies.

With forty percent of the magazine's costs dependent upon sales and advertising, the Vannasin Magazine unit needed to not simply produce Party propaganda, but find ways to actually sell it to Lao consumers. Each month as the date for Vannasin Magazine's printing approached the Vannasin administrators and editorial staff found

themselves scrambling for material to fill the pages of the issues. The practice of culling through back issues, dusting off and reprinting items from the magazine's archives, was proving insufficient for attracting an audience of youthful readers. Peppering the issues of the magazine with images of eye-catching young models had not proved sufficient for attracting young consumers to purchase Vannasin Magazine. In Mr. Paengan's assessment, what the magazine needed was young writers attuned to the interests of their peers, young people who would be able to simultaneously produce the requisite propaganda in support of the single-Party State, and make it marketable to young consumers.

Though not directly discussed with the students during the course of the camp, Mr. Paengan's aim from the start was to form a writer's club, essentially a pool of youthful talent (akin to what he had previously created in the area of cultural modeling with the Sinxay Culture Club) from which Vannasin Magazine would be able to draw submissions for its publications. The training activities culminated with Mr. Paengan and the staff of the Sinxay Pen's Camp officially establishing the Sinxay Young Writers' Club. The Lao Government's English language newspaper reported that the objective of the club was, "to encourage a new generation to develop a love of literature in order to replace senior writers in the future."<sup>2</sup> An instructor with the club explained in the article that the club activities involve the training of the next generation of writers by the current generation of writers stating, "If we don't do this, we may not have any new professional writers with creative ideas to continue our literary heritage . . ."<sup>3</sup>

The quotes above from one of the Sinxay Pen's Camp instructors reveals concerns regarding perpetuation shared by a number of the older generation of Ministry authorized writers, that is, if steps were not taken to intervene in the situation and actively inculcate a body of new young writers by the social body of authorized writers, there may soon be no participants to perpetuate the social practices of the group. In describing the purpose of the Sinxay writer's training program to me, Mr. Paengan explained that Vannasin's Sinxay writer's training program was established, "with the objective purpose of specifically developing and producing official sources of writing . . . official sources of literary work." The end products of the training were to be young people sharing a common set of practices with the older generation of 'official sources of writing.'

Describing the camp Mr. Paengan emphasized that benefits produced through interactions between students (the younger generation) and established writers (the older generation) would not simply accrue within the student body, rather the interactions between students and instructors in the camp format were intended to benefit the established writers in charge of instruction, by enabling these members of the older generation of writers to learn of the interests of contemporary Lao youth. From the onset (at least from Mr. Paengan's perspective) the camp was not intended to simply entail a top-down older generation to younger generation flow of information. His goal was also to spark in the older generation of writers an understanding of the interests of contemporary youth in order to shape the older generation of writers' submissions (articles, short stories, poems. . .) to Vannasin.

It must be kept in mind, that writing for the Ministry was not simply writing for art's sake, rather, writing under the Ministry was embedded within the institution's goals for administering social behavior. As the official sources of literary work, the members of the Sinxay Young Writer's Club would have the duty to produce work employed in the

adjustment of social behavior. The first task assigned to the members of the Sinxay Young Writer's Club would be generating content for the revival of the Sinxay newspaper, a monthly publication distributed at public schools. The establishment of the Sinxay Young Writer's Club would enable the Ministry to have a body of young writers who could craft propaganda aimed at their peers. As a member of the older generation of writers explained in the same newspaper article cited above, "At present, some young people are causing problems in society. For this reason, we want young writers to speak to their contemporaries through their writing and to persuade them to give up their bad habits." He continued: "We want these new writers to work effectively and to follow government policy with regard to content."<sup>4</sup> Prior to the formation of the Sinxay Young Writer's Club, the Sinxay Pen's Camp was the official first step in the mass inculcation of a social body of new young writers, in which the members of the older generation worked to shape the social practices of aspiring writers with the aim of producing a new generation of writers who would "work effectively and to follow government policy with regard to content."

Mr. Paengan drew from the social body of the Lao Writer's Association (LWA) to staff the Sinxay Pen's Camp. The LWA was an association authorized to assemble under the authority of the Ministry of Information and Culture, an organization of which Mr. Paengan served as the Secretary General, an organization made up of many of the contributors to Vannasin and other publications for the single-Party State. In drawing instructors from the LWA Mr. Paengan engaged the older generation of writers in the practices of inculcating the next generation of writers in aspects of "working effectively" and "following government policy with regard to content."

Opening day of the camp would constitute the first opportunity for the young aspiring writers and the older generation of writers to interact. The presence of a number of established members of the LWA and contributors to Vannasin's publications at the opening meeting provided the entering aspiring writers with an impressive welcome to the camp – a welcome to the periphery of the community of practice of propaganda production for the single-Party State.

### **Opening day – arranging an impressive welcome to the periphery of a community of practice:**

Mr. Dee and his assistant Mr. Sisavath arrived at the Vannasin Magazine offices early on the morning of Saturday July 6, 2008. Mr. Paengan (the Director of Vannasin Magazine and Secretary General of the Lao Writer's Association) had assigned Mr. Dee (the Deputy Director of Vannasin) the day-to-day responsibilities of running the Sinxay Pen's Camp, and Mr. Sisavath (the lowest ranking member of Vannasin's editorial staff who himself had just recently completed his period of probationary employment) was to serve as Mr. Dee's assistant.

Tea had to be brewed for the guests (i.e. senior members of the Lao Writer's Association and authors who contributed to Vannasin's productions) and the doors of the Ministry's "large meeting hall" had to be unlocked. The large meeting hall was the primary room used for conducting the meetings and instruction during the camp. The meeting hall measures approximately ten meters in width, by sixteen meters in length. However, at one end a wooden stage, standing half a meter high, juts a few meters into the room from beneath a floor-to-ceiling red velvet stage curtain. The pleated red velvet

curtain is usually closed, and seeing it closed one would not likely guess that it hung about a quarter meter in front of a wood paneled cement wall (this wood paneled wall with the nation and the Party's flags and the national slogan is pictured behind the models in figure 3.16a). Complete with a pleated velvet teaser hanging down in front, the closed stage curtain gives the illusion that the portion of the stage we see in the room is just the proscenium of a larger stage extending far back, hidden, behind the curtain. Small party flags hang from pillars in regular intervals around the periphery of the room.

The day before, under the direction of Mr. Paengan, the Vannasin staff had arranged the room, with rows of desks facing forward towards the front of the room (for the students), and six desks, placed side by side in pairs, forming a loose U in front of the stage facing the audience. The staff pinned a blue banner, announcing the opening of the camp, on the center of the closed stage curtain at the front of the room. With minor variations, this room arrangement would be the standard set-up for each day of lecture.

The parking lot from which one enters the room tends to be flooded with light reflected off the gleaming white backside of the Ministry of Education building. The meeting hall, with tinted windows and drapes, is relatively dark. Upon entering the room, one's eyes must adjust to the dramatic change in light, even the most self-confident of new students entered with halting movements that physically revealed an unfamiliarity, hesitancy, and uncertainty. The members of the older generation of writers were familiar with the setting, and entered the room appearing relatively confident and self-assured.

On the opening morning of the camp, invited members of the LWA and contributors to Vannasin took seats facing the audience of students from behind the U of desks at the front of the room. This gathering, composed of twelve of Lao PDR's contemporary literary figures, made for an impressive picture, and a cameraman from Lao National Television and a photographer/journalist from the Lao language press were on hand to report on the opening of the camp. Up among those of the older generation of writers at the front of the room were a number who would actually have very little to do with the day to day instruction during the camp: a police officer who writes crime novels came dressed in a black Sinxay Pen's Camp t-shirt; a revered monk (wearing his orange robe) who contributes pieces to Vannasin; Mr. Khamphon the most senior member of Vannasin's editorial staff. These men would not actually provide direct instruction to the students; rather they were present for the formalities of the opening ceremony. Seated among these men were other members of the older generation of writers who would serve as the primary instructors for the camp. In the section below I introduce the seven writers who constituted the body of the primary instructors lecturing to students over the course of the camp.

### **The older generation - Primary Sinxay Pen's Camp instructors and their subjects of inculcation:**

The students attended lectures within the Ministry of Information and Culture compound every Tuesday and Friday throughout the months of July and August. The weekday schedule helped to both a) limit attendance primarily to young people who were high school and university students who had yet to gain fulltime employment, and b) limit the duties of instruction to those members of the Lao Writer's Association and contributors to Vannasin's publications who were able to take time away from their regular employment and lecture at the Ministry during the workweek.

On average those who composed the body of primary instructors for the camp were in their early to mid forties. A number of these instructors were incorporated into the labor of writing for the Lao government at a young age, in the 1980's, soon after completing high school. The majority of the students the Sinxay instructors taught ranged in age from their late teens to early twenties. The typical age difference between the instructors and students was twenty years; the arrangement of the writing course literally had one generation teaching the next.

Of those who taught the students over the weeks of instruction, seven writers constituted the primary body of instructors attending on regular basis throughout the course. While some of these seven instructors were present primarily to deliver lectures, others spent a considerable amount of time outside of lectures accompanying the students on the various camp excursions (described in the following three chapters) and interacting with students during these outings individually and in groups. Below I present a brief introduction of these seven writers and the subjects upon which they lectured, devoting particular attention to the two full-time administrators of Vannasin Magazine (Mr. Paengan and Mr. Dee) who organized and oversaw all camp activities.

### **Mr. Paengan, Social positioning, Lao culture, language and moral behavior:**

At forty-six years old Mr. Paengan was The Director and Editor-in-Chief of Vannasin Magazine and Secretary General of the Lao Writers' Association. He was the Lao PDR's recipient of the 2004 South East Asian Write Award (SEAWrite Award). He was on an administrative trajectory inside the Ministry, and soon after the camp Mr. Paengan would be promoted up and out of the Publishing and Libraries Department to become a Deputy Director of the Ministry's Mass Culture Department.

Mr. Paengan's lectures to the students in the large meeting hall of the Ministry of Information and Culture were on topics of Lao culture, language, and moral behavior. He referred to each of his five lectures as "conversations with a sage writer" (ສົນທະນາພາກີ ເວທີນັກຂຽນ). His delivery, however, was not as much conversational as it was sermon like. He sat at the front of the room facing the assembled mass of students presenting information to the students in manner reminiscent of how a monk may talk from on high to a gathering the laity. His talks were interspersed with rhetorical techniques of enticing vocal agreement from his audience; after making a point he would ask, "Isn't that so?" to which the only appropriate response from the assembled body of students would be a chorus of affirmations.

For the first of his series of lectures he casually read from a prepared manuscript documenting his twenty-five years as a writer. As Mr. Paengan started his talk Mr. Sisavath (the lowest ranking of Vannasin's editorial staff) scurried around the room distributing photocopies of Mr. Paengan's talk to the seated students. Mr. Paengan detailed how he wrote his first short story during his last year in high school. Soon after graduation from high school in 1980 he came to work as a 'journalist' with the newly founded Vannasin Magazine. He was young, twenty years old, and the magazine itself had only been in existence for about a year, but it was staffed with a body of experienced writers into which he became immersed and honed his skills. The story was clearly meant to parallel and provide a possible foreshadowing of the experience of the young aspiring writers assembled before him.

Referencing the literary figures under whose guidance one honed their practices of writing is an important part of the social positioning within the community of practice of writers in Lao PDR. Through such referencing of one's teachers, writers position themselves within a lineage of descent; position themselves on a pathway of the passage of the torch of authorship. Mr. Paengan explained to the students that he developed his techniques and understanding of Lao working with many of those who are to this day considered among the most prominent Lao literary figures: Souvanthone Bouphanouvong (ສຸວັນທອນ ບຸບຜານຸວົງ), Dara Kanlaya (ດາຣາ ກັນລະຍາ) Outhine Bounyavong (ອຸທິນ ບຸນຍາວົງ), Khampaw Puongsaba (ຄຳພໍ ພວງສະບາ) and Bountanon Somsaiphon (ບຸນທະນອງ ຊິມໄຊຜິນ). Mr. Paengan's positioning of his development as a writer within the labor of this body of significant Lao literary figures is important as it is an act of placing himself, a) in a direct line of descent from those who initiated the first steps towards Lao Nationalism<sup>5</sup>, b) in a line of descent from the revered writers about the revolution<sup>6</sup>, and c) among those widely recognized as the great Lao poets and authors.

His descriptions for the students of developing as a writer flowed through personal narratives immersed in the political context of the time. The second piece he had published in Vannasin Magazine was in 1981, it was written to commemorate the birth of Ho Chi Minh, titled "The Heart of Indochina." He described the period from 1980 to 1984 as the era when he became one of the new young Lao writers; in his description this was the time of a passing of a torch – training (through laboring alongside the greats engaged in actual production) with the preceding generation of revolutionary Lao writers. He told the students of his six years of studying in the Soviet Union – a period he describes as being when he sharpened his skills as a writer. Looking into the eyes of the young aspiring writers in the audience, Mr. Paengan described how he walked through the door of high school and into a decade of developing himself as a writer within the labor of the Ministry of Information and Culture, supported by the government in his studies and supporting the government in his writing.

The remaining sermon-like lectures of Mr. Paengan were on topics of writing engaged in issues of Lao culture, language, and moral behavior. These talks were less formal in nature, more casual in delivery than his initial biographical presentation. During these subsequent "conversations with a sage writer" Mr. Paengan continued the format of a sage elder lecturing from a higher position of experience and knowledge to the neophytes, but unlike his autobiographical presentation he did not read from a written manuscript. The lectures were even more interspersed with rhetorical cues for unified affirmative responses from his audience of aspiring writers (e.g. "Is that true or not?", "Isn't that so?"). While the lectures of the other members of the older generation focused largely on structure, Mr. Paengan's "conversations" were aimed at introducing the students to general expectations about content, what forms of behaviors and language are deemed appropriate, and what forms of behaviors would not be appropriate in Lao society from the perspective of his generation.

Significantly, Mr. Paengan laid out two important points during an initial lecture to the assembled students. The first point was that young writers entering into the practice of writing must be wholeheartedly committed to being a writer, the second point was that as part of this commitment aspiring young writers must familiarize themselves with the body of contemporary practitioners (the older generation of writers), and the products of their labor. Mr. Paengan began this introductory lecture with what seemed to

be a casual talk about the pen names and given names of Lao literary figures he deemed important. In this casual introduction he linked the corpus of a writer to his/her pen name, and then to the given name of that author, and at points briefly described how that author fit into social relations with other authors about whom he would subsequently address.

The tone of this first part of his lecture was expository; an introduction to the social body of contemporary Lao writers (the older generation) and the products of their labor, but shortly into the lecture he shifted his tone, moving the lecture into the realm of a sermon. His sermon focused on self-confidence and the importance of becoming familiar with the social body and works of contemporary Lao writers. He initiated this shift in tone by directly telling the students the first step they must take towards becoming a Lao writer:

This is the first step . . . if you walk into this profession you must be confident [that writing is what you want to do] . . . If you aren't feeling certain about this profession do not enter into it . . . Whatever arena you choose to enter you must have confidence. You must be attentive and have confidence in yourself. Do not destroy your confidence.

Young writing students have a strong internal flame, a flame that flows well through the nib of their pens in the form of writing. They have good ideas with a wide breadth of knowledge.

[Those with pen names that we recognize as famous today] didn't even have the opportunity to finished elementary school because of the war. Those of you who are now learning at the National University of Laos have a worldwide breadth of knowledge to draw upon. When you come to this stage you should have confidence. You must devote yourself to writing.<sup>7</sup>

Mr. Paenang spoke to the quietly assembled students from behind a table at the front of the large meeting hall. He relied upon a microphone to amplify his voice and aura of authority, making the message of self-confidence and commitment audible to all the young people seated before him. Devoting oneself to writing, he was quick to point out, was not an individualistic act – but rather one that needed to be embedded within the social body of writers (the older generation) and the corpus of writing they have already produced. Immediately after telling students they must devote themselves to writing he posited the following:

For what purposes do we want to learn from the writers? . . . I am going to ask you a question, and I'll give you 2 or 3 or 5 minutes to answer this: Why must we learn from a writer? Why do we want to know the writer, those who have written in the past? Discuss this among yourselves . . . Don't be bashful, talk . . .

The room was silent, and a number of those who had been looking at Mr. Paenang shifted their gaze uncomfortably towards others as they waited to see who would be the first to break the uncomfortable silence. Eventually a young male student from the National

University of Laos said: “Every writer has experience with composition and we can copy their practice.” Mr. Paengan jumped in to polish and augment these thoughts stating: “We can draw from their experience and knowledge, from what they write and how they think, for our lessons . . . Are there any other ideas?”

As the air of an uneasy silence permeated the room and seemingly threatened to linger indefinitely, Mr. Paengan humorously stated: “You don’t have to chant.” The meaning of his statement was that students didn’t have to recite a perfect answer flawlessly in unison from rote memory, similar to how one would chant at a Buddhist temple. “You can just talk.” The students laughed timidly at his humor, but no one presented an answer to Mr. Paengan’s question. After a moment Mr. Paengan continued:

Why do we have to know the writers? Why do we have to read their compositions? Why do we have to know what they achieved, going back to how many hours they sat in a class, what they have done before the hour at which they became writers?

What if you become a successful writer and you say, “I’ve never read and learned from their writing”?!

Don’t be black hearted.

Read someone’s work, and someone will read our compositions as well.

I want to warn you: you should become familiar with the writers, in order to become a writer. But you don’t need to do exactly what the writers do. Please, I beg of you, if you learn from the educator Mr. Dee, you don’t need to produce work exactly like that of instructor Mr. Dee. Nobody is going to have the exact style of teacher Dee.

The same applies to learning singing, the same applies to learning music.

You must have your own style.

Mr. Paengan’s statement centered on the older generation of writer’s desire for the younger generation to become familiar with their social body and the products they produce. His warning about style (that students should not copy an instructor’s style of writing) was far from a call for unrestrained creativity – but rather his statement was the older generation’s call for creativity that conformed itself within the rather rigid structural expectations of the older generation of writers. In some subjects, such as the subjects of poetry taught by Mr. Dee, the older generation held firm to strict structural expectations.

### **Mr. Dee, Lao poetic structures:**

Working under Mr. Paengan was Mr. Dee, the Deputy Director of Vannasin Magazine and direct supervisor of the Editorial Department and Technical Department of Vannasin Magazine. Mr. Dee was in his mid-forties, and assigned the responsibilities for the day-to-day operations of the camp. Of all of the staff members he was the one person present at almost every moment of camp activity.

Mr. Dee was one of the recipients of the Ministry of Information and Culture’s 2004 Sinxay writer’s award. Not long after the completion of the camp he was promoted to the position of Director and Editor-in-Chief of Vannasin Magazine (filling the position

vacated by Mr. Paengan). Mr. Dee would later be the recipient of the 2008 SEAWrite award for Lao PDR.

Mr. Dee interacted with the students in a manner that was quite different than most of the other male instructors. He was very humble in his approach to others, and modest about his own accomplishments in writing. He did not come across as boastful or arrogant. And he did not present himself as the ordained and authorized fountain of knowledge on a particular topic. Rather, he was quietly humorous, and expressed his ideas in a sensitive and poetic manner. He did not express a need to detail his accomplishments. On occasion he shared small poems, works in progress, and these moments of sharing allowed the students to hear (often in rapt awe) and form their own judgments about the products of his labor.

Unlike Mr. Paengan, Mr. Soubanh (the radio host), and Mr. Bounpheng (the banker), Mr. Dee did not stand out as someone who particularly enjoys being in front of a large audience or the focus of attention. A number of students told me that this quiet and thoughtful aspect of his personality is what endeared them to him; it was a characteristic that many of the young writers could relate to themselves. When Mr. Dee did stand in front of the assembled students his humble and gentle approach to instruction proved exceptionally well suited for both capturing and holding their attention.

At the opening session of the camp each of the members of the older generation of writers present stood and provided the students with a short self-introduction. Mr. Dee's introduction was markedly different than that of the others in that it was a humorous, self-effacing and embarrassing description of his earliest use of writing as a form of public self-expression. Standing in front of the assembled students Mr. Dee didn't use the recollection of an award, or the public presentation of an honor to introduce himself, rather he started out by telling the students of his second year in upper secondary school. "I'm going to begin to tell you about my writing. In 1979 I came to study at Sikhot Upper Secondary School. It was soon after Sikhot Upper Secondary School had opened. In 1982 I was very upset with my girlfriend." The last line caught the students off guard, Mr. Dee smiled sheepishly and the audience erupted in laughter.

The students were sitting in expectation of a story following the format of a glorified recollection of a past honor, a triumph that received high recognition, rather Mr. Dee introduced himself through presenting his foray into writing centered around a youthful emotion that with which young people present could relate. As the laughter quieted down he continued: "And I wrote my first short story because I was so upset, it was titled 'I Will Never Forget You.'" By this point in his self-introduction he had garnered the full attention of all the students present, and he continued with the story describing how his broken heart inspired his first poem (titled "This is for you!"), which he posted publically but anonymously on the school's news bulletin board the day he dropped out of school.

This youthful act of public poetic self-expression caught the attention of both his friends and teachers. By the next year, when he enrolled in a different school, his reputation as a writer was beginning to spread through the channels of gossip among students and staff. As a student he kept a personal notebook of his writing, and, unbeknownst to him, when he left the notebook unattended his friends (and even one teacher) began sneaking into his private notebooks to peek at his work. Soon there were numerous people encouraging him to write more, so that they would have more to read.

Mr. Dee's interests, however, were in mathematics and medicine, and in 1983 he entered medical college, but continued to write on the side. In 1985 he submitted a short story to a Ministry of Education writing contest and won first prize. During the awards ceremony he met a number of newspaper publishers. In 1985 newspapers (all of which were government operated) were printing poetry on the front page, and those in charge of printing were in need of content. The publishers encouraged him to submit his work.

Mr. Dee continued his medical studies, but became increasingly involved in entering writing competitions and winning the top prizes. Short stories, poetry, song lyrics, his submissions were repeatedly coming out on top in these competitions. In his talk to the students Mr. Dee explained that entering and winning the competitions was something he enjoyed, but he did not tell the students that writing was not the profession of his choosing.

Mr. Dee's eight-year-old daughter was frequently present at the Ministry during her breaks from school. It was easy to see that she adored her father, and it was clear to see why, he devoted a good deal of attention to her, while balancing his workload for the Ministry. He incorporated her into his work, having her help him with small tasks and made time to create activities for her, ranging from drawing illustrations and composing stories, to math games on paper. One afternoon when I was admiring the creative mathematical games he was making for his daughter, and her ingenuity at solving the problems, Mr. Dee confided in me that his dream and desire was to be a mathematician. He informed me that he never had any intent or desire to be a fulltime writer for the Ministry of Information and Culture. He explained that in the mid 1980's young people were not completely free to choose where they would work, "if the Ministry told you that you were going to be a writer you had to be a writer" he stated, "I wanted to be a mathematician, but I did not have that choice, I was told I would be a writer." I must have looked surprised or confused because he went on to clarify, "At that time if a government Ministry told you what you were to do, you had to do it. They would have been able to prevent me from working with any other Ministry." The writing competitions he won brought him to the attention of officials in the Ministry of Information and Culture, and as a result he was drafted into service of the Party and its institution.

Mr. Dee, like the vast majority of the students sitting before him during his Pen's Camp lectures, had not followed a kinship trajectory into the Ministry. He seemed well attuned to what young writers would experience entering into a social body from the outside. As the director of the editorial staff of Vannasin, he was very familiar with the difficulties young writers faced in conforming their work to the content and structural expectations of the Ministry's publications. His lectures were focused on guiding the students through these structural expectations with a heavy emphasis on subjects of poetry. Over the course of the camp Mr. Dee delivered six lectures with the following titles: "Learning to use the vocabulary of poetry" (ຮຽນຮູ້ຄຳເພື່ອ ໃຊ້ແຕ່ງກາຍກອນ) "Synonymous vocabulary" (ຄຳສັບທີ່ຄ້າຍຄືກັນ ແລະ ໃຊ້ແທນກັນ) "From true stories into short stories" (ຈາກເລື່ອງຈິງກາຍມາ ເປັນ ບົດເລື່ອງສັ້ນ) "Learning to write poetry" (ຮຽນແຕ່ງກອນ) "Contest of the language of poetry" (ປະຊິນລິລາ ພາສາກະວີ) and "Proverbial predictions" (ສຸພາສິດ ຄຳພະຫຍາ).

The majority of his talks were focused on what the editors of Vannasin expected to see in terms of Lao poetic structures. He spent a considerable amount of time diagramming (on white boards or large sheets of poster paper) the expected number of syllables in a line and the tone patterns that editors want to see within and between lines of poetry. With a gentle humor and clear passion for the subject of structures and patterns (that one might expect from a mathematician) Mr. Dee exhibited a considerable talent in making the topics of structure both interesting and amusing for his young audience.

### **Mr. Xaypraseuth, Short story writing:**

At just thirty-seven years old Mr. Xaypraseuth was one of the youngest writers involved in preparing the next generation of writers to enter into writing in support of the Party. Mr. Xaypraseuth was a journalist who wrote for the Lao People's Army Newspaper. A bespectacled man who was small in stature, Mr. Xaypraseuth was visibly nervous when standing and addressing the assembled students. The fact that his voice was largely inaudible over the drone of the ceiling fans in the Ministry's large meeting hall (even when he held a microphone) meant that the majority of the content of his lectures literally went unheard. His four lectures were titled as follows: "Prior to writing a short story" (ເສັ້ນທາງສູ່ການເປັນນັກຂຽນ) "Some lessons of learning to write short stories" (ພາກປະຕິບັດ ຂຽນບົດເລື່ອງສັ້ນ) "The practice of writing short stories" (ບາງບົດຮຽນໃນການຂຽນເລື່ອງສັ້ນ) "Practice writing short stories" (ເພິກແຕ່ງເລື່ອງສັ້ນ).

### **Mr. Bounpheng, Short story writing:**

Mr. Bounpheng's personality was the polar opposite of Mr. Xaypraseuth. With a broad smile Mr. Bounpheng reveled in the attention of students as he lectured about his personal experience translating literature from Vietnamese into the Lao language, and explained the expected structures for short stories. He was a frequent contributor to Vannasin Magazine and was one of the recipients of the Ministry's Sinxay writer's award in 2005. At forty-six Mr. Bounpheng was an employee of the Lao Development Bank. The bank's location, just a few blocks away, enabled Mr. Bounpheng to spend a considerable amount of time socializing with the students, even on days when he wasn't delivering lectures. Outgoing and gregarious Mr. Bounpheng served as the frequently quoted spokesperson representing the Sinxay Pen's camp in press interviews and articles about the camp. Soon after the camp his brother was appointed Lao PDR's ambassador to the United States. As is reflected in his brother's appointment, his family was very well positioned in the Lao Government; Mr. Bounpheng's family was well positioned within the Lao political elite.

The two lectures he delivered during the course of the training program were based on recounting his personal experiences writing and were titled: "Experience with writing short stories" (ປະສົບປະການໃນການຂຽນເລື່ອງສັ້ນ) "Practice writing short stories" (ເພິກແຕ່ງເລື່ອງສັ້ນ). His work writing short stories for the Ministry, combined with his constantly cheerful and charming personality, made him the ideal candidate to sit through the tedium of listening to students read aloud every short story submitted for the camp's short story writing competition.

### **Mr. Soubanh, Lao musical genres and their history/Song writing:**

In his early forties the wiry and tempestuous Mr. Soubanh worked for the Ministry of Information and Culture as a late night disk jockey. He launched in to a career of writing for Lao National Radio in 1985, and has since gained some notoriety as a writer of popular songs.

Like Mr. Paengan, Mr. Soubanh delivered his first talk reading from a typed script. With the document in hand, a microphone standing a few inches from his mouth, and his elbows resting on the table Mr. Soubanh read a lecture titled: “About new Lao music” (ຄວາມເປັນມາຂອງເພງລາວ ສະໄຫມ) – a talk about Lao musical genres, the influences that shaped these genres, and their history. In contrast to Mr. Paengan’s style of playing off the energy of students in the room, Mr. Soubanh delivered his history of Lao popular song as a disk jockey might talk over the airwaves to an unseen audience, he paid little attention to the reactions of the students sitting in the room in front of him.

His second session was “A game about music” (ເກມກຽວກັບເພງ), during which time students were invited to try and answer his trivia questions about the popular songs of the older generation. Finally he held two brief sessions titled “Sharing songs” [listening to each others’ songs] (ຮ້ອງເພງສູ່ກັນຟັງ), during which students were invited one by one to sit at the front of the room and share some of their own compositions. A handful of male students who had compositions ready took Mr. Soubanh up on this offer and performed their compositions for the group. Mr. Soubanh appeared to be caught off guard by their subject matter (generally unrequited love) and the dominant choice of students to perform songs composed in the western and Thai influenced song format popular with urban youth in Vientiane, *paeng sa ting* (ເພງສະຕິງ). The sharing activity did not seem to go according to his plans.

### **Mr. Chaomaly, Lao lyric structures:**

Mr. Chaomaly was the second instructor teaching on the topic of writing songs and delivered two lectures titled: “The structure/principles of Lao songs” (ຫລັກການແຕ່ງເພງ ລາວ). A songwriter in his mid-forties, he (like Mr. Soubanh) wrote in a Lao style of musical composition popular with his own generation (i.e. popular with those in their mid forties) a style that was still well liked among many young people who did not embrace *paeng sa ting*. The older style of lyric composition that Mr. Chaomaly taught is written in a manner similar to that of the poetic structures taught by Mr. Dee – that is, the lyrics are written with two lines (couplets) arranged side by side on a page forming two columns of text flowing down the sheet, with attention paid to the arrangement of both a pattern of tone marks and consonant vowel rhymes. The students writing lyrics of *paeng sa ting*, however, arranged their words on the page very much like western lyrics, in a single column of lines with a repeating chorus.

While the interest of many of the urban high school students enrolled in the Sinxay Pen’s Camp centered on composing in the contemporary genre popular among urban youth, *paeng sa ting*, this was not a subject covered by either Mr. Soubanh or Mr. Chaomaly. From Mr. Chaomaly and Mr. Soubanh’s perspective (i.e. from the perspective of the older generation who constitute the social body of the Ministry’s approved writers) *paeng sa ting* (i.e. the form of Lao pop-music embraced by many of the

younger students enrolled in the Sinxay Pen's Camp) did not conform to what the older generation considered "the structure/principles of Lao songs."

Mr. Chaomaly's instruction consisted primarily of guiding students through choral readings of his lyrics written on large sheets of poster paper hung on a poster stand at the front of the meeting room. As he stood next to the written lyrics he read through the couplets, stopping to draw arrows and notes on the page above the lines, indicating where tones were to rise and fall, thus making visible the tonal structure of his compositions. In a style similar to that of Mr. Paengan he would occasionally pose rhetorical questions (e.g. "Isn't that so") to the assembled students eliciting a chorus of agreement as he proceeded through the lectures.

### **Mrs. Phounsavath, Short story writing:**

Only one female Lao writer came to present to the Sinxay Pen's Camp students: Mrs. Phounsavath. At forty-six years of age Mrs. Phounsavath was a full time employee of an insurance agency, and used her spare time to write short stories. She was a contributor to Vannasin Magazine and had a book published through the unit. She was the recipient of the second place recognition for the 2005 Sinxay writers award. On the camp's course syllabus her name stood out among the other instructors because of the printed gender prefix the camp organizers had placed in front of her name (the prefix "ນ" is used to denote the name of a female in print). Notably the equivalent male gender prefix was not placed in front of the names of the male instructors – indicating that her presence, not theirs, was the anomaly. The gender disparity in instruction, combined with the behaviors and actions of the male instructors and camp organizers (which I discuss in more detail in subsequent chapters) helped to reinforce the concept that the social body of authorized Lao writers is an old boy's network.

Mrs. Phounsavath delivered only one short lecture during the course of the writer's training program, titled: Mental labor involved in literature (ແມວຄິດຂອງການວິຈານ ວັນນະກຳ). While this was her only lecture, she made an effort to come join the students on the scheduled outings for the camp. During these outings, and on the bus to field trip destinations, she had the opportunity to have personal conversations with the young women who eagerly gathered around her to discuss writing. The bus, the museum, and other venues outside of the Ministry's compound thus constituted the venues where female aspiring young writers were able to have meaningful personal interactions with the only Lao female writer associated with the Sinxay writer's training program.

### **Developing "our" official sources of literary works within the political movement of writing:**

The body of primary instructors in charge of producing the next generation of writers for the Ministry of Information and Culture through the Sinxay Pens' Camp were in general twenty years older than the student body they labored to incorporate into the work of the Ministry. Most began writing for the Lao government in earnest around the time the majority of the students were born. All were part of a social network of writers producing work that supported the Ministry of Information and Culture. Their lectures were aimed, for the most part, at sharing information about the continuity of practice among members of this group, the shared expectations, standards, and literary structures,

to which written work of the members of this group was expected to conform. Each lecturer flavored their presentation with a description or demonstration of their personal techniques for producing work to be shared with the Lao public through the channels of the Ministry. Each in different ways provided the students with a personal perspective of what it was like to be a member of the exclusive body of writers supporting this institution of the Lao Government.

Mr. Paengan's five "conversations with a sage writer" functioned to draw together the different subjects and techniques taught, unifying the presentations into one "conversation" that returned repeatedly to the subject of what role writers are expected to play in Lao society (I discuss the role, and what is expected to "flow from the tips" of the young writer's pens further in chapter 6). From Mr. Paengan's perspective there existed "a good political movement of writing" in Lao PDR. Mr. Paengan used this phrase to discuss with me how the camp's training of the students fit into broadening political roles of, opportunities for, and appreciation of writers in contemporary Lao society: "There is a good political movement of writing. We are talking about building students of writing. Officially, the training of Sinxay student writers was established with the objective purpose of specifically developing and producing official sources of writing." Mr. Paengan explained that the camp was designed "Specifically to produce our writers", using the word "our" indicating the social body of writers currently producing work for the Ministry, the body into which the students were to be incorporated. He continued explaining that by hosting the camp those who constituted the "our" (i.e. the older generation of writers) would "have a role in" and help to establish the "atmosphere" for "the development of official sources of literary works."

The next two segments of this chapter provide an overview of the students, that is, an over view of who constituted the potential future "official sources of literary works" drawn to the camp. First I describe the recruitment of students, which enables the reader to understand how young people became aware of, and enrolled in, the camp. Following the description of recruitment I present a series of brief descriptions of different students, which together provide the reader insight into the range of young people who attended the writers training camp, their interests, and their backgrounds.

### **Recruitment of Students:**

The hosting of the Sinxay Pens' Camp in Vientiane during the University and public school break enabled the recruitment of a student body with diverse geographic origins. This diversity is the result of Vientiane being a hub for education in Lao P.D.R. Students from around the country attend schools and colleges in the national capital, and many of these students choose (often for financial reasons) to stay in Vientiane rather than returning to their home provinces during the school breaks. While the Vannasin Unit did not have the funds to travel around the country providing writing workshops, the staff was able to take advantage of the fact that Vientiane is an educational hub to draw in writing students from a multitude of provinces.

In the Vannasin staff busily publicized the upcoming Camp. The recruitment of prospective students for the camp was done through a variety of media (much of it media which also operated under the auspices of the Ministry of Information and Culture). Radio announcements broadcast the existence of the camp and informed listeners how to enroll. Print advertisements ran in the Lao Language newspapers. In addition to

broadcast and print announcements the staff also arranged for the posting of flyers about the camp on bulletin boards on the campus of the city's largest High School and on the campus of the National University of Laos.

Prior to the opening day students came to the Ministry to register in the Vannasin Offices. Following the advertised instructions, each student brought with them two small passport sized photographs of themselves. One photo was to be affixed to their registration papers, and the second photo was used on their laminated identification card – a card that was to be worn around their neck on a lanyard during camp activities, which would serve as a secondary visual indicator to others that these students were authorized to be within the Ministry compound as part of their participation in official Ministry activities. The primary visual indicator of their authorized student status was a black t-shirt, emblazoned with a large Sinxay Pen's Camp logo. One of these t-shirts was issued to each student on the morning of Saturday July 6<sup>th</sup> when they arrived for the opening session of the camp. Each student paid a registration fee of 35,000 Lao Kip (equivalent to approximately \$3.60 U.S. at the exchange rate of the time).<sup>8</sup>

Looking back at the pay scale of Vannasin salaries presented in chapter three, one can see that this entry fee is a significant amount of money for many living in Lao P.D.R. At the time the fee was equivalent to almost two days wages for the Director of the Vannasin Unit. It was a large investment for most high school and university students with limited financial resources. Even with a t-shirt included, a fee of \$3.60 constituted a considerable expense for the average Lao citizen. Therefore, for most young aspiring writers, enrolling as a student in the camp was not an action that was entered into without careful thought in regard to the possible value gained through one's participation, and the potential returns on their investment of time and money.

### **The younger generation - A sampling of student profiles:**

The camp setting created a rare structured opportunity for Lao high school students, university students, and a handful of older aspiring writers to interact as peers in an organized instructional setting. Initially when the camp opened the high school students tended to cluster among themselves, but as the camp progressed, and group activities brought young people of different ages together for collaborative production there was considerable intermingling, and expressed shared respect for each others contributions despite differences in age and levels of schooling. Below I present a sampling of twelve student profiles, to provide the reader with a quick picture of the range of young people who constituted the Sinxay Pen's Camp student body.

#### **Xiong, university student, aspiring short story writer:**

Xiong (who was nineteen at the time of the camp) grew up in a village a few miles outside the old royal capital of Luang Phrabang. His father was a taxi driver transporting people to and from their village and surrounding villages to the city of Luang Phrabang, and his mother sold dry goods in a local market. His high grades in school earned him a scholarship for the National University of Laos, where he was enrolled in his third year of studying English. His employment goal was to become a tour guide, but his passion was in writing. Xiong was in his early twenties, and was a prolific writer of short stories on topics related to contemporary society. He did all of his composition in small notebooks, writing in his mother tongue: Hmong. After composing stories in

Hmong he would translate select stories into the Lao language. Xiong had enrolled in the camp not as part of a group enrolling collectively, or in the company of a friend, but independently on his own. While quiet and contemplative in larger groups Xiong had a warm and welcoming smile that drew other quiet students into one-on-one collaborative interactions, often around a guitar, during break-times between lectures and events.

**Noukham, a high school student and aspiring short story writer:**

Noukham was the youngest student enrolled in the Sinxay writer's training course. At just fourteen she already had aspirations to be a short story writer. She joined the camp after reading about it in a promotional posting at her school. While some of the older students had already sat through language courses in high school and college that covered some topics similar to those presented during the camp, the vast majority of the information was new to Noukham. She, like many of the older female students, was familiar with the work of number of the authors who came to teach, and, also like the other older female students was wide eyed and visibly excited by the opportunity to interact with these published authors in person. She had a bubbly outgoing personality, a propensity for giggling, and was immediately taken under the wing of a couple of older female students who interacted with her in a manner one might expect from caring older sisters. As a young girl considered by many to be quite pretty with a gullible innocence she also attracted considerable affectionate teasing from the older boys and men enrolled in the camp.

**Thippavanh, a business college student and aspiring short story writer:**

Thippavanh was one of the female students who related to Noukham as an elder sibling. Thippavanh was in her early twenties and a student studying business at the private Europe-Asia College. The fact that she attended a relatively expensive private college in Vientiane informed others of the degree of financial success her parents experienced selling dry goods at a market in Luang Phrabang. Thippavanh was an avid reader of Lao PDR's limited body of literature. Describing herself she told me "I'm the kind of person who likes to read short stories, and I also like to write short stories, about life in our society." During lectures on music her attention was easily diverted by quiet alternative activities with the students she sat beside, but during the lectures on short story writing her attention was fairly undivided.

**Soulichan, Buddhist novice and aspiring short story writer:**

Soulichan was one of two Buddhist novices enrolled in the camp. Then, in his late teens he had entered the temple and come to Vientiane from an outlying province as a means of gaining an education. He had learned of the camp through an article in the Vientiane Mai newspaper. Reflecting back upon the day when he picked up the paper and read the article, he described himself as being very happy learning of this news of the camp and this opportunity to learn. Talkative and jovial he was extremely outgoing and social, and seemed particularly pleased with opportunities to interact with young people outside of the monastic order. Of the three Sinxay students attending the camp from life within a temple (one monk and another Buddhist novice), he seemed the least likely to remain in the temple as a monk after achieving his educational goals. With eyes wide in surprise Noukham, the young high school student described above, told me that he had

approached her for her mobile phone number. This was clearly not behavior she expected from a Buddhist novice. She added that he was quite good at collecting the mobile phone numbers of the cute female students, by explaining to each that he wanted their numbers 'to discuss writing outside of class' and 'to learn about any assignments or lectures' he may happen to miss due to the time constraints imposed by monastic duties. Her tone indicated that she didn't personally believe his stated motives; her smile indicated that she found the surprising behavior more amusing than appalling.

**Vatsana, student entering her final year in NUOL's Faculty of Education:**

Vatsana, a student in her fifth and final year at the National University of Laos' Faculty of Lao Language and Literature, read about the Sinxay Pen's Camp via a posting on a campus news bulletin board. She and her friends in the Faculty of Education collectively decided it would be fun to all come to the camp together, as a group. Vatsana lives in the instructors' housing at the University, as her mother and elder sister are both professors on campus. Her mother, in fact, was one of Mr. Dee's mathematics instructors when he was a student at the University. Quiet, and very polite, she did not jump at opportunities to share her work; rather she spent much of her time at camp silently listening to what others shared. Attending camp was both an opportunity to learn about writing, but importantly for Vatsana it was also an opportunity to spend time participating in activities in the company of a good group of friends. This group of friends from the Faculty of Education was fairly tight knit, congregating together at meals and sharing food. They came to the camp with social relations established through taking courses together at the National University of Laos, but they were not cliquish, rather they were quite welcoming of others to join them in their shared meals and working groups during camp activities. The members of this group of students from the Faculty of Education all had different interests, some were intent on being song writers, others focused on poetry, a number wrote short stories, and others, like Vatsana came with no specific focus, but rather opened to learning about all forms of writing taught through the course of the camp.

**Siha, university student and an aspiring short story author:**

Siha was in her mid-twenties and a student of literature at the National University of Laos. Her desire was to become a published short story author. She was originally from Xieng Kwang province. Relatives who had fled Lao PDR at the time of the revolution and resettled in the United States introduced her (via the telephone) to a divorced Hmong-American man with grown children (i.e. children around the age of Siha) in Minnesota. The Hmong-American divorcee was seeking a new (younger) Hmong wife from Lao PDR. Although Siha had never met him in person, he was funding her enrollment in both the University and the Camp. This trans-national relationship resulted in a man paying for his young girlfriend to learn how to be a writer in support of the very regime from whom his family had fled. Siha approached her participation in the course with visible seriousness and attentive focus that set her apart from many of the younger students.

**Amone, high school student attending camp at her brother's behest:**

Only weeks away from turning sixteen years old, Amone was caught off guard when I asked her to tell me about her favorite books – “Uuuhhh, books?” She broke eye contact, diverting her gaze to her right, as a child might when questioned about an act they are ashamed to admit. “Well, I don't really like to read.” Returning her focus to me she continued, “It was my older brother who told me I should come to the camp. He knows I would like to think, write, and read better.” She grew up in Vientiane and was attending a large high school in the center the city. Amone was a favorite of the music instructors, for a number of reasons: first she did not produce any work that she wanted them to review (unlike most of the other students with an interest in songwriting), second, she was willing to perform the work of these instructors, third, able to perform it on key, fourth, she could adapt her vocal performance to their critique, and fifth, they found her to be very pretty. Eventually she was one of three young female students chosen to perform a Sinxay Pen's Camp theme song written by Mr. Paengan for the closing ceremony of the camp.

**Vilayvone, high school student attending camp at as part of the kinship pathway into labor for the Party:**

Vilayvone was sixteen. She didn't have any particular interest in the camp on her own, but because both her mother and father worked for government ministries, camp enrollment was a convenient way for them to keep her busy and make sure she was kept out of trouble during the school break. For Vilayvone the camp can be understood as an early step in the kinship pathway into Ministry employment (akin to what was discussed in chapter four), and was a form of social enculturation into the practices of the Ministry that will likely benefit her should she follow the administrative paths blazed by either of her parents. Her parents labor within institutions of the Lao Central Government and this involvement with supporting the Party made her in an insider in the social relations of the Ministry. She was one of just a handful of Sinxay writing students with higher-level kin/Party connections.

However, she also seemed to constitute a potential threat to the continuity of social practice that the camp was designed with the intent to contain. Outside of the requisite Sinxay Pen's Camp t-shirt and Lao style tube skirt, her style of dress (e.g. thick black leather silver studded wrist bands around each wrist) and tastes in pop culture exhibited heavy western influence. Ironically this influence developed as a result of her father's advantageous position in the Lao Government. Her father had the privilege of receiving an Australian government scholarship, and she spent many of her formative years attending public schools in Australia while he was there working on his degree. As a result she switched effortlessly between English and Lao, able to discuss Western and Lao popular culture in either language with ease. Her preference in music was pop – pure unadulterated pop – nothing on the palate of Mr. Chaomaly, nothing among the playlists of Mr. Soubanh.

**Phonpaseuth, high school student pop song writer:**

Phonpaseuth was one of the youngest male students attending the camp, and among the best at playing guitar and singing. Like Vilayvone, he was in high school, and also like Vilayvone, his taste in music was pure unadulterated western-influenced pop.

He had no interests in composing music along the lines of what Mr. Soubanh played on his show. Despite the fact that Mr. Soubanh and Mr. Chaomaly's lectures focused on a different form of Lao musical composition, Phonpaseuth stuck steadfastly to his chosen style: *paeng sa ting* (ເພງສະຕິງ). Phonpaseuth drew on his youthful experiences as a high school student who had grown up in Vientiane to compose toe-tapping songs of young love, with catchy repeating choruses. His style of play drew around him other young students who were also fans of *paeng sa ting*.

#### **Somsavat, a soldier songwriter:**

Originally from the south of Lao PDR, Somsavat was a low ranking soldier in the Lao People's Army stationed at an army base northwest of the capital city. He spoke of the Sinxay Pen's Camp as a rare educational opportunity, affording ordinary people the chance to study from the country's great contemporary writers. Already married and in his late twenties Somsavat came across as being considerably older than all but two of the other students. Working in a musical genre popular with Mr. Soubanh and Mr. Chaomaly, Somsavat was a song writer with a notable knack for creating forced rhymes – if the vocabulary he wanted in a certain spot didn't fit the poetic pattern that he had created, Somsavat wouldn't shy away from adding a different consonant sound to the end of a word to make it fit.

Joining me and the other older male student (Chanthaboun) for dinner one night after the day's camp activities had concluded he explained that his obvious determination and concerted efforts at interacting directly with the camp instructors during breaks and after instruction was based on a desperation linked to his age: 'I am older, I am not like the younger students here, I won't have another opportunity like this. I need to succeed.' Reviewing my video recordings of the camp activities which included a clip of Somsavat, Mr. Paengan commented that from his perspective Somsavat was one of the most determined students enrolled in the training camp, Somsavat had set goals (specifically that of producing a CD of his own compositions) and was determined to achieve those goals.

#### **Chanthaboun, a musical fruit vendor:**

Chanthaboun was the other male student notably older than the others attending the camp. He was also one of the few students who were both married and a parent. In his early thirties Chanthaboun labored as a fruit vendor, selling fruit from a pushcart in a village just down river from Vientiane. During his daily rounds selling fruit he sang. Sometimes these were songs written by others, sometimes these were songs of his own creation. His neighbor was Mrs. Anoumone, the Vannasin staff member responsible for income and expenditure accounting. Recognizing his talent, she informed him of the camp, he jumped at the opportunity and was one of the first students to enroll. His age and social relations with Mrs. Anoumone meant that he interacted with the lower ranking members of Vannasin's staff as a peer, often spending time with them in Vannasin's front office.

The older students attending the camp while already employed in vocations, such as Somsavat and Chanthaboun approached the course with a fairly constant serious focus and concerted effort that was not always visible among the younger students who joined the camp in the company of their friends. The style of their musical compositions, and

the subjects of their lyrics were also more closely aligned to what Mr. Paengan, Mr. Soubanh and Mr. Chaomaly seemed interested in cultivating.

**Bounmee, NUOL student and aspiring songwriter from southern Lao PDR:**

Bounmee, was a university student entering into his third year of studies at NUOL, like Siha and Thippavanh, Bounmee came to the writer's training program independently without the company of an established cohort of university friends. Bounmee had a fairly singular focus on the subject of songwriting. Like Phonpaseuth, Somsavath and Chanthaboun, Bounmee came to the camp with a collection of drafts of songs he had already composed and was eager to share this body of work with Mr. Soubanh. This focus on songwriting, and apparent disinterest in much of the other subject matter, afforded Bounmee plenty of opportunities (during instructional periods devoted to subjects other than songwriting) to engage in lighthearted attempts at distracting the attention of other students.

**Summing up the students – some generalizations:**

The sampling of student profiles above provides an overview of the range of students drawn to participate in the Sinxay writers' training camp. It was from this student body that the Administrators of the Vannasin unit hoped to produce the next generation of writers creating lyrics, poetry, stories and other text that would support the Ministry and attract an audience of young Lao consumers to the Party's messages. Of the forty-nine students registered for the training camp, most were unmarried students enrolled in either their last years of high school or first years of college.

For the majority of students, the camp activities helped to fill the rainy season semester break with supplementary educational activities. By hosting the camp activities in Vientiane during the university break the Administrators were able to attract students from a number of different provinces. Most of the students came to the camp with a fairly specific interest in writing (e.g. poetry, short story writing, or song writing). Only a handful of the students held full-time employment (e.g. two were bank employees, one was a soldier, one was an elementary school teacher, one was a fruit vendor, and one was an employee of the Lao State Publishing House). These employed writer's training students tended to be older, and they engaged in camp activities with an apparent seriousness, attentiveness to lecturers, and determination that was generally not as visibly evident among the majority of younger Sinxay Pen's Camp students.

**Student inculcation and production - intergenerational tensions visible during lectures and breaks:**

Evident in their actions and interactions, the majority of students entering the camp were eager to jump right into producing written works. The members of the older generation, however, had planned for a period of inculcation prior to students' production and sharing of written work. Tensions between the generations, that is, tensions between the established writers and the students, centering around the products of student labor, gradually became apparent both during the lecture sessions and between lectures soon after the camp opened. These intergenerational tensions became quite visible on a day devoted to lessons on songwriting.

In the following section I describe the intergenerational tensions apparent within the Ministry of Information and Culture's large meeting hall. These tensions became evident in two interrelated forms of social interaction that took place first between lectures and then continued on through the older generation's lectures as the lessons of the day progressed. The first form of interaction between generations involved students attempting to present their written work to members of the older generation during breaks between lectures. The second involved students participating in covert collaborative writing activities during the lectures and lessons delivered by the older generation.

### **Intergenerational tensions apparent through staff and student interactions between lectures:**

The July morning was devoted to lectures on song writing. A considerable portion of the male students<sup>9</sup> who envisioned themselves as singer-songwriters were very eager to share the products of their efforts with others. Their eagerness in sharing their lyrics with the members of the older generation became apparent immediately after Mr. Soubanh's first lecture.

For the first half of the morning lecture session Mr. Soubanh sat behind a table placed front and center in the Ministry's large meeting hall. Wearing a pink and white striped shirt with a red necktie, Mr. Soubanh appeared very formal as he read his prepared talk into a microphone placed on a stand on the table in front of him. His delivery seemed to be very much like how one might deliver an official radio address from an empty studio – words were read from a printed page, delivered into a microphone, with little apparent acknowledgement that a live body of people sat in rows directly in front of him.

The lecture format, in which the older generation verbally delivered information toward a seated mass of young people, did not foster or leave room for students to engage in sharing their work with members of the older generation. The format was designed for top down information dissemination – not a two-way flow of communication. While Mr. Soubanh did eventually create a forum for student songwriters to share their work later in the course, these opportunities were not part of his first period of instruction.

At the conclusion of Mr. Soubanh's lecture, Somsavat, the student/soldier marched to the front of the room with a page of lyrics in hand written in blue ink on an A4 sized piece of paper. His mission was to get Mr. Soubanh to listen to his lyrics and receive advice on how he could break into the Lao recording industry. Bounteum, the jovial student from the National University of Laos' faculty of Education, stood halfway across the room, and upon watching Somsavat approach Mr. Soubanh he too grabbed his stack of lyrics and headed to the front of the room. The pages he held were filled with his own compositions, and he clutched them tightly as he approached Mr. Soubanh. Bounmee, holding his own small red notebook and a stack of additional lyrics written on scraps of paper of varying sizes, also headed to the front of the room. Upon observing Somsavat, Bounteum, Bounmee and others making their moves to surround Mr. Soubanh, a visibly excited group of aspiring songwriters grabbed their own notebooks filled with lyrics and congregated at the front of the hall around a table seeking an audience with Mr. Soubanh.

Mr. Soubanh had been in the process of putting on a windbreaker and gathering his belongings, in a clear attempt to beat a hasty retreat from both the room and the

onslaught of students, but his egress had been blocked by an employee of a recording studio who had shown up unexpectedly for this day of camp. The recording studio employee had registered as a Sinxay Pen's Camp student to attend a single day of camp (in the guise of being a Sinxay Pen's Camp supporter) as a way of entering the Ministry of Information and Culture to gain the requisite permission needed for hosting an international concert in Vientiane. The concert promoter was the first to reach Mr. Soubanh. The promoter's act of soliciting Mr. Soubanh's participation in the concert had prevented Mr. Soubanh's quick departure to lunch, and the exchange of the promoter's business card was the act that enabled Somsavat to first reach Mr. Soubanh and further impede Mr. Soubanh's post-lecture departure.

As more students gathered around, Mr. Soubanh's eagerness to leave became increasingly visible. Clearly flustered by multiple student solicitations, Mr. Soubanh's disinterest in conversing with both the recording studio employee and the students became apparent when he handed the recording studio employee's card to Somsavat and quietly (with a quick glance in the direction of the recording studio employee and at a volume clearly not meant to be heard by the employee) suggested the students talk to and share their lyrics with the recording studio employee. Mr. Soubanh's action was an attempt to mutually engage two encroaching predators<sup>10</sup> (the students and the recording studio employee) in order to bid a retreat from interactions with either. Having initiated this diversion Mr. Soubanh made movements towards the door.

By engaging the students (with whom he did not want to interact) with the recording studio employee (with whom he did not want to interact) Mr. Soubanh should have been able to escape the lecture hall. However, at this point Mr. Soubanh glanced over and noticed that I was continuing to make a video recording of the event. With obvious reluctance, he acquiesced to devoting a minimal amount of his break time to a quick cursory review of the student work. Through a cantankerous delivery of gruff comments he expressed his displeasure in the engagement with the written products of students.

This period between lectures on July 14<sup>th</sup> was one of the first of Mr. Soubanh's multiple public displays of disinterest and disdain for interacting with students and the written products of their labor. The sobering fact that students had already penned lyrics, prior to his lectures on the structures he and other members of the older generation expected in student work, appeared to cause Mr. Soubanh a considerable amount of frustration. Students approached Mr. Soubanh as a gatekeeper who could afford them entry into the community of songwriters who met with the Ministry's approval. As the course progressed, and where meetings with students took place in more relaxed settings outside of the Ministry compound, Mr. Soubanh increasingly fortified himself for such encounters with students, through his consumption of alcohol.

By including alcohol into the equation, the quality, applicability, and coherence of Mr. Soubanh's feedback was eventually inversely related to the amount of time he was willing to spend among the students providing his feedback. His behaviors during the periods when he was simultaneously responsible for instruction and noticeably intoxicated, contributed to the production of a mutual disdain between Mr. Soubanh and a significant portion of the student body. His practice of conversing about student work with a bottle close at hand worked to limit his sustained interactions to a handful of students (i.e. those students for whom drinking with an adult male was socially

permissible). For multiple reasons young women could not run the risk of participating in drinking with Mr. Soubanh in order to solicit his feedback and approval. Not the least of these reasons was that such behavior (i.e. young women drinking socially with men) was the very kind of frowned-upon-behavior that the older generation of authors hoped these young propagandists would work to prevent in Lao society. As a result, Mr. Soubanh's fortification with alcohol effectively excluded all young women from such interactions, resulting in Sinxay Pen's Camp songwriting being a male dominated domain.

The members of the older generation had little incentive to hide their disinterest in the unsolicited products of students labor. While large numbers of students clearly wanted to share their written works, commenting upon student products prior to the completion of the older generation's attempts at inculcation did not appear to be a task relished by any of the instructors. However, compared with Mr. Soubanh the other instructors were subtler and more creative in their methods of avoiding such time consuming interactions with student work.

After the break on July 14<sup>th</sup> the social behaviors of a number of the students (particularly behaviors in proximity to some of those who had earlier gathered around Mr. Soubanh for feedback) were noticeably different. The second lecture of the day was also on the subject of Lao song writing, and Mr. Chaomaly was the member of the older generation responsible for its delivery. While Mr. Chaomaly spoke from behind the table placed front and center, Mr. Soubanh and Mr. Paengan sat together at a table at the front left hand side of the room listening to his presentation. During Mr. Chaomaly's presentation Bounmee, a student who had struggled to get feedback on his lyrics from Mr. Soubanh during the break, and then again at the start of Mr. Chaomaly's lecture, began quietly soliciting feedback from his peers.

#### **Didactic structures and the production of space for student collaboration - intergenerational tensions made visible during lectures:**

The older generation exhibited considerable structured rigidity in their approaches to the instruction for aspiring writers. The vast majority of the older generation of writers' time within the Ministry's large lecture hall was devoted to top-down attempts at mass inculcation of their expectations of the structures for written works. The rigid approach to instruction, however, enabled students opportunities to produce shielded spaces for peer collaborative writing efforts. The social production of collaborative space resulted in cycles of activity, during lecture-time, in which groups of students simultaneously tuned out the older generation's attempts at inculcation and engaged in productive activities with peers.

The dominant style of instruction during training sessions in the Ministry of Information and Culture's large meeting hall was a lecture format in which the instructors (positioned at the front of the room) spoke in the direction of the assembled mass of seated students. At the beginning and conclusion of each day's session the Vannasin staff were careful to make sure that the placement of furniture in the room matched the standard and expected arrangement for the large meeting hall. The room was filled with narrow desk-like tables – designed for two people to sit side by side. Rows, six tables wide were positioned to stretch the width of the room. The tables were placed in pairs, with four wooden chairs behind the pairs of desks facing forward towards the stage. The

pairing of the desks formed three columns that extended the length of the room. The pairing of desks created four narrow walkways running the length of the room from the stage to the rear, two along each of the side walls of the room and two parallel walkways running on either side of the central column of paired desks. This arrangement of desks and chairs was how the room was expected to be found when a department reserved the room, and how the room was expected to be arranged when a department finished with the room. The room received frequent use, and infrequent cleanings. A fine layer of umber Mekong dust covered most horizontal surfaces. The dust was a reliable constant, and the accumulated tracks and trails left in it reflected the lack of rapid or substantial change in use of the room over time.

The row upon row arrangement of audience members facing a front-and-center speaker was a form of social positioning for top-down information dissemination that one saw almost every night on Lao National Television in news reports about government meetings held in various parts of the country. The arrangement of furniture for the audience and speaker in the Ministry's large meeting hall was a component of the rigid didactic structure of the Ministry's meetings in that room, meetings in which officials positioned high in the social hierarchy disseminated information to the assembled lower ranks of Ministry employees.<sup>11</sup>

The students who sat in the first two rows closest to the front of the meeting hall tended to be those most interested in the day's topic. Typically they sat with pens and pencils poised above notebooks ready to jot down kernels of sage wisdom on subjects of writing. Those students further towards the back of the room were shielded from the speakers' view (by the bodies of those who composed the first two rows of students), and were thus able to covertly engage in social and productive activities, such as conversing quietly with the students sitting beside them, and working on their own personal compositions and works-in-progress.

Bounmee was one of the students whose activities were very productive during lecture times. His primary focus was song composition. He labored away at his lyrics, not as a solitary task, but rather during class time he actively worked to draw others into forms of group engagement with his works-in-progress. For example, during Chaomaly's July 14<sup>th</sup> lecture on "The structure/principles of Lao songs," Bounmee sat in the second row back from the front of the room crouched over lyrics inscribed upon a couple of pages torn from his small red notebook. After a few moments of silent work on the lyrics of one of his songs he passed the pages to the male student sitting immediately to his right. His interaction with the other student attracted the attention of Somsanouk, a male university student sitting at the desk directly behind him in the third row. Bounmee's passing of the lyrics to Somsanouk in the third row in-turn captured the attention of two additional students, young women sitting in the fourth row at a desk behind Bounmee and his in-class lyric reviewer. Soon after the Somsanouk returned the lyrics to Bounmee the young women in the fourth row quietly requested that Bounmee pass his work back to them for review. All of this was taking place as Mr. Chaomaly continued his lecture on Lao songwriting.

The two female students were Thippavanh and Noukham, two young women whose body language and whispered conversation with each other indicated they had grown rather disinterested in Mr. Chaomaly's lecture. In quiet voices (as Mr. Chaomaly and Mr. Soubanh explained what they saw as the distinction between "Lao music" and

“Thai music”) Thippavanh and Noukham, discussed Bounmee’s composition. Using a bright pink ballpoint pen Thippavanh made notes directly on Bounmee’s lyrics. After Thippavanh’s edits Noukham passed the pages to the young woman sitting directly to her right. This third young woman sang the lyrics softly, first to herself, then in a whisper to Noukham as she jotted notes onto the page with her pen. The three young women kept their heads slightly lowered as they worked on Bounmee’s composition, keeping themselves shielded from the view of the members of the older generation seated at the front of the room.

After making notes and suggested changes, Noukham passed the composition to Thippavanh, Thippavanh passed the page to Somsanouk who quietly sang through a few verses, then passed the work to Bounmee. With the collaboratively edited composition in hand Bounmee passed a second work back through the rows of his peers. Thippavanh adjusted her body so other students blocked Mr. Chaomaly’s view of her, and silently mouthed a few comments to Bounmee from her seat four rows back. As the page of lyrics circulated back to Bounmee, he read the notations made by his collaborators, and adjusted his work, and then they continued the process of circulating the text, singing portions of it in whispers amongst themselves, and providing feedback. Twice Bounmee quietly rose from his seat to move back to the empty chair next to Somsanouk in the third row so that they could all converse. Passing the handwritten lyrics among the members of this peer-group, and collective feedback from the members of this group occurred in parallel with (that is, parallel in general subject and parallel in time), yet peripheral to, the tuned-out lecture.

The students organized the topography in spite of, but on, the elder generation’s terrain. The visibly attentive students in the first row shielded the creative activities of Bounmee and his collaborators from the view of Mr. Chaomaly, Mr. Paengan, and Mr. Soubanh. The standard didactic positioning of the instructor and students within the meeting hall, and the visible performance of attentiveness of the shielding wall of students sitting in close proximity to the members of the older generation charged with inculcation, enabled the tuning out of the lecture and the relaxed peer-collaborative creativity a short distance away from the lecturer and members of the older generation of writers. After a period of peer collaborative work, Bounmee exhibited considerable audacity, rising from his seat to quietly deliver his lyrics to Mr. Soubanh at the front of the room, with the request that Mr. Soubanh look over his peer-edited lyrics while Mr. Chaomaly continued his lecture.

Bounmee and his collaborators were far from the only students whose attention drifted away from the designated speaker’s structured presentation. The standard rigid arrangement of furniture in the Ministry’s large lecture hall, combined with the fact that all students were expected to attend every lecture (whether the subject matter was of particular interest to them or not) helped to establish the barrier of student bodies needed for the students to simultaneously tune out the words of the speaker and engage in covert collaborative productive writing activities. The students self-selected where they would sit during the course, and as a result their seating locations changed both between days and between lectures. Those most interested in the subject presented by a given speaker, those most interested in pursuing trajectories of possible employment with the Ministry, and those who engaged in the performance of attentiveness as a form of sycophantism, generally strived to sit as close to the front as possible during that speaker’s lecture, while

those least interested (i.e. least interested in a particular subject or social relations with a particular speaker) tended to sit further back in the room.

The students' creative peer-collaborative disengagements with the older generation's attempts at inculcation during lectures constituted a visible (i.e. visible to the students but shielded from view of the instructors) manifestation of the tension existing between the generations. The students (i.e. those seeking to become members of the community of practice of writers for the Ministry) made concerted efforts to conceal such disengagements from the view of members of the older generation. In contrast, those members of the older generation (i.e. those who had little interest in engaging directly with the pre-inculcation written work of students) had little incentive to conceal their disinterest.

The older generation's need for the labor of young aspiring writers did not necessarily represent an earnest interest in the creative products of the young people enrolled as students in the training camp. Rather the interest in the students and their labor was reflective of the older generation's self-interest, a vested interest in the adaptive-perpetuation of the social body of writers under the Party and the institutions of the single-Party State. The break-time interactions between Mr. Soubanh and the young aspiring songwriters on July 14<sup>th</sup> constituted an important junction in the process of inculcation – a junction where a number of young writers' creative aspirations collided with the reality of the gate-keeper's disinterest in their creative products.

### **Conclusion:**

The Sinxay Writer's Training Camp provides an ideal setting within which we are able to explore the social practices of adaptive-perpetuation. The training camp itself arose from the older generation of writers recognizing that without an influx of new writers their practice and resulting social positions in Lao society would be threatened; those writing in support of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party recognized that they needed a new generation of writers to enter into the practices of writing in support of the single-Party State and its institutions. Further, the older generation of writers recognized that the nature of their practice resulted in their need to draw the new body of practitioners from outside the established procedures of incorporating the labor of youth into the practice of supporting the single-Party State and its institutions.

The older generation of propagandists created the Sinxay Writer's Training Camp as an attempt at the mass inculcation of those young people who would eventually take over the practices of propaganda production. The older generation hoped that this youthful body of trained writers would not only labor to perpetuate the practices of writing for the Party and its institutions, but also constitute a communicative link between the Party, its institutions, and young people within the borders of the State, contributing to the shaping of behavior of the population. The two generations (1. the established writers legitimately engaged in ongoing labor for the Party, and 2. the aspiring writers from outside the established social networks of the older generation) intersected through a) interests in a common form of labor: writing, b) through the common organizational form of the "camp." Tensions between the generations were given specific form and were expressed through the practices of inculcation, as the older generation attempted to govern products of the aspiring practitioners, and the younger generation sought opportunities to gain feedback on the products of their artistic endeavors. As a result of

the intergenerational tension, the members of the younger generation produced a social space for parallel movements, a space for productive peer-collaborative activities disengaged from the attempts at mass inculcation foisted upon them by the members of the older generation.

In the next chapter I introduce a fundamental source of tension between the two generations: the two do not share the same lived experience around and through which the older generation of practice have both produced the practice, and produced their social identity. As a result, from the perspective of the older generation, inculcation becomes an act of re-membering the organization – that is both bringing in young people while trying to simultaneously infuse a larger social memory into their practice/social identity as practitioners/and products. This sets the grounds for the production of youthful forms of rebellion and the production of social spaces where young people can release built up tensions through playfully and creatively prodding and poking fun of aspects of the social identity that the members of the older generation present as worthy of reverence.

---

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> In line with regulations regarding assembly in Lao P.D.R. “Clubs” or “Associations” (ສະມາຄົມ) exist under the aegis and authorization of a relevant Lao government institution. For example, the Lao Writer’s Association falls under the responsibility of the Ministry of Information and Culture under the Publishing and Libraries Department; the Lao Disabled People’s Association falls under the aegis of the Veterans Affairs Department of the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare; and The Lao Handicraft Association’s by-laws were approved under the Ministry of Commerce. It is these government ministries that authorize the members of these organizations to associate and assemble for specific purposes that fall under the aegis of the authority granting ministries.

<sup>2</sup> (Xayxana 2006)

<sup>3</sup> (Xayxana 2006)

<sup>4</sup> (Xayxana 2006)

<sup>5</sup> Reiterating a point made in more detail in a footnote in the previous chapter, Dara Kanalya is the daughter of Maha Sila Virivong a man recognized for his role in shaping Lao nationalism and the written Lao language during the period of late French Colonialism under Vichy France. Maha Sila worked as the assistant to Prince Phetsarath (the man credited with unifying the geographical territory into a single Kingdom of Laos at the time of Japan’s surrender) during the period of the rise of Lao Nationalistic propaganda. Prior to the revolution Maha Sila Viravong and his two daughters published an early Lao literary and culture magazine.

<sup>6</sup> e.g. Souvanthone Bouphanouvong

<sup>7</sup> The quotes printed here are all transcribed from video recordings from the training camp. The original spoken language was Lao, and I (with the invaluable assistance of Dalounny Phonsouny) transcribed and translated these passages into English.

<sup>8</sup> In order to provide a little more detail, here are figures related to the ongoing growth of the camp and the registration fees over time. The inaugural Sinxay Pens’ Camp hosted forty-nine (49) students. Four years later, the summer of 2010 Sinxay Pens’ Camp

---

student body was composed of one hundred and ninety (190) students. The tuition fee charged has increased over time. The initial fee was about 35.000 kip per student (approximately \$3.60 US at the exchange rate of the time), in 2007 the fee was about 40.000 kip (about \$4.25 at the exchange rate of 2007), in 2008 the fee was about 45.000 kip (about \$5.39 at the 2008 exchange rate), and in 2010 the tuition fee was 45.000 kip (about \$5.52 at the exchange rate of August 2010). The 2010 registration fee broke down with 20.000 kip constituting the registration fee (about \$2.50), and 25.000 kip (about \$3.00) constituting the cost of the t-shirt.

To put these figures in perspective, in 2010 the United Nations Development Program indicated that Lao civil-servant monthly salaries ranged between \$40 and \$120 U.S. (UNDP 2010 p.8). With this in mind one can understand that a \$5.25 camp fee in 2010 was a significant expense for most participants.

<sup>9</sup> Not once during the course of the Pen's Camp did a female student stand to share/perform her lyrics in front of the entire class. It was only the male aspiring songwriters who eagerly sought opportunities to perform their work in front of the assembled student body.

<sup>10</sup> "Leo" the concert promoter, was a rather nefarious character who associated with Ajaan Phumjai, and was at the time working with Ajaan Phoumjai to organize a concert "for the poor." I used the term "predator" here as in my field notes I described Leo's behavior as being similar to that of a shark. Present both this day and during periods of the model training, Leo circled the large meeting hall looking for the most socially isolated young women to corner in conversation. In my notes I described his attire as being similar to that of a business traveler. Months after the Sinxay Pen's Camp we learned that he was arrested in Bangkok, caught stealing luggage from the international terminal at the airport. The next time I saw him in Vientiane, he looked quite disheveled, the publicity surrounding his arrest had clearly resulted in a fall from grace, and I made note that he was carrying a plastic bag of mobile phones (knowing his past I suspected that the phones, like the computer, cameras, clothes, etc were probably stolen from Bangkok bound business traveler luggage) apparently trying to hawk the phones to the owner of the mobile phone/internet shop where we awkwardly ran into each other. As I was writing chapter eight a friend in Bangkok sent me yet another article about Leo, this time the article was about his arrest for kidnap, rape and blackmail. I mention Leo to cast a light on the odd way in which the practices of transitioning to a "market-based economy" opens doorways for associations (through *viek peeset* and otherwise) with characters who in many ways epitomize the social behaviors (akin to the behaviors of the main character in the second film discussed in the next chapter) the Ministry's propaganda is aimed at critiquing and curtailing.

<sup>11</sup> On the second floor of the Ministry was a smaller meeting hall located just outside the offices of the Ministry's cabinet and the office of the Minister. This second meeting hall was a considerably smaller and more intimate setting, with chairs (two rows deep) arranged around a large rectangular central table. Higher-ranking Ministry officials were able to congregate around the table for discussions in this second meeting hall with the most senior member of the social hierarchy sitting at a commanding end of the rectangular table.

---

This second meeting hall was the setting where the promotion ceremony for Mr. Paengan was held when he was promoted from being Director of Vannasin Magazine to the position of Deputy Director of the Department of Mass Culture. As Deputy Director of Mass Culture Mr. Paenang used the room for organizational meetings related to his *viek peeset*, such as the planning of cultural video projects for ASEAN cultural exchanges.

## Chapter 6

### **Re-membering a social body – practices of inculcating memory in the act of incorporating youth into the labor of propaganda production for a single-Party State**

#### **Introduction:**

Transformations of the political-economy of the State resulted in the need to incorporate the labor of young people who come from outside the established social relations of the older generation of practitioners. The differential in lived experience between the insider practitioners of the older generation, and the outsider younger generation of aspiring practitioners, is one factor at the roots of the older generation's perceived threats of continuity and displacement. In the processes of incorporation of youth the challenge for the older generation becomes answering the questions: How does one inculcate the younger generation in the aspects of social relations that the older generation developed over time through their shared lived experiences? How does the older generation inculcate aspects of the social memory of the organization the older generation deem to be requisite knowledge for those engaged in the labor of the institution?

Answering these questions is especially important when the labor of the institution is the production of propaganda in support of a single-Party State. In the context of the single-Party State the older generation of propagandists constitute (i.e. comprise, are, and produce) the product of their labor; their labor is the production of their position of political rule within the State, the production of their dominant position within the national political-economy. The inculcation of a history of the social organization and the situation of the labor of the social body into this history is a key component of the older generation's efforts to mitigate the threats of social transformation. The older generation's labor in mitigating displacement entails an inculcation of a memory of the lived experience shared by the older generation. "Memory" must be understood here as the object of the labor of inculcation, it must not be misinterpreted as being entirely factual. An important aspect of inculcation becomes the presentation and re-presentation of the history of the social organization (the mythologized roots of the social body) and its labor, the social memory of the lived experiences of the practitioners. The capacity to remember becomes a focal point in the older generation's practices of re-membering (i.e. replenishing the social body of the organization through the incorporation of outsiders into the ongoing social practices of the group).

In this chapter I focus upon the social practices of inculcating a social memory in the act of re-membering the body of propagandists writing for the Vannasin Unit of the Lao Ministry of Information and Culture. There is a major element of discontinuity inherent in the act of bring a group of young writers into the ongoing practices of writing within the Ministry of Information and Culture. In the Lao language this factor of discontinuity might best be described as a difference in "life capital" (ທຶນຮອນຊີວິດ). Mr. Paengan uses the term "life capital" to refer to the lived experiences that shape one's being, and upon which one draws for inspiring one's decisions, and inspiring one's writing.

Born prior to the revolution, Mr. Paengan, Mr. Dee, and the others actively involved in the Ministry's production of literary works have as part of their lived experience the rise of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party and the 1975 revolution. As such, the rise of the Party, the revolution, and their personal involvement in the Party through the Ministry constitutes fundamental components of their "life capital."

In contrast, all but a few of the Sinxay Pen's Camp students<sup>1</sup> were born long after the revolution, and grew up during the period of Lao PDR's transition to "the New Economic Mechanism."<sup>2</sup> The "life capital" differential that exists between generations is at the roots of a fundamental tension inherent in the practice of bringing new young authors into the information and culture institution of the People's Revolutionary Party.

On one hand, the Party needs young writers joining the Ministry of Information and Culture in order to contribute to the *continuity* of labor contributing to the Party's goals in the areas of information and culture (i.e. propaganda production). On the other hand, those engaged in the ongoing labor are faced with the perceived threats of *displacement*<sup>3</sup> inherent in bringing in new-comers who do not share the same "life capital" as those long employed in support of the Party.

Here I examine a central part of the Sinxay Pen's Camp training: field trips. Field trips were the primary means through which those employed by the Ministry labored to inculcate students with the requisite "life capital" for social participation as a writer within the Ministry of Information and Culture. Mr. Paengan described the goal of the trips to the Lao National Museum, the National Film Archive and Video Center, and the Lao People's Army Museum as:

Providing the students with inspiration, the life capital (ຫີນຮອນຊີວິດ), imagination, to develop ideas. The things that they witness and understand are their texts and will become part of their writing. It will come through the tip of their pens, for society and their friends to read, or to share with others about what they think.

The shared lived experience of the revolution and service to the Party constitute both a factor in the social cohesion (produced through sharing tales of camaraderie in a common struggle) and a source of material for the considerably older administrators of the Sinxay Pen's Camp. This commonality of life capital flows through the tips of their pens for society to read in the Ministry's publications. The aim of the field trips was to inculcate the young writers in aspects of the life capital and potential subject matter of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party members.

I need to stress, however, that Mr. Paengan never pushed the students to write about what they experienced and saw in the museums and archive – he never expressed directly to the young people how they were to be inspired by the museum and archive visits, or how their experiences and insights from the visits were to flow through their pens. The quote above was a statement he made in reply to one of my interview questions regarding the purpose of the field trips. In his relations with the students his goal for the trips was an unstated goal. The camp was presented to the students as a writer's training, not a propagandists training. Stating the goal of the museum visits up front would have likely come across as a bit of a heavy-handed push. Even as it stood, the Party-line in the visits came across as a bit overpowering and by the end of the visits

we were seeing some students re-narrating the Party narrative in humorous irreverence. However, had the goal of the trips been more clearly articulated I have the strong feeling we would have seen some students (particularly those with goals of employment in the Lao Ministry of Information and Culture) making concerted efforts to integrate the content from the exhibits into their writing. I also suspect that we might have had to listen to far fewer student songs about unrequited love and mobile telephone problems.

Through the presentation of these three field trips I demonstrate how in the context of producing the next generation of propagandists for the Lao Ministry of Information and Culture, the labor of re-membering involved:

- Efforts at inculcating a memory of the unilinear history and evolutionary rise to power of the contemporary Lao political elite.
- Efforts at inculcating a conception of the just and legitimate rule of the contemporary political elite.
- Efforts at inculcating the importance of a tripartite loyalty:
  - Loyalty to one's labor
  - Loyalty to one's family
  - Loyalty to the Party
- Efforts at inculcating a teleological conception of history of the geographical region encompassed within the contemporary borders of the State via framing the presentation of history backwards through a lens of the Lao Peoples Revolutionary Party and the contemporary borders of the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

In concluding the descriptions of each museum visit I present a brief description of the parallel movements of students during the guided tour. My purpose in doing so is to highlight the fact that the young students targeted for inculcation engaged in acts of autonomy and creative exploration as they moved through the exhibit space parallel to the guided tour. Through the parallel movements the students produced space for levity, prohibited types of exploration, and creative and entertaining engagements in re-narrating of displays.

My aim in this chapter is to provide the reader with a considerable amount of detail (through text and still images) regarding the practices of re-membering involved in the incorporation of the next generation of Lao propagandists. The presentation of the two films at the National Film Archive and Video Center was fundamentally different than any of the other activities of inculcation – the film presentation constituted subjecting the aspiring writers to the very type of message they were expected to produce once incorporated into the labor for the Ministry of Information and Culture. As such I provide a very detailed description of both the films – with the understanding that the video productions constitute both tools for inculcation and exemplars of the products writers for the Party and its institutions are expected to produce.

The efforts of inculcating “life capital” in the act of re-membering the social body of Lao writers began with a trip to the Lao National Museum described below.

### **The Lao National Museum - guiding students through the evolution of the single-Party State:**

The activities in the afternoon of the third day of camp made the day a bit more special and entertaining for Tukta than most. Tukta is Mr. Dee's eight-year-old daughter, and on that day she was able to accompany her father, Mr. Paengan's twenty-year-old daughter, and thirty-four students on a guided tour of the National Museum. Like Vannasin, the National Museum operates under the aegis of the Ministry of Information and Culture. By any route the National Museum is at most three blocks from the MIC compound. It is a short distance, but the black Sinxay Pens Camp T-shirts absorbed a considerable amount of the sun's heat during the walk, making the journey feel much more arduous than it would have been on an overcast day. The dark cool interior of the Museum's colonial era building was a welcome relief from the sun.

The Museum staff appeared prepared for the arrival of the students. Mr. Paengan's daughter introduced herself to the museum staff, as did Mr. Dee. Mr. Dee, however, stood back to allow Mr. Paengan's daughter the experience of leading a Ministry activity. For Mr. Paengan's daughter her role in organizing this trip and communicating with the museum staff constituted an aspect of her increasing participation in the administrative work of the Ministry; her participation was part of her trajectory into labor for the Ministry along the filial-kinship pathway blazed by her father. After the students read the list of rules posted on the wall in front of the museum and placed their backpacks and other prohibited belongings in lockers, a female docent gathered the group in front of the first exhibit, a large plaster relief map of the Lao PDR.



Figure 6.1: Museum guide (center) presenting the features depicted on a large plaster bas-relief map of the nation of Lao P.D.R.

The students stood in a large semicircle around the guide facing the display. Using a long thin wooden dowel as a pointer, the docent oriented the students to the

geographic features represented upon the map within the borders of contemporary Lao PDR. “The Lao country has mountains, forests . . .” she slowly moved her pointer down the map describing its features from the north to the south. She used the pointer to indicate major temples in Luang Phabang, Vientiane, Savanakhet, and Champasak. The factual, rather non-expressive, tone and the tempo with which she delivered the list of map features indicated that her narrative was well ingrained in her memory through countless recitations, and that her guiding of these aspiring writers was far from the first time she had led a group of students through the exhibit space and the presentation of the national imaginary with the Party at its helm.

As she pointed to areas on the map and recited matching key words such as “forestry” and “elephants” the students appeared attentive. The two Buddhist novices stood in the front row of the semicircle, and like many of the other students they diligently took notes on her commentary. The student’s notes were, for the most part, lists of information the guide recited: elevations, numbers of square kilometers, etc. Khamlah, a National University of Laos Faculty of Education student from Xieng Kwang province, was a member of the cohort that included Bounteum and Vatsana. Though visibly Khamlah was quite attentive, she was not taking notes; rather she stood a few feet away from the docent, holding her mobile phone in her outstretched right hand, digitally recording the docents every word. According to Vatsana, the phone was a gift from one of Khamlah’s “many male admirers.” Khamlah blushed and giggled as her friend said this, seemingly confirming Vatsana’s claim.

As the docent guided the group on to the next display (a dinosaur display) she picked up a megaphone. The bulk of the display is a long mural in which multiple forms of dinosaur peacefully co-inhabit a very densely populated plain. Standing in the narrow hall in front of the mural, with her voice amplified through the megaphone, the docent ran through a list of guidelines for the students to follow; “. . . don’t touch or feel the objects in the museum it could harm the objects. If you have questions you can ask. . .” (see figure 6.2). Even in the largest of the museum’s rooms, the megaphone enabled the guide to provide a narration for the students’ visit at a volume that was difficult to ignore.



Figure 6.2: The museum guide in front of the museum's Mesozoic Era display uses a megaphone to instruct the students in expected museum behavior.

After explaining the rules, the guide directed the group into one of the smallest display rooms in the museum. The room's most noticeable feature stood behind a glass window at the far end, a sculpted diorama depicting scaled-down cave dwellers within a cave. The diorama, however, is not the most significant feature in the docent's lecture. Rather, the docent directed the group's attention to a relatively small painting on a sidewall, which provides an image of a single line of evolution from *Homo erectus* to *Homo sapiens*.



Figure 6.3: Museum guide standing before a painting depicting evolutionary development culminating in Homo sapiens, explaining that the capacity to remember is the fundamental feature distinguishing Homo sapiens from all previous life forms.

Standing beside the depiction of the evolution of humans, the guide used a laser pointer to direct the students' attention to the image:

This tells about the development of humans from a million years ago. The figures on the top level here are the Homo erectus. These beings had brains like humans but the brains only had two lobes. This group of beings had no capacity to remember. The beings on the bottom level [of the diagram] are what we refer to as "Homo sapiens."

Reinforcing the idea that those least developed had "no capacity to remember," the guide used the laser to highlight the last of the six beings on the lower row (i.e. the highest end of the evolution depicted in the painting) and said, "This one has a greater capacity to remember, because this animal is developed." Here, after situating the nation geographically (using the map in the first room), the guide presented the students with a concept that was central to their visit: *the capacity to remember (ຈື່ຈຳ) is the indicator of "development" (ການພັດທະນາ)*. This is the conceptual springboard from which the tour of the museum is launched, and provided the ideological trajectory for the remainder of the visit.

Like the painting the tour through the museum's displays, and the docent's accompanying narration, followed a simplistic evolutionary structure, presenting a geo-political evolution that culminates in the single party rule by the Lao People's

Revolutionary Party over the geographically bound region of Lao PDR. The map depicting the contemporary geographical boundaries of the nation provided the geographical frame within which this evolution was explored. The room with the cave diorama depicts the earliest inhabitants of what is present day Lao PDR soon after they have attained their upright posture and the ability to stand on their own. Progressing forward from this room the students moved forward through representations of a sequential social existence, the students were essentially guided across time while the guide's narration and the displays maintained the geographical frame of the present day borders of contemporary Lao PDR.

**Preambling through the second floor:**

After touring through the first floor's archeological artifacts of the early inhabitants of present day Lao PDR, the students climbed a curved staircase to the second floor where most of the displays represent a lineage of reigns, and struggles against foreign aggressors. At the top of the staircase the students filed through a black curtain into the second floor's first display area. The space is a segmented portion of a long narrow colonial era hallway that was converted into a room with artifacts, photos, and written descriptions representing the unity of ethnic diversity within the contemporary borders of Lao PDR. The space was titled "Ethnic Diversity in the Lao PDR Many Peoples, One Nation."



Figure 6.4: Students examine the displays in the exhibit titled: "Ethnic Diversity in the Lao PDR Many Peoples, One Nation."

There is only one entrance to this narrow room, and the students slowly milled about the displays as the guide, standing in a tired pose (leaning with her elbows resting upon the top of a display case and the megaphone to her mouth), provided a brief explanation of the artifacts on display. Introducing the display, the guide stated that

ethnic groups have differing “traditional” [ວິນັດຂອງປະເພນີ] spiritual practices and languages, and then she launched a list of statements related to what one passes as one walked towards the far end of the display space:

The highland Lao or Hmong embroider . . .  
[Displays] on this side of the room are about the Hmong or Yeo dyeing. . .  
The Hmong or the Yeo weave silk . . .  
Next to this is about the traditions of the mid-elevation Lao. When they have festivals they drink rice whisky from a jar . . .  
The Lowland Lao traditions are the *bacci soukhuan*,<sup>4</sup> right? In front of you is a house from the era of Fa Ngum. Fa Ngum said, “A house has a platform, a garden has posts, eat sticky rice dipped in fermented fish sauce. Listen to the Lao *khane*<sup>5</sup> music. That is Lao.

The explanations of the artifacts on display and related social practices were cursory. The narration of the display (and the guide’s attributing of the quote to Fa Ngum) was a transition point in the tour. This was a transition from archeological evidence of a lineage of habitation and cultural evolution (the first floor of displays) to displays that extend the evolutionary theme into the realm of a different sort of presentation of evolution and lineage: the guided tour through the second floor presented an lineage of political leadership and the evolution of political rule over those inhabiting the geographical realm framed by the initial map (i.e. the geographical realm framed by the map at the start of the tour, the frame of the contemporary nation of Lao PDR).

When we look back to the top of the staircase, to the point where the students walked into the “Ethnic Diversity in the Lao PDR Many Peoples, One Nation” display, we must understand that the students were essentially being guided into a narrated display of the preamble of the Lao constitution. The layout of the entire second floor, and the final display spaces that conclude the exhibit down a different staircase on the first floor, follow the structure and present subject matter in parallel with the preamble. The “Ethnic Diversity in the Lao PDR Many Peoples, One Nation” is a material-object representation of the first line of the preamble.

We can understand the display best when we view the guide’s movements and presentation in parallel with the text of the preamble. The first three paragraphs of the constitution of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic read as follows:

**Preamble to the Lao Constitution:**

The multi-ethnic Lao people have existed and developed on this beloved land for thousands of years. Starting from the middle of the 14th century, during the time of Chao Fa Ngum, our ancestors founded the unified Lane Xang country and built it into a prosperous land. Since the 18th century, the Lao land has been repeatedly threatened and invaded by outside powers. Our people enhanced the heroic and unyielding traditions of their ancestors and continually and persistently fought to gain independence and freedom.

Since the 1930’s, under the correct leadership of the former Indochinese Communist Party and the present Lao People’s Revolutionary

Party, the multiethnic Lao people have carried out difficult and arduous struggles full of great sacrifices until they managed to crush the yokes of domination and oppression of the colonial and feudal regimes, completely liberate the country and establish the Lao People's Democratic Republic on 2 December 1975, thus opening a new era – an era of genuine independence for the country and freedom for the people.

During [the years] since the country has been liberated, our people have together been implementing the two strategic tasks of defending and building the country, especially the undertaking of reforms in order to mobilise [sic] the resources within the nation to preserve the people's democratic regime and create conditions to move towards socialism.<sup>6</sup>

Fa Ngum, mentioned in the second line of the preamble, was a fourteenth century figure who in Lao PDR seems to be increasingly revered and often mythologized.<sup>7</sup> He is credited with bringing Buddhism to the area,<sup>8</sup> and the unification of the populace of the geographical region that constitutes much of present day Lao PDR.<sup>9</sup> His story is commonly deployed as a lesson to instill patriotism.<sup>10</sup> Fa Ngum's reign plays an important role in the preamble to the Lao constitution, as the ruler under whom the multi-ethnic people of the region would experience unification, a step towards what would eventually become a “democratic regime” moving towards socialism.

The era of Fa Ngum's reign and his consolidation of “ancient Lao townships” in the 14<sup>th</sup> century to form the kingdom of Lan Xang is invoked by the leaders of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party as the beginning point of “the deep patriotism, heroism, and determination of the Lao nation,” the first formative step in an evolutionary path that led to the protective rule of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party over the “multi-ethnic Lao people.”<sup>11</sup>

A statue of Fa Ngum (i.e. an artists imaginative interpretation of how the mythologized Fa Ngum might have appeared) is the focal point of the display space immediately following the “Ethnic Diversity in the Lao PDR Many Peoples, One Nation” display. In front of the statue of Fa Ngum the guide's narration of the tour began to focus more pronouncedly on geopolitics. The story of Fa Ngum's unification of the populous of the region and the justness of his rule constituted a seminal narrative for the remainder of the displays on the tour. That is, through presenting the tale of Fa Ngum, the guide established: 1) “Lao” as a geopolitical entity, and 2) Fa Ngum as a narrative figure representing justness and legitimacy of rule, against whom the rule of subsequent others could be compared and contrasted. Importantly the presentation of Fa Ngum also provided an anchor for the guide to develop the narration of a political lineage, a lineage that included Fa Ngum as the just and righteous starting point, and the Party as the just and righteous contemporary end. The guide was literally walking the students through the historical-political narrative these young people were expected to adapt and perpetuate through their own writing as participants in the community of practice of propagandists for the single-Party State.



Figure 6.5: Guide standing in front of a statue of Fa Ngum as she tells describes to the students how he united the multi-ethnic population to form the Lan Xang kingdom.

From the Fa Ngum exhibit the guide directed the students through displays that paralleled the remainder of the preamble. In subsequent rooms they were escorted past images and briefly told of moments in the rise of resistance to oppression, and the formation of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, and, as the preamble states, the "difficult and arduous struggles full of great sacrifices until they managed to crush the yokes of domination and oppression of the colonial and feudal regimes."

Where there were gaps in the continuity of the story, or where there were important points not captured by photographs or represented with material objects, artists renditions of events were deployed. Hung high on the wall in the room displaying French colonial occupation was a large painting depicting a French soldier beating a Lao woman with the butt of a rifle while another soldier tossed a baby down a well. Just as she did with photographs, statues, and material artifacts, the guide wove descriptions of the events these artistic interpretations purported to represent into the narrative of the current Party's rise to power. With words she imbued the artist's depictions with smells, actions, horror, honor and heroes. Standing in front of this canvas the guide provided a vivid description animating the French imperialist occupation:

The smell of blood from the dead bodies permeated the area. During the fighting at this time Souphanouvong was hurt, strafing from an aircraft broke his ribs. It was horrible, the French took the Lao people to clean up the bodies of our own people as well as their own.

Gesturing to the painting the guide indicated that her words described the location that was illustrated by the artist. Though he is not depicted in the artist's rendering, the narrator's words add the revolutionary leader Souphanouvong to the scene. While

different nationalists took different paths in seeking an end to French colonial rule during and after World War II, Souphanouvong, who chose the path of seeking support from the Indochinese Communist Party in Vietnam, is present in the narration and the others are omitted. In the guide's narration of events Souphanouvong emerges as if he was almost alone in his struggle. Souphanouvong, so positioned, arises in the narrative of the museum tour as an injured hero, valiantly fighting against these horrors, struggling against the horrific French colonial oppression.



Figure 6.6: Guide narrating a tale of the brutalities of French colonialism as students view an artist's rendition of such brutalities.

After explaining the horrors of occupation and the sacrifices of Souphanouvong, the guide directed the students' attention to photographs showing a man whom western authors refer to as King Sisavangvong.<sup>12</sup> Noticeably, the guide did not refer to Sisavangvong as "King." Rather, she simply referred to him as "Sisavangvong," and her narration indicated that his rule over the people of the Lao nation was neither just nor legitimate.<sup>13</sup> The guide moved to stand in front of portraits of Marx and Lenin, and the Lao revolutionary leader Kaysone Phomvihane. Kaysone emerged in her narration as the antithesis of Sisavangvong as she continued to explain the rise of the Lao resistance to colonialism. This is where she transitioned her narration into the subject of American imperialism, explaining to the students that after the French departed from the region, "Lao became a new colony of imperialist America."



Figure 6.7: Students observing a display of Marx and Lenin while the guide describes the evolving resistance to American imperialism.

Referring back to the successful overthrow of the French, by the revolutionary armies of the region the guide stated:

They won in 1954 in the three countries of Indochina, Lao, Vietnam, Cambodia. But the American imperialists interfered and inserted themselves [ແຊກແຊງ] into the war of Indochina. America forced its hand into the war of Indochina, America jumped in to fill the void left by the departing French. Because they wanted Lao to become a new colony of theirs, and to be placed in SEATO [South East Asian Treaty Organization] in 1954 . . . .

Gesturing to a photo of Sisivangvong she added, “This is Sisavangvong, an accomplice [ສົມຮູ້ຮວມຄິດ] of imperialist America.”

Hung high on a red curtain the portraits of Marx and Lenin gaze into this, a room lined with photos depicting the leaders of the early evolutionary stages of Lao resistance to American imperialism. At first glance the images of Marx and Lenin occupy a significant position in the room – the images are placed higher than the surrounding images, and the red curtain seemingly sets them apart from the neighboring displays. However, Marx and Lenin, their ideologies, and how these ideologies may have or may not have influenced the Lao revolutionary heroes is not spelled out or explained in the guide’s narration. The images appear to be a holdover from an earlier era of the Museum. With the transition from the “centrally planned system” to the “market-based economy” it is not surprising that their ideologies do not constitute a significant feature in the guide’s narration of the evolutionary build-up to contemporary single-Party rule.

Reflecting back to Mr. Paengan’s explanation of the purpose of the museum visit, we can see that Marx and Lenin are not expected to flow through the tips of the students’ pens.

Following the guide into the next room the students were led to a corner where one of the converging walls displayed the images of those who collaborated with “the American imperialists,” and the other converging wall was hung with photos of the resulting atrocities. Megaphone to her mouth, the guide explained: “Phoumi Nosavan [an American backed military leader] is the one who brought the army to start the war.” And using her laser pointer to focus attention on objects in a photograph she told the students: “These are weapons people brought with them from their military bases to come wage the war in Lao.” She turned to point to a group of weapons on a low platform in the corner, “These are the same.”



Figure 6.8: Standing next to a sampling of weapons the guide explains that these are the weapons the “American imperialists” supplied to their “lackey tools.”

Pointing at photos of different people who were either severely injured or killed by the US bombing she said, “These are the unfortunate people and things upon which America dropped the bombs they brought.” She gestured above her right shoulder to a photo of about 10 men, many in military fatigues. The men in the photo stand looking down upon two bandaged and bound men on the ground. The guide narrated the photograph: “Vang Pao, the lackey tool [ລູກແຫລ່ງຕີນມື] of imperialist America, squeezed down upon, killed, oppressed and tormented the ordinary citizenry. This is the populace that received maltreatment.” Moving her hand downwards to gesture at a photograph of highland children and old men she continued, “These are highland Lao, aged ten to sixty, forcibly conscripted to die as the substitutes for others in the battlefield.”



Figure 6.9: A student uses a pen to indicate to others which figure in a photo is Vang Pao, “the lackey tool of imperialist America.”

Student’s questions elicited additional details regarding the photo. As the guide began to move away from the wall and toward the next display, Khamlah politely asked, “Teacher, who is Vang Pao?” The guide raised her hand and pointed to the smiling figure dressed in fatigues in the middle of the photograph. Another student asked, “Has he died already?” “Not yet,” the guide explains, “he is still alive. He is in another country. He is afraid to come back.” Most of the students were still peering at the photograph as the guide walked through the crowd towards the next exhibit. As the guide passed, Khamlah asked, “Is he Lao?” To which the guide replied “Hmong ethnicity.” The guide’s responses were short and direct. Despite what she told them at the beginning of the tour, questioning the guide was clearly not a particularly welcomed activity. The guide made her way through the students to a large diorama built into a different wall.

After an explanation of the display depicting the heroes of the revolution, the students were guided to the final display rooms downstairs on the first floor of the museum. The displays in these rooms depict the post-revolutionary productive capacity of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic in areas such as pharmaceutical production, natural resource extraction, and hydropower. As the students exited the final display room, the guide handed each a twenty-page Lao language booklet summarizing the life of Ho Chi Minh. The Museum of Ho Chi Minh published this book in Hanoi in 1985. When I asked the guide about the significance of distributing a book about Ho Chi Minh at the Lao National Museum, she explained that there was no a reason other than the fact that the government of Vietnam gave the Lao National Museum many copies of the book, it wasn’t something that would sell well in the Museum’s shop, but it was something they had plenty of that they could give away to visitors.



Figure 6.10: Small book on Ho Chi Min distributed to each student upon completion of the tour of the National Museum.

### Reflections upon the tour:

The geographic frame for the entirety of the museum’s display was established by the guide’s use of the map in the first room of the Museum. This frame was the contemporary border of Lao P.D.R. As the students were guided through the display space the frame is held constant. Despite the fact that the contemporary borders of Lao PDR did not exist eons ago<sup>14</sup>, the border is what was used to frame the representations of and descriptions of the Mesozoic Era, Homo erectus, ethnic minorities, Fa Ngum, etc. What at first may appear to be a mundane practice of touring students through the museum is an important part of a “mechanics of state spatialization”<sup>15</sup> and the production of the toured imaginary, the imaginary of the single-Party State.

In the sequential presentation, Paleolithic man’s struggles and Fa Ngum’s struggles are part of the history of the “Lao people” from which the Party eventually evolves. The rulers residing in the region long before colonial invasion<sup>16</sup> are imagined to be part of a lineage of which the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party is the pinnacle of political evolutionary development. Those who occupied the land long before the foundation of the People’s Revolutionary Party are thus encompassed not only within the contemporary borders, but also within the imagined community<sup>17</sup> of the contemporary state.

Passing through the exhibit space from the first room to the last the geographical frame remains constant, but the representations of time decrease in scale in a telescopic manner. The duration of time represented in the Mesozoic and Paleolithic displays of the first rooms represent epochs that span millions of years. The museum’s second-floor displays (exhorting the glory of the contemporary ruling party and struggles that led to their rule over contemporary Lao PDR) represent time in scales of decades. The pictorial displays depicting the atrocities of foreign imperialism (be they bloated bodies of bombed

civilians, or the butt of a French soldier's rifle poised about to strike a pleading mother in the head) depict durations of time equivalent to the blink of a human eye.

Through maintaining the geographic frame and establishing a telescoping depiction of time, the labor of the revolutionaries (and the labor of the imperialist aggressors and their "lackey stooges") not merely rivals, but surpasses the significance of events of the long distant past (e.g. the extinction of the dinosaurs, the evolutionary transformation from *Homo erectus* to *Homo sapiens*). Through this display and her narration the guide is producing and presenting an imaginary for the students. The expectation, as Mr. Paengan explained, is that in turn this imaginary is expected to flow from the tips of the students' pens. The ultimate aim of this guided tour is for the rise and rule of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party to be presented by the young writers (taking part in the tour) as a monumental evolutionary end of human development.

Parallel to the painting of *Homo erectus* evolving to *Homo sapiens*, the museum's display as a whole depicts the rise of the current ruling party as the endpoint of a unilinear ecological and social development within the contemporary borders of Lao PDR. The tour guide emphasized the point that the capacity to remember is a signifier of development – and the museum displays exist as a form of mnemonic device to guide visitors towards the realization that the development of Lao PDR culminates in the just and legitimate rule of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party over all those encompassed within its' borders.

### **Parallel movements**

During the tour of the Lao National Museum all of the students followed the guide on her general route through the rooms. All but five of the students carried notebooks with them through the museum. On the first floor as they slowly meandered between displays of pottery shards, Dong Son drums, stone stile, and Buddha images, many of the students diligently wrote notes, transcribing what the docent said, and copying the object descriptions from display labels posted near particular items (see figure 6.11).

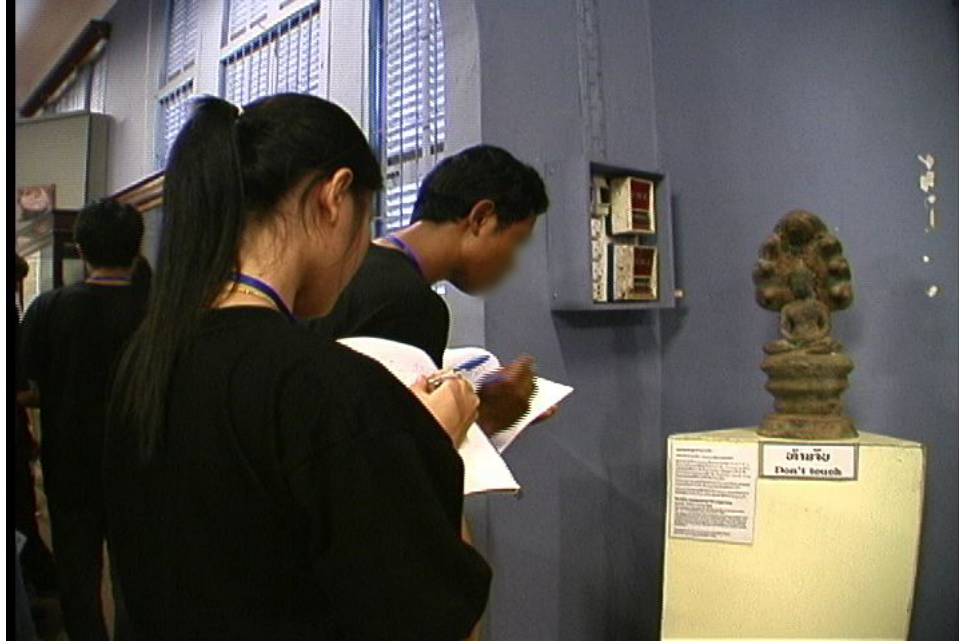


Figure 6.11: Students take notes while reading object display tags.

The museum clearly posts that no cameras are allowed in the exhibit space, but this prohibition does not appear to apply to mobile phones with camera features. While others were diligently taking notes, three students, Khamlah, Xiong, and Vilayvone, used mobile phones to record parts of the guided tour, photograph items on display, and collect images of the text printed on the descriptive tags next to display items (see figure 6.12).



Figure 6.12: While her notebook remains closed, Vilayvone takes a photograph of a bronze Dong Son drum.

The students, however, are not simple propaganda sponges or mindless automatons inscribing all of the input verbatim as the Party-line etched upon a piece of slate. Rather the students, corralled and herded through the space by the guide, exhibited varying degrees of autonomy in their movements and actions.

By the time the students passed through the curtains to enter the pan-ethnic “One Nation” display space, only two of the students were still actively engaged in note taking. The polite highly attentive behavior that the students exhibited at the beginning of the tour was retained primarily amongst those who gathered in the inner-circle of students forming the semicircle around the guide. On the periphery of this group, shielded from the guide’s view (i.e. shielded by the bodies of those who are huddled attentively around her), student behavior began to give way to a more relaxed exploration of the displays and display space.

As the guide told those huddled around her of the achievements of the Lao revolutionary leaders, Bounteum (a university student) stood next to a large gold painted statue representing a revolutionary soldier, and (to the amusement of his friends) struck the statue’s pose. While the guide was occupied telling the half circle of attentive students about the “lackey stooge” Vang Pao, another male student was at the rear of the group exploring how far the smooth soles of his shoes would allow him to slide across the polished tile floor. The space of autonomous exploration and levity extended primarily to the rear of the mass of students closely huddled around the guide. However on occasion their movements into a display area preceded the movement of the huddled. As the guide lingered in front of one display to answer individual student questions Bounteum and two female university students moved forward towards the next display. Peering into a glass case housing bound palm leaf manuscripts they quietly laughed at each other’s attempts at deciphering the manuscripts’ visible text.



Figure 6.13: A wall of students (center) huddled facing the guide (off screen to the right) form a wall that blocks her view of student activities taking place on the periphery of the huddle, such as the student (on the left side in the background leaning at an odd angle) experimenting with how far his smooth soled shoes will enable him to slide across the tiled floor.



Figure 6.14: Students examining palm leaf manuscripts through a glass display case, laughing at each other's failed attempts to decipher the script.

Through these autonomous activities (on the periphery of the guide's narrated tour) the students produced a social space of levity; a social space that traveled through the display area in parallel with and peripheral to the closely attentive semicircle around the guide. While the guide maintained a stern seriousness throughout the tour, many of the students quietly moved back and forth between the attentive lecture-focused semicircle and the more relaxed and autonomous exploratory space shielded from the view of the guide. This production of a parallel student space was not noticeable during the next camp outing, however it was visible again, to an even greater degree, during the last museum outing (mentioned in the last section of this chapter).

After the tour of the museum the students retrieved their belongings from the lockers behind the reception desk, and walked back to the Ministry of Information and Culture for a lecture by Mr. Paegnan. The week after the tour of the National Museum the students were brought on a second trip. The destination was yet another branch of the MIC charged with memory: the Lao National Film Archive and Video Center.

### **The Lao National Film Archive and Video Center - produced memories:**

The week following the visit to the Lao National Museum, after a morning of exploring the structure of Lao poetry, almost forty students from the Sinxay Pen's Camp loaded onto one of the Ministry of Information and Culture's small busses to travel to the Lao National Film Archive and Video Center. Female students crowded themselves into the small seats, managing to fit three students into a seat designed for two. When the seats were filled, the ten remaining male students packed themselves into the small aisle way.

Departing from the Ministry one of the male students began to sing a popular Lao song describing a beautiful young woman. Soon other male students joined in, with female students hooting in jest at the lyrics. Certain members of the Pen's Camp engaged in the public performance of songs on each bus ride. One or more of the male students always performed the lead vocals, with the female students and other male students providing varying degrees of accompaniment (ranging from vocal accompaniment to clapping). When a student singing the lead forgot lyrics others would fill in, sometimes taking over the lead temporarily or permanently.

The final touches on renovations to the Lao National Film Archive were still underway when students disembarked from the bus. The government of Vietnam supported the renovations with the equivalent of \$900,000, enabling the construction of a large two-story building, complete with climate controlled storage facilities for the archive's library of films and videotapes.<sup>18</sup> The fairly dilapidated colonial era building that once housed the archive's administrative offices were slated to be the new home for Vannasin, but due to lack of funds for repairs, the move was repeatedly postponed, and the building was used only as temporary housing for the construction crews working on the new archive.

Rather than entering into the new building, the students made their way through the newly constructed gates to a second older building, behind the former administrative offices. This second building houses the Archive's production unit and exhibition space.

Removing their shoes the students entered into the long rectangular exhibition room; a dark cool cavernous space with a four-meter-tall ceiling. The floor was covered with sheets of an omnipresent plastic floor covering (with a pattern designed to look like

tiles). Six rows of chairs were arranged at one end of the room facing a tripod mounted portable screen at the opposite end of the room.

The director of the production division gave a brief introduction, explaining that the students would have the opportunity to see two of the types of films that writers working for the Lao National Film Archive produce. As his assistant adjusted the DVD player and LCD projector someone at the rear of the room turned off the lights.

**A produced memory of the horrors of imperialist aggression:  
*Sorrow of Piew Cave***

The mood among the students in the darkened room was jovial in the period of video silence as the DVD started. The anonymity provided by the darkness opened opportunities for comical social behaviors that students did not exhibit when their actions were visible to all; when the video image of the countdown to the film flickered up onto the screen a chorus of voices from the audience read the numbers aloud, “Five, Four, Three, Two.” The merry ambiance of the room dissipated as a solemn audio track began to play and the opening credits appeared: “The Lao National Film Archive and Video Center, Presents, a non-fiction film, Sorrow of Piew Cave” (ໂສກນາດຕະກຳຖໍ້ປີວ).<sup>19</sup>

Written and directed by Simmanee Keokhan (ສິມມະນີ ແກ້ວແກ່ນ), the entire film is composed of images drawn from the archive, edited together with a voice over narration, sound effects and a musical score. The first image to appear on the screen is a black and white map with Lao PDR center screen, Thailand to its west, Vietnam to its east, and a small fleet of warship silhouettes are pictured off the coast of Vietnam. Three small airplane silhouettes circle over the map of Lao PDR, and as the clip continues to play the planes drop a large amount of bombs within the borders of Lao PDR (see figure 6.15).

With a rich authoritative baritone voice, the narrator (Saleiang Siangvong ສະຫຼຽງ ຊຽງວິງ) informs the audience: ‘In 1964 America and its accomplices had a desire to eradicate the resistance of the Lao people. The war was becoming progressively worse. America and its accomplices were fighting to prevent the liberation of the Lao people.’

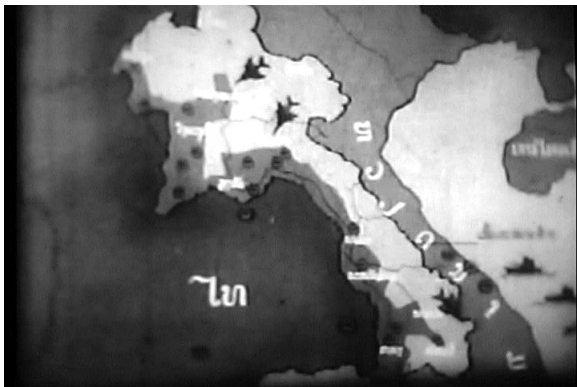


Figure 6.15 and 6.16: Stills from the opening scenes from the film “Sorrow of Piew Cave.” A map of Lao PDR with American bombers circling above, and archival footage of American military aircraft in use over Southeast Asia.

Scratchy black and white archival footage displaying American aircraft flicker on the screen (see figure 6.16) as the narrator explains: ‘The Americans and their accomplices were attempting to wipe clean all forms of life and livelihood from the region of Xieng Khouang.’ The audio track under the voice over is a barrage of gunfire, heavy artillery, and explosions timed to coincide with flashes and explosions shown on the screen.



Figure 6.17 and 6.18: Scenes from “the Sorrow of Piew Cave.” Archival footage showing Lao armed resistance against imperialist aerial assault.

Images of peasants with rifles shooting into the skies from within dense grass, and footage showing soldiers aiming large anti-aircraft guns fill the screen as the narrator makes it clear that the people of the region did not sit idly when under assault: ‘The Lao people fought back against this attempt at eradication.’

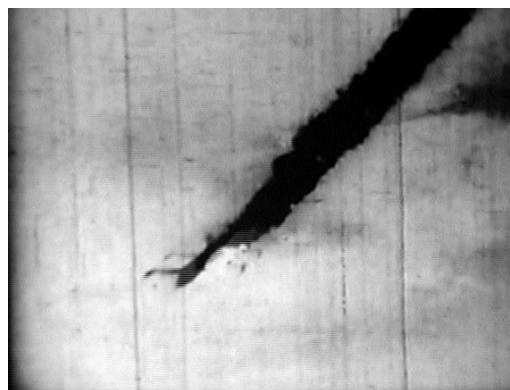


Figure 6.19: An image of a plane in flames and billowing smoke as it plummets from the sky.

Film clips of anti-aircraft fire are spliced together with shots of aircraft to imply the successful targeting of the imperialists and a degree of success in defending against their aggression. An airplane streaming a long thick tail of smoke plummets towards the bottom of the screen (see figure 6.19 above).

The narrator informs us: ‘The situation became increasingly bad as aircraft were incorporated into the battle. The airplanes were used to drop bombs indiscriminately with no care.’ Flames flicker whip and billow up the screen as a village is entirely engulfed in an inferno. Women and children racing about in an apparent state of panic are silhouetted against the wall of fire.



Figure 6.20 and 6.21: Panic stricken villagers fleeing villages engulfed by bombardment.

The students in the room were silent. Staring wide-eyed at the screen their faces were illuminated with each image of flames and explosions. Transfixed with a degree of astonishment clearly visible in their facial expressions, they were bombarded with shocking images of warfare and thunderous sounds of battle.

Such images existed in still photos on the walls of the museum, but in the museum those not wishing to view those photos were able to walk around the display, and glance away. In the museum, the students had a social periphery to which they could escape. In the museum, though moving through the display space in parallel with the guide they were able to distance themselves from her, physically and socially move away from her message. The social space of the museum had periphery into which they could escape into relaxed social interactions with friends or explorations of objects (such as the jovial interactions around the palm-leaf manuscripts). The video setting did not provide a space for such movement to a periphery. The volume precluded conversations with friends or tuning out the message. The ridged seating structure reinforced facing the images that appeared on the screen.

The film was very much like the productions of the archive that Lao National Television (LNTV) broadcasted daily: a pastiche of archival footage, an assemblage of fragments of film shot in different locations at different times, edited together to provide visuals for a voiced-over-narration regarding the importance of remembering the revolution - - the importance of the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party. At home one was able to turn down the volume, turn off the set, or (if living close enough to the border to access Thai TV) turn the channel to alternative programming. The Film Archive’s screening enveloped the student audience in explosive sound and searing visuals in a manner that could not be achieved in the exhibition at the National Museum.

The images of smoke and flames preceded images of devastation. The narrator’s voice tells us: ‘Houses, hospitals, schools temples, life of the people were destroyed, devastating Xieng Khouang province. A region that was beautiful was left in ruins.’ A

Buddhist temple towers high upon the screen; it is a ghostly hollowed out skeleton of a building. It has no roof, rafters, or any forms of ornamentation (see figure 6.22). A young monk carefully lifts a badly damaged Buddha figure from the soil (see figure 6.23). A blackboard and a solitary desk standing in the charred burnt-out frame of a school punctuate the narrator's points (see figure 6.24).



Figure 6.22, 6.23 and 6.24: The burnt out shell of a temple, a damaged image of the Buddha, and the remnants of a burned out school illustrate the film's narration.

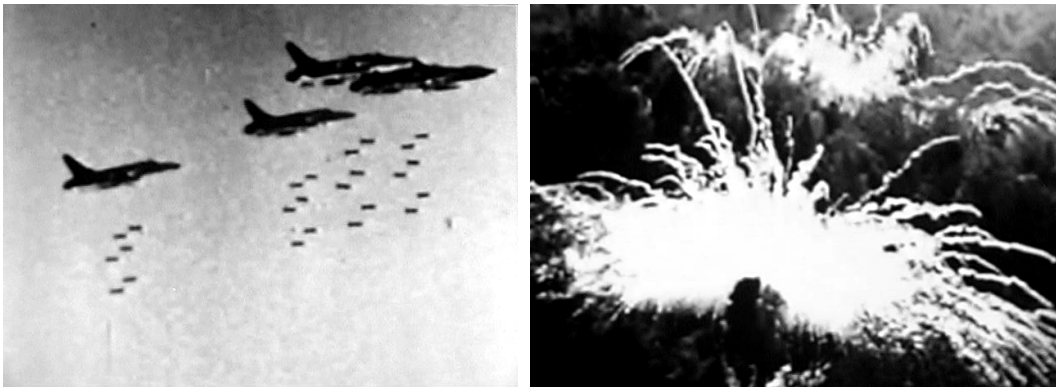
The narrator informs us: 'The schools, villages and hospitals were gone. All that were left were the foundations and empty frames. Those members of the population, and the old monks and young novices who narrowly escaped with their lives, congregated around the rivers and in the forests and caves.' This is where the film introduces the human suffering and ruin that the imperialists' bombers rained down upon the population. The LCD player projected a montage of those seeking refuge (see images 6.25 to 6.34), elderly monks huddle in the shade with Buddhist novices. Elderly women and young children stare into the camera. The images depict people weary and worried. A mother nurses an infant. We see the injured, and the damaged structures from whence they have fled. Bloodied, bandaged infants lie listlessly under blankets. During the montage of displacement and destruction the narrator informs the audience: 'People who were injured, and tortured with fear, sought refuge in Piew Cave.'





Figures 6.25 through 6.34: A montage of human displacement and destruction resulting from the American imperialists aerial assault on Xieng Khouang province.

Following the montage is a series of archival images showing American planes dropping bombs, and the resulting fiery chrysanthemums rising up in horrific blossoms through the thick canopy of the Southeast Asian forest (see images 6.35 and 6.36). Over these images the narrator conveys: ‘With a black heart determined to find and kill the people of the region, the Americans flew their aircraft continuously day and night.’



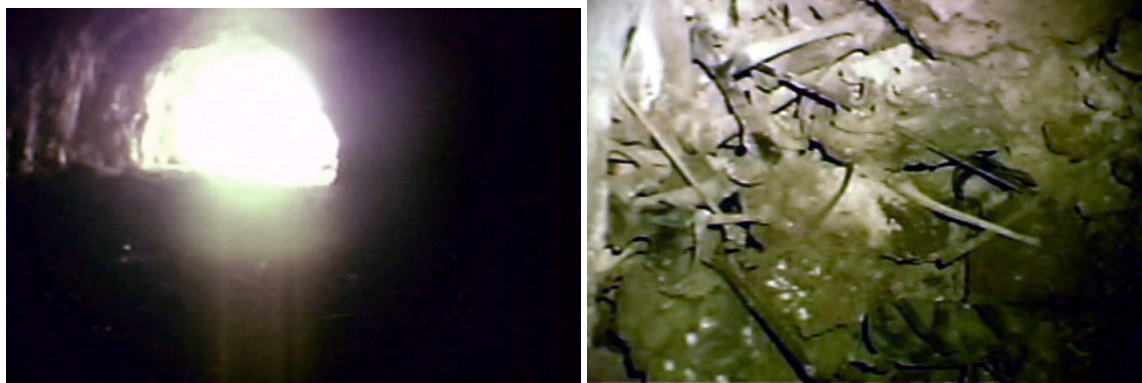
Figures 6.35 and 6.36: Jets of the black-hearted American imperialists dropping bombs, and the fiery results.

The image of a massive bomber stretches across the width of the screen, and a steady stream of bombs falls downward through its bomb bay doors. Then comes an image is of a massive explosion shot from the point of view of a low flying fighter plane flying directly towards a smoky fireball rising and expanding from the forest floor. As the camera hurtles towards the billowing conflagration the baritone voice-over states: ‘We will never forget when the Americans shot a fire arrow into Piew Cave.’



Figure 6.37 and 6.38: US bomber dropping a steady stream of bombs, and a billowing ball of fire and smoke rising from an explosion among the trees.

As the camera passes into the fireball the image dissolves into a shot of the mouth of Piew Cave, looking outward towards the light from the dark recess within the mountain (see figure 6.39 below). The images are no longer drawn from black and white archival footage, the images are in color and shot on video. Charred human bones (stripped of flesh by searing fire) are strewn about the floor of the cave. The narrator states: ‘At 3:15 on the twenty fourth of November 1968 Imperialist America bombed Piew Cave. In less than a second a single bomb killed 374 people, primarily women, elderly men, and children. Twelve families were entirely decimated.’



Figures 6.39 and 6.40: The mouth of Piew Cave shot from within, and charred human bones scattered across the cave’s floor.

The image cuts to an exterior shot of the cave, the image is close at first, and then the camera slowly zooms out to reveal the entire mountain as the narrator informs us: Every year on the twenty-fourth of November a memorial is held for the victims. The innocents who died had nothing to do with the war.

A series of shots showing the memorial ceremonies fill the screen. Masses of people huddle under tent-like awnings that cover a clearing in the forest. Orange robed monks chant as smoke rises from incense and flickering candles placed in front of a monument. The narrator informs us: Thirty-seven years after the incident, it continues to be remembered.



Figure 6.41: Monks chant in front of a monument erected to commemorate those who perished in Piew Cave.

The camera focuses on a woman, Miss Bua, who was only 13 years old when her entire family (with the exception of one aunt) was incinerated in Piew Cave. Ms. Bua describes how she was in the cave, but left to inspect her aunt's house, which she heard was in flames. The bombing occurred when she was out of the cave checking on her aunt. Of her entire family only she and her aunt survived.



Figure 6.42: Miss Bua and her aunt are interviewed by the production crew at the mouth of Piew Cave with a small altar to those who perished visible in the background, mounted on the cave wall.

A relatively lengthy section of the film focuses on a ceremony held to commemorate the atrocities. This is where the contemporary ruling Party is introduced into the narrative. As the images of government officials paying homage at the monument and shots of various people moving about through the interior of the cave flash upon the screen, the narrator explains that four years prior to the production of this film the government officially recognized the bombing of Piew Cave with a monument. He continues explaining that in the future the government will commission statues to be made, statues representing the citizens who lost their lives in Piew Cave.



Figure 6.43: Government officials bowing their heads in front of a monument erected to commemorate the atrocity of the American bombing of Piew Cave. Figure 6.44: Rusting remnants of ordinance inside a cave.

The soundtrack for the film is almost entirely voice over, with the exception of Miss Bua and her aunt, and a man interviewed on-site describing the reasons behind the ceremony. This man explained: “We are doing this to help the young people know about how the people of Xieng Khouang survived during the war.”

Over video footage of people visiting the museum erected to commemorate the bombing the narrator explains that the Governor of Xieng Khouang province together with the President of the Ministry of Information and Culture granted permission for the formation of a museum with the purpose of remembering the bombing. The narrator continues: This museum was made for new generations to learn and see what the war produced in the city of Kham in Xieng Khouang province. Similar to how it was true in the tour of the National Museum, the capacity to remember, and the Party’s role in fostering this capacity is highlighted in the film.



Figure 6.45: An exterior shot of the “Beyond the Cave” memorial to the victims of Piew Cave in Xieng Khouang province. Figure 6.46: Officials placing offerings in a row of Buddhist monks’ bowls at the ceremony.

On the screen we see images of Lao officials proceeding along the length of a table upon which rest numerous alms bowls of Buddhist monks. As the officials place offerings into the bowls the narrator tells us that this ceremony in 2005 was the first

ceremonial meeting for the opening [of the memorial/museum], and that it was attended by government officials, officials from the Ministry of Information and Culture, by many students, and ordinary citizens.



Figures 6.47: Buddhist monks and officials listening to speakers address the assembled audience at the 2005 opening ceremony for the “Beyond the Cave” memorial. Figure 6.48: Shot of Ministry of Information and Culture officials attending the 2005 ceremony in Xieng Khouang.

With images of different speakers addressing a diverse audience flickering on the screen the narrator informs us: The worst of atrocities happened in the city of Kham. Imperialist America and its accomplices (who served as the imperialists feet and hands and sold the country to the imperialists) did so in the worst way, to a degree to which it had never been done before in Lao history.



Figures 6.49 and 6.50: Speakers, including Lieutenant General Choummaly Sayasone, current Secretary General of the LPRP and President of the republic, addressing the assembled masses at the 2005 ceremonial opening of the museum.

As the LCD projector casts onto the screen shots of the masses of ordinary Lao citizens attentively focused upon speakers at the ceremony the narrator says: Thirty-seven years have already passed but the people who witnessed this continue to remember the atrocities to this day.



Figure 6.51: Images of ordinary Lao citizens listening to the speakers at the 2005 ceremonial opening of the museum. Figure 6.52: Contemporary exterior shot of the mouth of Piew Cave.

From an image of the contemporary exterior of Piew Cave (see figure 6.52 above) the film reverts back to black and white archival images shot during the era of “the American War” in Southeast Asia. Framed in a clear sky a jet flies high towards the top of the screen and releases a bomb that falls slowly towards the bottom of the screen. Then the audience is hit with a horrific image of a torso and head of a young male lying face up in the dirt. His legs and arms appear to have been violently severed from his body, leaving only mangled bloody stumps of flesh. His body seems to be atop two severed and unidentifiably distorted limbs. Students in the darkened room let out a collective gasp. Some diverted their eyes from the screen lifting their hands as if to shield their eyes from the possibility of witnessing any more. A number simultaneously exclaimed a whispered, almost breathless, “ohyee” (a vocalization made when one witnesses something painfully disturbing).

The image of the dismembered young man is followed by the image of what seems to be a novice monk, huddled in a fetal position; his left arm lacerated with shrapnel wounds, and only fragments of a shattered skull, flesh, and shredded brain matter where his head should be. A similar image was displayed on the wall of the National Museum. But in the museum the students were able to easily avoid viewing it by steering a wide path around the display. In the dark of the film archive the image is much larger, much more vivid, and much more difficult to avoid. Following the novice we again have an image of a bloody and bandaged infant, an infant apparently barely clinging to life.



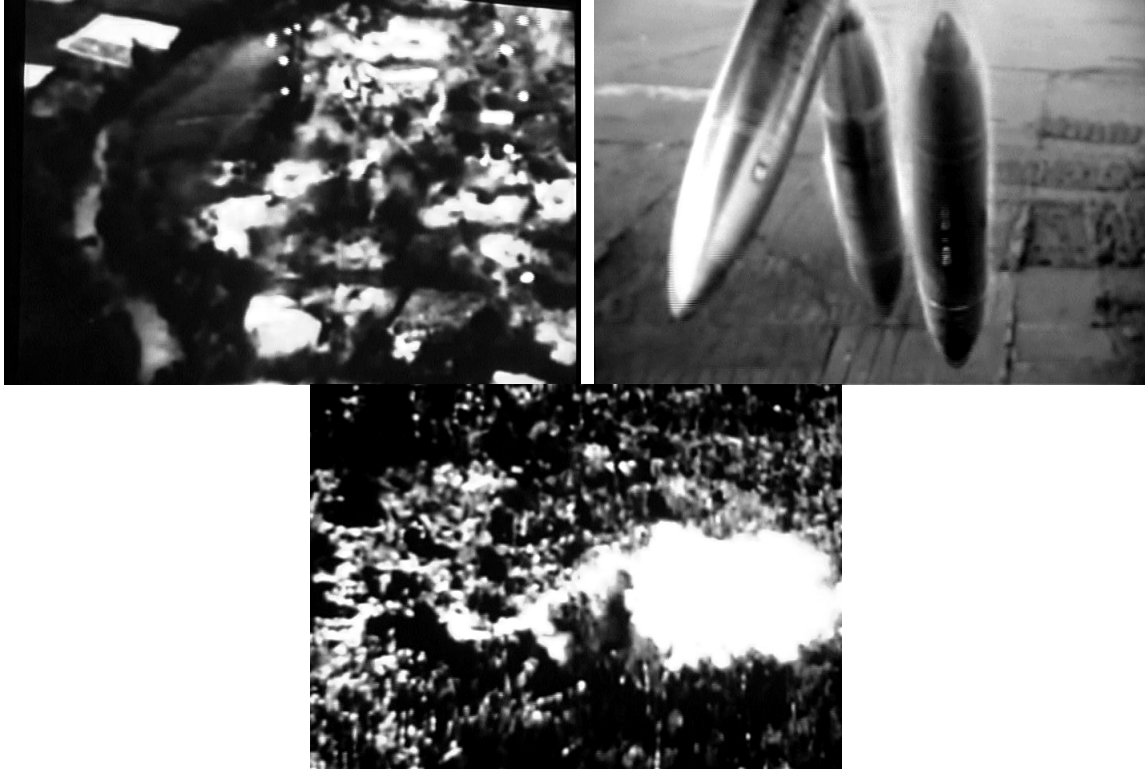
Figure 6.53: A jet dropping a large bomb. Figure 6.54: The dismembered corpse of a young man lying on the dirt. Figure 6.55: The mutilated body of what appears to be a young Buddhist novice. Figure 6.56: The almost lifeless body of a bloody and bandaged infant.

In the darkened room the tear-filled eyes of students shimmered, reflecting light from the screen. The glistening eyes attest to the emotions the film was able to stir among many students – emotions that were not visible in the trip to the museum. An image of a mother laying beside and gently stroking her injured infant is followed by images of a family huddled around a scant meal amidst smoking wreckage of a home. The narrator continues: ‘Those present at the time witnessed people die while involved in life’s daily activities. Infants died as their mothers were breast-feeding them. Children died while their mothers were hand feeding them rice.’



Figure 6.57: A mother lies beside and gently strokes her injured infant. Figure 6.58: and 6.59: A family sitting for a meal amidst the smoldering wreckage of a village.

The final images of the film are a black and white aerial footage montage documenting munitions being shot into and dropped upon villages, agricultural land, and forests. As the flames rise, the narrator concludes his commentary: The recalled images from the past produce a deeply imbedded searing pain. The Lao people will indelibly inscribe this testimony to pass it on to all future generations.



Figures 6.60 through 6.62: A montage of aerial footage documenting bombs dropping on villages, fields, and forests of Southeast Asia.

### **Reflections in the wake of *Sorrow of Piew Cave*:**

The credits began to roll up the screen, and someone in the rear of the room turned on the overhead lights, enabling the technician to change the DVD in the projector. As the light came on, Amone (one of the high school students) continued to wipe tears from her cheeks and eyes. Amone's friend, another high school student sitting beside her, smiled and whispered a comment to Amone. Amone smiled gently while continuing to wipe away evidence of her crying.

Many of the students appeared uncomfortable, and for the most part they were silent. Their watery eyes with gazes cast in directions that avoided contact with others seemed to indicate that for many, their emotions were uncomfortably close to the surface. Somsavat (an active duty soldier in the Lao People's Army) sitting in the second row surreptitiously glanced in my direction a number of times, he was apparently interested in seeing how the one American in the room reacted to the film. There was very little socializing among the students during this short break between features.

A Film Archive staff member removed the first disk, the *Sorrow of Piew Cave*, from the player and inserted a second production. With the emotions stirred by the first film becoming less visible, the students sat back and braced themselves for whatever might appear on the screen next.

Shown in the context of the camp the film exists both as a sample of the propaganda produced by the Ministry, and (as Mr. Paengan described) as a 'text' from which the students are expected to draw inspiration for their writing. The horrors of the war were not part of the lived experiences of the young people crowding into the Lao

National Film Archive on this day. But as writers for the Ministry this form of production, the production texts, scripts, lyrics that produce and foster “memories” in the form of tales of atrocities committed by imperialist invaders, and the Party’s defense of the population are what they will be hired to produce, to indelibly inscribe. In the museums and archive they were being subjected to the production of memory, and they in turn would be hired to produce such products, drawing from the ‘texts’ of the tours, and aimed at remembering/re-membering a Party and its imaginary.

The break was short, and the opening images of the next production soon appeared on the screen.

**The deleterious influence of capital accumulation, and the perils of forgetting the past: *Forget Oneself***

The theme of memory, which began during the tour of the museum, was extended through the viewing of *The Sorrow of Piew Cave*, and it continued (with a twist of personification) in the second screening for the students. The second production, *Forget Oneself*, (ລືມຕົວ)<sup>20</sup> is a dramatic morality tale focused on a man (Mr. Saengphet) experiencing moral, ethical, and social dilemmas as a result of capital accumulation, lust, and consumption (of material goods and alcohol). Although Thai television was easily accessible in numerous locations in Lao PDR, there were few feature length contemporary Lao dramas available via video in 2005. For most of the students this showing of *Forget Oneself* was likely their first opportunity to view a feature length video produced in the Lao language.

A team of three is credited with directing the drama: Bunchao Peejit (ບຸນເຈົ້າພິຈິດ), Witun Sundala (ວິທຸນ ສຸນດາຣາ), Wongjit Pomajak (ວົງຈິດ ພິມມະຈັກ). The video production is based on a story by Jantee Duansawan (ຈັນທິ ເດືອນສະຫວັນ) with a screenplay by Padit Latanabouyang (ປະດິດ ລັດຕະນະບຸນຍັງ), Simanee Keokeaen (ສິມມະນີ ແກ້ວແກ່ນ), and Viengkohn Kaeohawong (ວຽງຄອນ ແກ້ວຫາວິງ).



Figure 6.63 and 6.64: Businessman Mr. Saengphet (played by ພຽງພະຈັນ ພິມມະຈັກ) ogles the breasts of his seductive young assistant Miss Keotah (played by ຈັນທອນ ແກ້ວມະນີໂຄດ) as she delivers tea to his private office in an early scene in the film *Forget Oneself*.

The main character is Mr. Saengphet (played by ພຽງພະຈັນ ພິມມະຈັກ) a married successful manager of a construction related business. As his lucrative business deals increase he becomes the target of the sensual charms of one of his alluring and seductive young employees Ms. Keotah (played by ຈັນທອນ ແກ້ວມະນີໂຄດ). During a late night working alone in the office together they consummate their relationship upon the office sofa (see image 6.65 - Note: after capturing the initial embrace the camera pans down to focus upon flowers in a vase next to the sofa so we don't see a performance of the act).

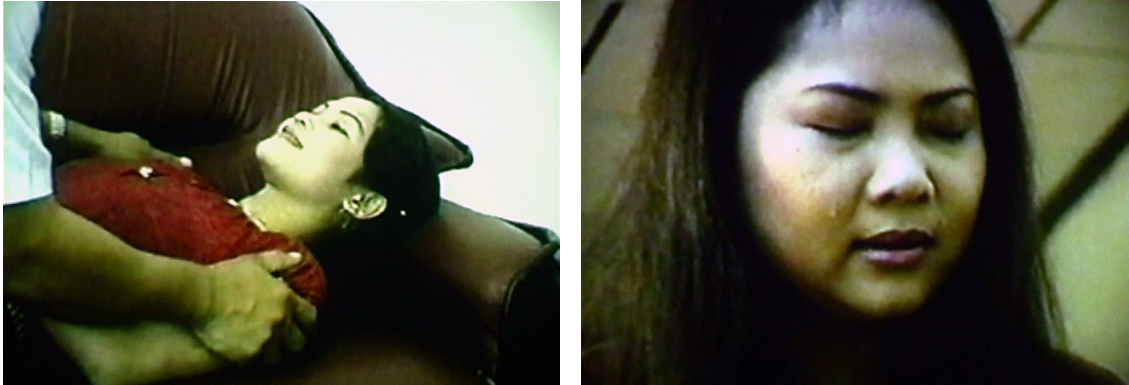


Figure 6.65 and 6.66: In the heat of late night passion Mr. Saengphet lowers his co-worker onto the office sofa, while his wife labors at a sewing machine, crying, alone in their home.

At this point the image fades to a night shot of the city, then cuts to show the man's wife (played by ອິນທະນິສອນ ຄຳພູມ). It is late that very same night and she is slaving away at a sewing machine in the family home. She rises from her labor and bursts into tears (see figure 6.66) thinking back to the time (in black and white images) when she and her husband were young revolutionary soldiers gathering bamboo shoots in the forest and he (invoking the heavens and earth) pledged his eternal love to her (see figure 6.67). The image cuts back to the present and the wife continues to weep as she enters her bedroom forlorn and alone.



Figure 6.67: A black and white flash back of Mr. Saengphet pledging eternal love to his wife, back when they were revolutionary soldiers harvesting bamboo shoots from the forest. Figure 6.68: One of many shots of Mr. Saengphet and his minor wife leaving a guesthouse.

A montage of the businessman and his young employee entering and leaving a number of guesthouses (see figure 6.68) conveys to the audience that he has taken the

seductive employee to be his minor wife; soon he purchases a newly constructed house for her. Mr. Saengphet's young son and daughter question their mother as to where he is. Their home life becomes increasingly acrimonious, as he is drunk, and or exhausted when he does eventually return (see figure 6.69).



Figure 6.69 and 6.70: Mr. Saengphet's wife, at her wits end, holds her head as her husband returns home disheveled and drunk and passes out beside her. Multiple scenes depict Mr. Saengphet's increased level of alcohol consumption, often in the company of his minor wife.

The lead character gradually extends his consumption of alcohol to all hours of the day, and stops returning to the home of his wife and children. Eventually he loses his job, and then his truck. Late one night, when an unknown driver delivers his minor wife home, the drunken Mr. Saengphet slaps her and accuses her of being unfaithful. She packs her suitcase, and hiking up her skirt she gives him a strong knee to his groin, then slaps him to the ground as she departs. The following day two men come to foreclose on the house where he had lived with his minor wife.



Figures 6.71 and 6.72: Mr. Saengphet in the middle of a full arm swing just a few frames before he slaps his minor wife. The minor wife hiking her skirt to give Mr. Saengphet a swift knee to the groin prior to her departure.

As the men foreclose upon his home a sorrowful sounding score accompanies the image of Mr. Saengphet leaning back in his chair with his eyes closed. The sad soundtrack continues as the image fades to black and then fades back up to a slow nighttime pan across the exterior of the house. As the camera completes its pan a loud sigh is heard on the soundtrack. Accompanying the sigh there is a sudden cut to a black and white shot of a platoon of Lao People's revolutionary army soldiers marching with the flag of the Lao PDR. A transparent image of Mr. Saengphet sitting deep in thought is laid over the black and white footage, and he begins to narrate a contemplative voice-over reflection of his life since the time of the revolution.



Figures 6.73, 6.74, and 6.75: Archival footage of soldiers marching during the period of the revolution play behind a transparent image of Mr. Saengphet during his voice-over reflection upon his life. Figure 6.76: Lao laborers participating in collective labor under the Lao flag and watchful eye of foremen, an image used to provide a contrast with the contemporary life of Mr. Saengphet.

As the archival footage of revolutionary soldiers plays behind his image, Mr. Saengphet bemoans his current state of life, and reflects upon his transformation of his work ethic and faithful service to the State, the people of Lao PDR, and his family:

Oh why is my life like this? In the past I received awards for being a good fighter for the State and for the people. I worked hard. My superiors had trust in me.

Importantly, in his reflection it is not family alone that the character of Mr. Saengphet feels he has failed; his reflections bemoan his life deviating from loyal service to the State and the people of Lao PDR as well. As he reflects upon the past positive aspects of his life and work ethic, behind him are projected black and white archival images of people performing collective manual labor underneath the Lao flag and the watchful eye of hardhat wearing foremen. The archival footage stops with the last of his positive self-reflections.

After the archival image of collective labor, Mr. Saengphet begins to focus more negatively upon his current state, and his flashback is now composed of segments of previous scenes in this current film. The image of Mr. Saengphet deep in thought is no longer superimposed over the footage. To indicate that the segments are flashbacks the images are de-saturated, shown in black and white, as was the archival film of labor for the State – his flashback reflections of earlier scenes in the film appear in black and white. The images of his downward spiral into consumption and hedonism roll silently under a voice-over in which he laments: “Now my life has changed. I’ve fallen from my position because I am not honorable to my labor, to the State, or to my family.”

As Mr. Saengphet in his reflections and laments, labor and State precede family. In his reflections of the past his labor and the State come first, but the family is an integral part of the social trinity that composes his honorable identity. Forsaking his labor, his State, and his family his life is awash.

As images of the sensual and alluring Miss. Keotah appear on the screen he initially blames her for his downfall: “I am doing things that are not good towards my children and my wife. I am doing the opposite of what I promised. It is because of Miss Keotah. That made me fall apart.”<sup>21</sup>

Placing of the blame entirely on Miss Kaeotah’s lap elicited a considerable amount of laughter from the students in the audience. Then, as the clip replays showing Mr. Saengphet lowering Miss Kaeotah to the sofa, he concludes that he is the one who is in fact responsible. The image cuts to a shot of Mr. Saengphet walking out on his wife and he states in self-deprecating tone, “It is my fault. I forgot myself. That made my future change.” The contemplative voice-over segment ends with Mr. Saengphet falling asleep in his bed as the sorrowful musical score fades out.

Another equally sorrowful musical score begins and as an image of busses waiting at Vientiane’s Southern Bus Terminal appears on the screen. Mr. Saengphet, his shirt un-tucked, and a small backpack slung over his right shoulder, walks through the terminal looking disheveled, tired and dejected. The song by Phongsawan Boulom (ພິງສະຫວັນ ບູລົມ), and the lyrics underscore the theme of the film:

Oh, life of people and birth  
Fate swirls just like water  
Some people have a good life  
And some people have more difficulties  
People are responsible for bringing this upon themselves.

One life  
Walks in the wrong direction

You forgot the friends who used to accompany you  
Forgot everything  
Became a person who forgot oneself  
Life is dark  
On the road of dreams.<sup>22</sup>

As the song plays Mr. Saengphet, a disconsolate figure, sits upon a bench in the waiting area of the bus terminal. Looking dejected and forlorn, Mr. Saengphet begins to board a bus to the southern city of Savanakheth, but as he starts to step onto the bus, his wife, daughter and son suddenly appear and rush to his side. His wife places her left hand tenderly upon his left arm and implores that he does not go:

Wife: Older brother Saengphet.

Mr. Saengphet: Why are you here Duangjai? Children! Why are you here?

Wife: Come back to our home. Your children need you.

Mr. Saengphet: Father is sorry. I am sorry.

They sit down on the bench in the bus station and she says again “come home with us” Mr. Saengphet replies: “I will come. I was wrong.”



Figure 6.77 and 6.78: After Mr. Saengphet’s family stops him from boarding the bus and implores him not to depart to Savanakheth he embraces his son and his wife, and collapses in tears.

After tearfully embracing his son and his wife, Mr. Saengphet and his family rise from their seats in the waiting area. He has his arms wrapped over the shoulders of his son and his wife, his wife has her arm wrapped around the shoulder of their daughter, and together as a family they march towards the camera from the shade into the light. This is the final shot of the film. The image freezes and the credits roll up over this frozen frame.



Figure 6.79: Mr. Saengphet, his son, daughter, and wife, united once more as a family, march triumphantly together from the shadowy darkness into the light in the final frames of the film *Forget Oneself*.

### **Reflections on *Forget Oneself*:**

*Forget Oneself* was produced in a period when private capital accumulation was becoming increasingly visible in and around Vientiane. Massive mansions enclosed by large iron gates were sprouting up along the new roadways, which cut through land that had previously been productive rice fields. The ever-increasing opportunities for private capital accumulation and the increasing disparity of wealth were made possible by the State implemented “economic reforms” of the 1990’s.<sup>23</sup> One of the publicly visible entrepreneurial figures taking advantage of the era of economic transformation was Mr. Anousone Sirisackda, a former employee of the Lao National Film Archive, who successfully capitalized on the techniques and connections he developed (while employed in the very building where the students were screening *Forget Oneself*), and he fashioned these into a burgeoning privately owned Lao media empire: Lao Art Media. Up until 2006 Lao Art Media primarily produced CDs and karaoke VCDs. In 2006 Lao Art Media entered into the field of feature length dramatic productions with “Lessons of Life” - a UN sponsored video on human trafficking, a production that starred one of the Sinxay Culture Club’s top models.

Those who remained employed within the Ministry of Information and Culture often spoke to me about people such as Mr. Anousone, people who were able to forge their understandings of particular forms of labor within an institution of the State, and with educational support made possible through State employment. These conversations typically began with tones of envy and awe, and concluded with hints of resentment and the subject of abandonment. The abandonment was always spoken of as an abandonment of the State institution that had supported the entrepreneurs in developing their talents. The inevitable reference to material objects owned by these former Ministry employees (e.g. houses, vehicles, equipment) made clear their feelings of personal abandonment and inequity.

The film presents the message that with increasing practices of capitalism one must not forget oneself. In his self-reflections on the past Mr. Saengphet's honorable identity (the self that has been forgotten to the distractions of capitalist consumption) is composed of labor, the State and the family. When he has hit the lowest of the lows and lost everything due to his excess, it is flash backs to the revolutionary struggle, loyal/"honorable" service to the State, and his family that spark his realization that he has forgotten himself. In the end Mr. Saengphet embracing his family marches forward into the light and away from the dark temptations (of lust and consumption) that (without self-reflection) could lead one down in the wrong direction towards individualism, disloyalty towards the state and one's labor, sexual promiscuity, debt, financial ruin, destruction of the family unit, and ill health.

Unlike *Sorrow of Piew Cave*, the video *Forget Oneself* contained elements of humor that had many of the students laughing out loud. Some of the humor (such as the comical expression on Mr. Saengphet's face as he ogled the breasts of his subordinate) appeared to be intentional. Other elements that induced laughter were perhaps unintentional.

One person who viewed my recordings of the film screening, explained that this film is "very much like real life"; its subject matter is something with which people are familiar, something with which many people in Lao PDR can relate. She explained that the student's laughter came at moments when the character's behaviors diverted from real life behaviors, and deviated towards the type of behavior one expects to see in Thai television dramas. For example the scene in which the husband and wife are collecting bamboo shoots is realistic, an activity in which ordinary citizens might engage, something with which young and older people would be able to relate. But then the character stops his activity to call on the heavens and profess that he will love his wife forever; this is not something a typical husband in Lao PDR would do, but rather it is a characterization of a husband's behavior akin to what is frequently depicted in Thai television dramas. The students could relate to the collecting of bamboo shoots, and found humor in the invoking of the heavens.

All of the students were aware that I made video recordings of the screening of the two productions. At different times after the screening, students approached me to inquire as to whether I could burn them a VCD copy of *Forget Oneself*. Even Mr. Dee asked if I might be able to make him a copy of the production. All of those who made this request did so while expressing their interest in watching the film again and showing it to their friends and/or family members. No one asked me for a copy of *The Sorrow of Piew Cave*. The dramatic enactment of contemporary life within the "market-based economy" proved far more popular than the sorrowful tale from the era of the revolution. At this point in the course it was difficult to imagine the students penning anything like a script about Piew Cave, however, the lived experiences of contemporary life were things with which the students could relate, and did attempt to present in their written work (as we will see in the following chapter).

As was true with the trip to the Lao National Museum, upon return to the Ministry there was no organized discussion of the outing; no discussion or mention by the staff of how the material, themes, or subject matter students experienced on the outings might be incorporated into their writing. Mr. Paengan expressed his intention for the trips was that "The things that they witness and understand are their texts and will become part of their

writing.” It was his desire that these trips would result in related subject matter flowing through the tips of the young writers’ pens, but little was done to encourage this beyond bringing the young people to the field trip venues.

The following week the students were taken on their third and final field trip Vientiane. This final trip was to the Lao People’s Army Museum.

**The Lao People’s Army Museum - teleological teachings on a circular tour that begins and ends with the Party:**

One week after visiting the Lao National Film Archive, after a morning of lectures, forty-four students, Mr. Dee, Mr. Chaomaly (one of the song writing instructors) and Ms. Phounsavath (the short story author and instructor) boarded one of the Ministry of Information and Culture’s busses and drove up Lang Xang avenue, past the Patuxai Monument to the Lao People’s Army Museum.



Figure 6.80: Exterior of the Lao People’s Army Museum in Vientiane Lao P.D.R. with Ministry of Information and Culture bus parked in front.

The Lao People’s Army Museum is a two-story building with a high pitched roof. The architectural style complements the style of the National Assembly building (which the museum faces from some distance away). Tall white columns adorn the front of the building. On the exterior of the building these pillars are capped with gold painted ornamental embellishments, similar to the columns that appear on the front of the Lao National Cultural Hall. A gated fence surrounds the museum grounds.

Generally visitors to the museum are directed by the guards to park in a parking area outside of the museum’s gates. When the busload of students from the Ministry reached the gates, the guards afforded it special privileges, directing the bus into the compound, permitting it to drive through the outdoor display of military machinery, and all the way to the front stairs of the museum building.

While the National Museum is a colonial era building converted for the purposes of being a museum, the Lao People's Army Museum building was designed and constructed to be a military museum. The specially built structure enables the display of large items of warfare (anti-aircraft guns, military vehicles, wreckage of downed enemy aircraft . . .). Such large displays would be difficult if not impossible to house in most colonial era buildings.

The cramped and crowded bus was uncomfortably hot, it was a welcomed relief to exit the bus and enter into the spacious cool dark interior of the museum. The Lao People's Army Museum is not run by the Ministry of Information and Culture, rather it is operated by the Army. Three middle-aged women dressed in olive green military uniforms (short sleeved button-up blouse, ankle-length tube skirt with grey and green woven hems adorned with supplementary weft designs) greeted the students in the foyer. These three soldiers served as the docents for the tour of the museum. Each wore open-toed sandals, had her hair pulled back in a loose pony tail, each wore a blue and white nametag affixed to her uniform, and each wore ornate red and gold epaulets (two had a single gold star in the center of each of the epaulets). One of the guides explained to me that the museum's most frequent visitors are young members of the Lao People's Army and school children, brought to the building in groups for educational visits.

The interior of the museum was exceptionally dark, as one of Vientiane's frequent power failures had cut all electricity to the building. The first floor's walls are lined with high curtained windows, which allowed a small amount of sunlight to filter into the room. The first floor houses a sampling of large olive green revolutionary-era military vehicles and wheeled weaponry bedecked with white-wall tires. The gleaming fat white-wall tires and polished armaments appear ready to be deployed not in battle, but rather in a military parade.

Sunlight streaming through the large opened front doors provided most of the illumination. The glossy floor, paved with large grey polished-granite tiles, reflected this light up a wide spiral staircase located in the center of the building.



Figure 6.81: Sinxay Pen's Camp students (with notebooks in hand) ascending the spiral staircase to the dark second floor of the Lao People's Army Museum.

After directing the students to leave all of their bags and cameras<sup>24</sup> upon a glass display case in the lobby, explaining to the students that items in the museum should not be touched and that cameras were not allowed, the docents guided the students (notebooks in hand) up the spiral stairs to the second floor. As the visitors reached the top of the staircase they found themselves faced with a large display erected to commemorate Kaysone Phomvihane, a revolutionary hero and founding member of the Party.



Figure 6.82: Display of the golden bust of Kaysone Phomvihane, the first exhibit on the guided tour through the Lao People's Army Museum.

The building's support columns, combined with a swath of red carpet on the floor, and decorative curved ceiling panels direct the visitor's attention toward an elevated gold-painted larger-than-life bust of the revolutionary leader. The bust is framed against the flag of the Lao People's Democratic Republic, and the hammer and sickle flag of the Party. The top of the pedestal, upon which Kaysone's golden bust is mounted, is ringed with a garland of brightly colored artificial flowers.

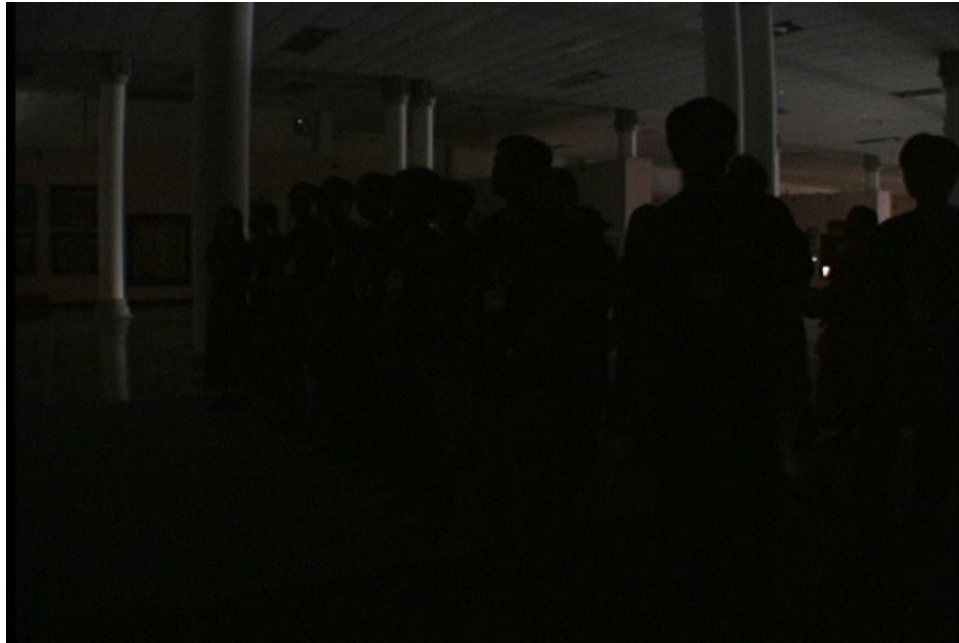


Figure 6.83: Sinxay Pen's Camp students standing silently in the dark facing the soldier/docent as she explains the significance of the Kaysone Phomvihane display.

Displays are arranged chronologically clockwise around the circumference of the room. The students started at the Kaysone Phomvihane/Party flag display at the top of the staircase, and were guided around the circumference of the room to the right of the display, through exhibits representing sequential military practices from the early historical accounts up to the present. The guided tour starts with the Kaysone Phomvihane display and ended with Kaysone Phomvihane display. The golden bust of Kaysone and the Party's flag are the equivalent of twelve o'clock on an analog clock face – he and the Party are the launching point for the displays of the progression of military advances and reigns of power through time, and he and the Party are the end-point of the displayed time and advancement (see Figure 6.84).

Standing in the dark to the right of the golden bust of Kaysone Phomvihane, and facing the assembled students, the guide began her presentation. The students (who were for the most part chatting and joking about the darkness while walking up the staircase) assumed a respectful silence once the guide began to speak. Unlike the guide in the National Museum, the female soldiers in the Lao People's Army Museum did not use a megaphone. Standing in front of the students in the dark the guide asked the students to observe three seconds of silence in honor of Kaysone Phomvihane and the soldiers who have fought for the country. The guide turned to face the bust and silently bowed her head.

Through the activity the guide was able to momentarily command the attention of all of the visitors simultaneously. After the brief three seconds, the guide's voice was the first to break the silence as she turned back towards the students and explained: The museum's display is divided into seven parts. The first division covers "protecting the Lao state and nation from foreign invaders between the years 757 to 1893." The second

division covers the period when the Lao people fought the French from 1893 to 1954. The third division covers fighting with Americans from 1955 to 1975. The fourth division covers the army working to protect the people and develop the nation from 1976 to the present. The fifth division covers the relationships between “our military and Armies of the world.” The sixth division is the display of vehicles and guns on the first floor. The seventh division is the displays outside.

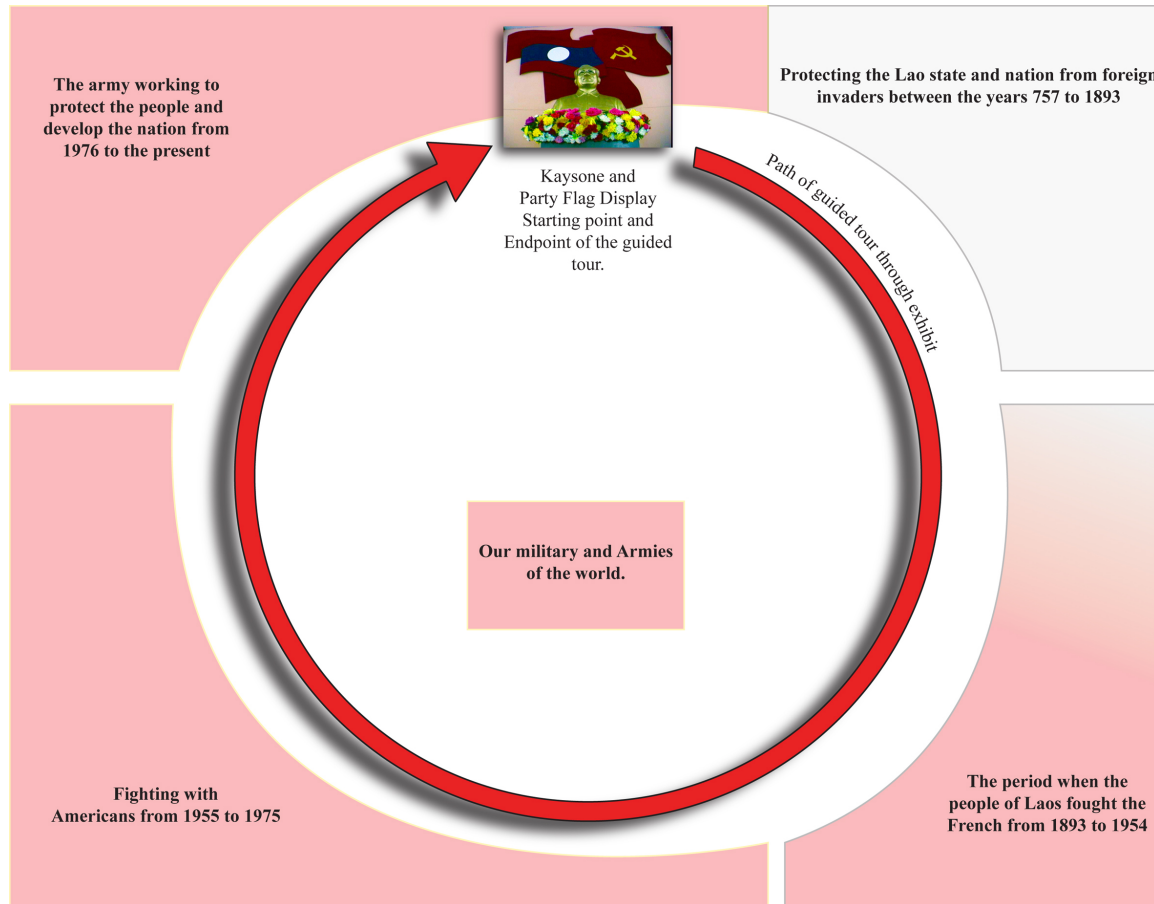


Figure 6.84: Circular path of guided tour through the Lao People’s Army Museum’s second floor display space. The tour starts and ends with Kaysone and the Party.

The guide then turned and walked from the Kaysone Phomvihane bust to a large map hung on the wall immediately to the right of the display. The guide clearly had a well-established routine and knew where she was going. However, it was awkward to move about the displays in the darkness. One student commented aloud: “Oh, it is so dark!” Another student jokingly replied, “We brought the darkness with us.” The map was titled: “Richness and Beauty of Laos.” The guide, ignoring the students’ comments, continued her presentation as if it was light and the students could actually see the display: “This is a map of contemporary Lao. The Lao nation is 236,800 square kilometers. It shares borders with five countries.”

Her verbal presentation of the map was short and to the point. Once she had delivered the lines she paused long enough for the visitors to read the map key, which

they cannot do due to the darkness. The guide’s presentation was a rigid, well practiced, routine that did not account for lighting conditions of the day. The rote recitation of the narration was not tailored for a particular audience.

The key on the map listed the lengths of each border with neighboring countries. Below the listing of the lengths of the borders was a list of the minerals that can be found within the borders. Sprinkled throughout the map were small photographs depicting key architectural or socio-economic features of different provinces (e.g. a hydroelectric dam, massive stone jars on the Plain of Jars, Buddhist temples . . . ).

Mounted on the wall to the right of the map were a series of photographs that parallel the small photos sprinkled throughout the map. The first photo directly adjacent to the map is a color photograph of women wearing clothing representational of the three broad classifications used to identify the populations within the nation’s borders by elevation, Lowland, Midlevel, and Highland.

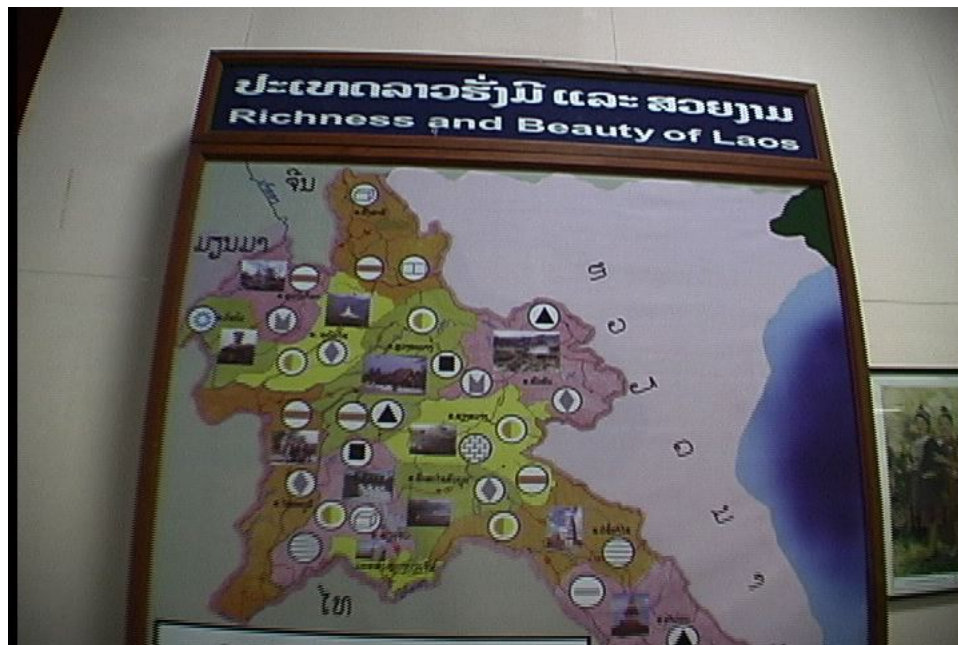


Figure 6.85: Map of the “Richness and Beauty of Laos”

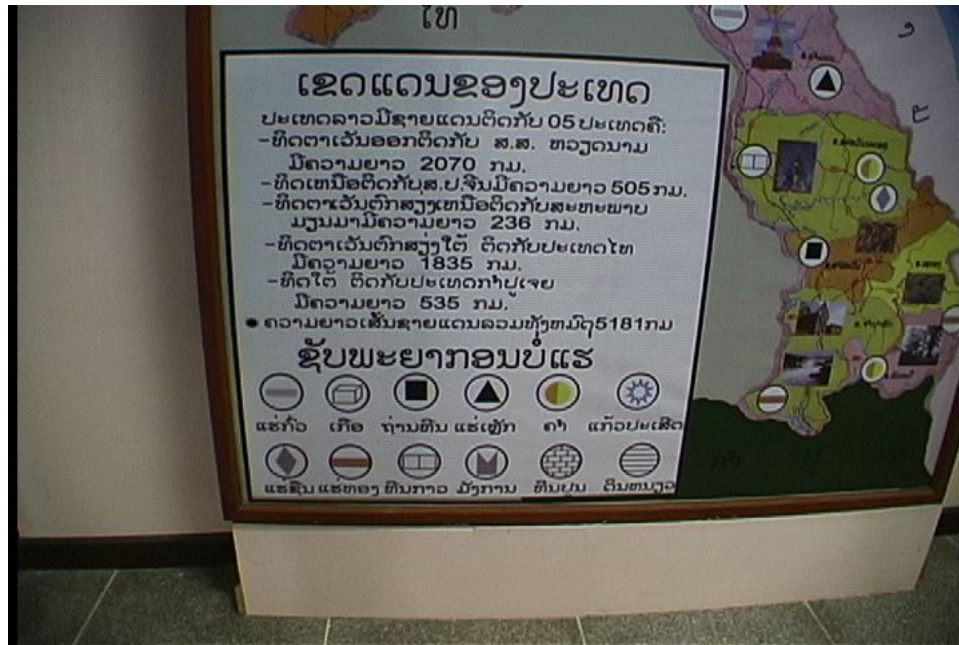


Figure 6.86: Key delineating the borders of Lao PDR and the things depicted on the map that can be found within those borders.



Figure 6.87: Display of photographs, mounted next to the map, depicting the “Richness and Beauty of Laos.” The first image on the left directly adjacent to the map is that of young female models wearing clothing that represents the three-tier classification system for the population – arranged in this photo from left to right as Highland, Lowland, and Midland. The politically dominant Lowland Lao are almost always positioned center.

The guide's introduction and presentation of these displays (the Kaysone bust, the map and the related photographs) established the contemporary political frame through which the entire exhibit is viewed. The guide's presentation of the Kaysone Phomvihane display and the map established, at the onset of the tour, the political end-State the exhibit is designed to justify. That is, the first wall of the exhibit (the Kaysone Phomvihane display and the map of the "Richness and Beauty of Laos" and the concept of the just and legitimate rule of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party over the multiethnic peoples and resources encompassed within the contemporary borders of the Lao People's Democratic Republic), is the conceptual endpoint of the visitor's guided tour through the museum. The student visitors are presented the teleological endpoint prior to circulating clockwise through the exhibit (i.e. prior to progressing through display spaces representing military struggles arranged chronologically).

Through presenting the socio-economic end-State of the exhibit first (i.e. presenting the Lao People's Revolutionary Party's rule over the population and resources within the contemporary borders of the Lao PDR first), the chronologically preceding political epochs and social struggles become steps or stages in a path that logically lead to this end-State. Provided with the end-State frame at the onset, each subsequent exhibit is presented as a stage in (or evidence of) the logical unilinear development of the Party's legitimate rise to rule over the population and resources contained within a geographical entity known as the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

In the section of the exhibit that the guide described as displays showing military encounters involved in "protecting the Lao state and nation from foreign invaders between the years 757 to 1893," one finds material object artifacts (or replications thereof) displayed with artists' interpretations of how such objects may have appeared in use. Intricately carved elephant chairs are displayed on a slightly elevated platform in front of oil paintings depicting mythologized kings (starting with Khun-Lo in 757) using such items while triumphing in battle and parading before the worshipful populace over whom they rule (see figures 6.88 and 6.89a below). The guide's descriptions of the struggles and triumphs of these mythologized kings would, later in the tour, harmonize with the guide's descriptions of revolutionary figures and Party founders such as Souphanouvong and Kaysone. The paintings created to depict Fa Ngum arriving to the cheers of a worshipful populous bear resemblance to the photographic images of Souphanouvong found later in the exhibit (compare the image composition of the painting of a triumphant Fa Ngum in figure 6.89a, with photo of triumphant Souphanouvong in figure 6.89b below).



Figure 6.88: Intricately carved elephant chairs displayed in front of artists renditions of a mythologized king sitting upon an elephant chair triumphantly leading Lao warriors into battle against foreign aggressors.

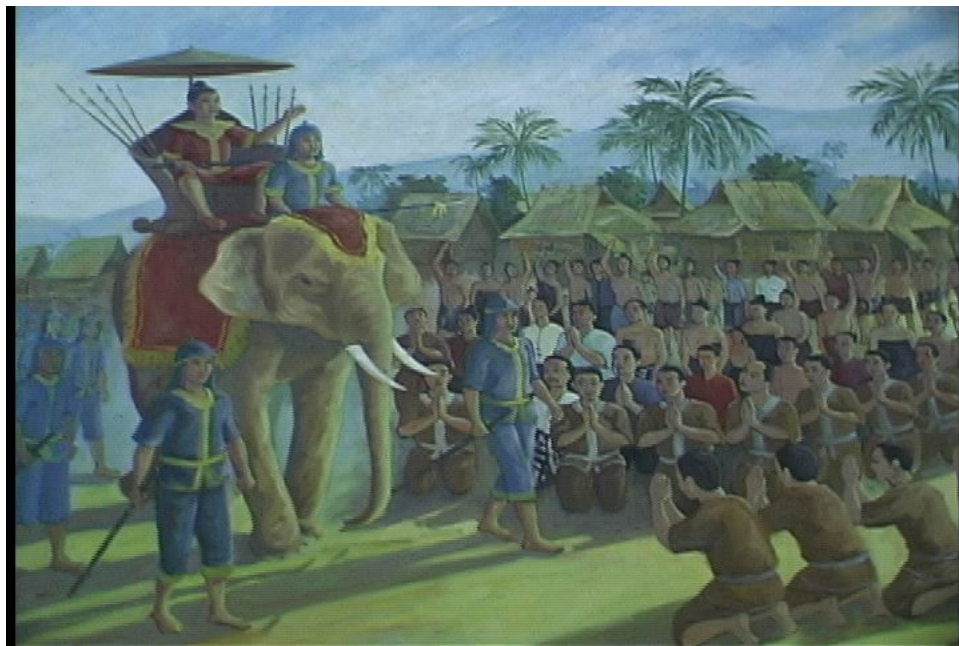


Figure 6.89a: An artists rendering of a worshipful populace lining the path in front of their grass roofed houses, paying homage to the mythologized king Fa Ngum riding triumphantly above the crowds upon an elephant chair.



Figure 6.89b: Revolutionary heroic leader Souphanouvong (center left) with cheering population lining a path in front of their grass roofed houses to cheer the revolutionary leader's triumphant arrival.

The exhibit, like the second floor of the National Museum, is arranged in parallel with the preamble to the Lao constitution. The majority of the items on display are representational of the chronological history of the Lao People's Army. The students passed the first half of the display in the dark (due to the power outage). When the guide was somewhere around the mid-1960's (well within the section of the museum devoted to fighting against American imperialism) the lights flickered on with an accompanying collective sigh of relief from many of the students.

The guide walked slowly from one display to the next, which enabled students to read the small amount of information posted on display tags. The guides lingered the longest around dioramas where they briefly pointed out details the models were intended to represent. Viengxay caves are where the revolutionary leaders bunkered down against American bombardment and developed strategies for the war. At a Viengxay cave diorama the guide mentioned which revolutionary leader resided and used which cave. Another guide flicked a couple of light switches attempting to illuminate small bulbs placed in the cave, but the lights did not go on. A large machine gun, aimed upwards as if ready to repel an aerial assault, stood on a tripod elevated upon a pedestal next to the diorama. The bulk of the guide's talk focused primarily on the successful shooting down of two American aircraft, these tales, framed around the revolutionary leaders, painted a picture in words of the leaders' perseverance against unbelievable odds in the fight to free the Lao people from the yokes of imperialist America.



Figure 6.90: Students gathered around a diorama representing the Viengxay caves as the guide describes the successful downing of two American aircraft in the area.

The guides' narration of most objects remained cursory for the duration of the tour. Walking backwards, in order to face the students, the guide made her way through the display of American imperialism. Standing in front of a display case containing, among other things, a drum, a banner, and a radio receiver, the guide stated: "These are the things used when we were fighting with imperialist America. After that we brought it from the battlefield to display here." The guide, however, gave no explanation of how any of these items were incorporated and used in the fight against imperialist America. Passing a glass-enclosed typewriter the guide paused and stated: "This typewriter was used to type orders, and documents, on a daily basis during the fighting." She moved on to the next display and the students slowly filed past looking down at the typewriter in its glass box. The objects were displayed as tangible evidence, yet, unlike the elephant chairs which had paintings to depict how they were used to battle foreign aggressors, these objects from the era of the American War stood alone with no explanation of how they might have been used to wage the successful battle. Who did the typing? What sorts of documents were produced? Where exactly was the typewriter used? Like many of the objects on display, the typewriter mounted on a pedestal and encased in glass appeared important and valuable, but the significance and historical value of the item was never fully explained.



Figure 6.91: Students file past a glass-enclosed typewriter, which, according to the guide, “was used to type orders, and documents, on a daily basis during the fighting.”

The display captions were also cursory, leaving much unmentioned, unexplained, and much to the imagination. In the exhibit of cooperation between the Lao People’s Army and the armies of other nations the students passed photographs with central images of Marx and Lenin, with no mention of their names, and no mention of how doctrines, and socio-political ideologies contributed to the military cooperation on display (see figure 6.92 and figure 6.93). The Lao People’s Army and the Party leaders at its inception and helm are the focus of the narrated tour in a simple tale of successive eras of repelling foreign aggressors. The narration of good versus evil, oppression versus liberation, righteousness versus injustice is not muddled with a detailing of ideological doctrine. Although key figures in the complex international dynamics of Cold War military strategies that supported the revolution are pictured in photographs alongside Lao People’s Army and revolutionary Party leaders, their identities and the roles they played are not introduced and do not dilute the narrative of the rise of the Party and its leaders.

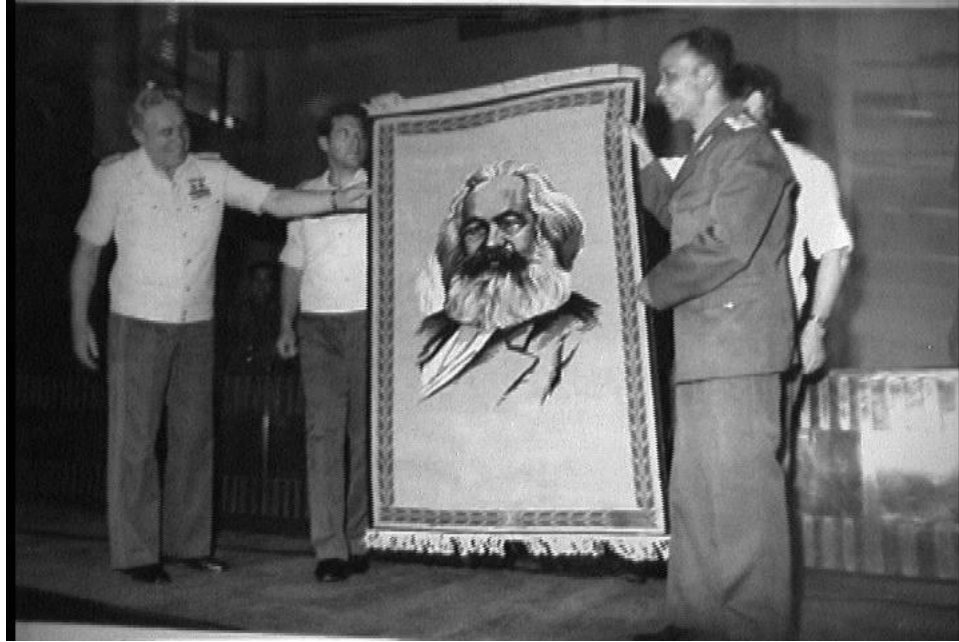


Figure 6.92: A photograph of East German and Lao military officials posing during an exchange of a large woven image of Karl Marx, with the caption that simply reads: “Military cooperation between Lao people army and German Democratic Republic army.”



Figure 6.93: Military officials from Lao PDR and the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics pose during the exchange of a large portrait of Vladimir Lenin, with a caption that simply reads: “Cooperation between Lao people army and the army of former Soviet Union socialist republic.”

The soldier/guide led the students past a display case housing various trinkets and material mementos of exchange visits, and on past a photo of Kaysone Phomvihane standing next to Fidel Castro as the two revolutionary leaders oversaw a signing ceremony. Neither the display caption nor the guide made any mention of whom the bearded cigar wielding man standing beside the esteemed Lao revolutionary leader might be, or what forms of cooperation they may have enacted through the meeting in Cuba. Kaysone, the Party leader, visited Cuba. This message – the fact that he visited Cuba – is enough to depict his importance and a relation with Cuba, and it is not muddled with the issues of why he made the visit.



Figure 6.94: A photograph of Kaysone Phomvihane standing beside Fidel Castro at a signing ceremony in Cuba, with a caption that reads, “President Kaysone Phomvihane visits Republic of Cuba.”

The guide moved forward and as students milled about the “Our Military and Armies of the World” exhibit space I put down my camera, and pointing to the figures of Marx, Lenin, and Castro asked some of the students if they could tell me who these figures were, or why their images were included in the photos. Many peered at the captions to see if the answers would be revealed in the text. None whom I asked were able to identify the figures, much less tell me about the significance these figures, central to the photos, might have played in the rise of the Party.

As the students traverse time along the circular path from the golden Kaysone Phomvihane bust back around to the Kaysone Phoumvihane bust, each aspect of the museum’s display contributes to the imaginary that throughout history a Lao People’s Army has been the just and honorable armed defender of the multi-ethnic Lao people and resources encompassed within the contemporary borders of Lao PDR. The museum’s exhibits and the guided tour focus upon the army defending the geographical region of present day Lao PDR and the Lao people from specific foreign aggressors: Fa Ngum is

painted as uniting and defending the Lao people against monochromatically clothed legions of foreign aggressors; an army of the Lao people is presented as defending against French colonialists; the Lao People's Army is shown repelling imperialist America; the Lao People's Army is pictured defending against Thai incursion. The guide's presentation of the exhibits to the students do not spell out ideological abstracts at the level of describing tenets of Communism verses tenets of Capitalism; rather the presentation of the exhibit is focused upon nationalism and specific instances of national defense. The story of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party is developed in tandem with the story of the history of the defense of Lao PDR.

Hammer and sickle flags increasingly appear in the background of photos starting in the displays depicting struggles against imperialist America. As with the tour of the displays in the National Museum, repelling colonial aggressors, not the ideologies behind the now abandoned "centrally planned system," are the focus of the narration. Marx and Lenin stare silently at the students from the images depicting military relations with foreign comrades. As the visitors circle through the exhibit space around towards the golden Kaysone bust, photos of party congresses are increasingly interspersed among military achievements; the central figures and heroes of the battles are the Party leaders. Through displays the Party is positioned as the insightful just leader of the army of Lao people defending the region and resources of Lao PDR; in the display, the Party is today what the mythologized Fa Ngum was in the past. At this point in the tour the students have cycled back around to the golden bust of Kaysone and the guides' labor in attempting to produce a teleological imaginary of the Revolutionary Party and its People's Army is complete.

#### **Student disengagement with the guided narrative:**

The focus and attention of many students was not necessarily attuned to the narrative produced by the soldier/guide. At the onset of the tour the darkness and lack of amplification appeared to provide a cover, and justification, for some students to venture a greater distance away from the guide than they did during their visit to the National Museum. Not tethered through auditory or visual links, individuals and groups of students established their own pace and pathway of progress through the exhibit space.

As the group moved around the display area the number of people surrounding the guide fluctuated. By the time the guide reached the year 1954 (one quarter of the way through the guided tour) only nine people stood within earshot of her. The majority of Sinxay Students were trailing behind her. Most were closely inspecting the items on display and reading the details typed on the exhibit tags. When the guide remained at a display for a minute or more, those students who were trailing behind had the opportunity to catch up to the group, and the number of those within earshot of her narration momentarily increased.

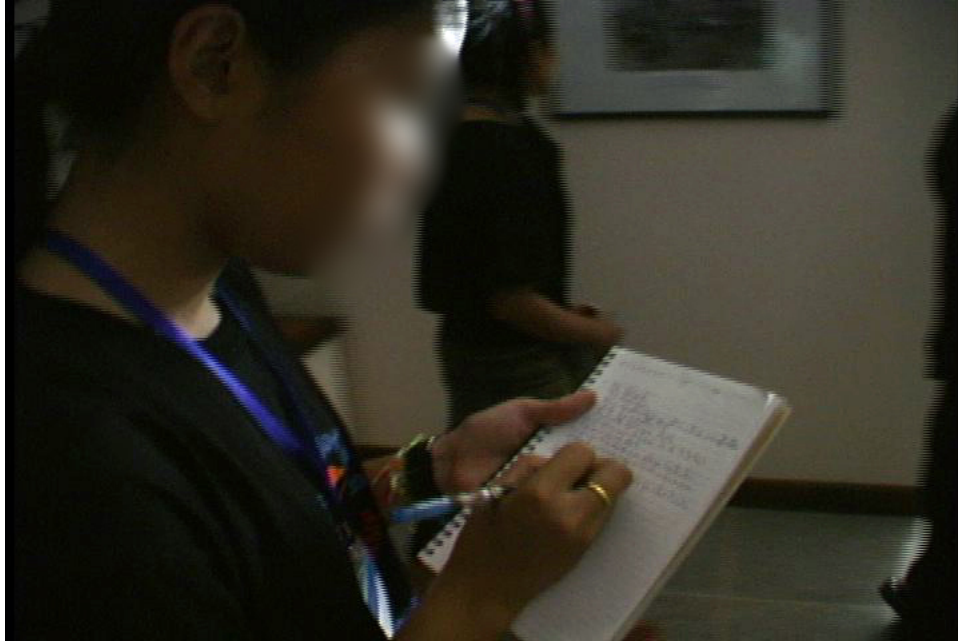


Figure 6.95: Trailing behind the guide, a Sinxay Student makes notes about the details of a display.

The guide did not discuss every item on display. As she guided the group from struggles against French colonialism to struggles against American imperialism, she silently passed a wall filled with statistics. Khamlah stopped to record the information. Khamlah did not use a notebook, rather she casually held her mobile phone a few inches in front of her mouth and read the charts aloud, recording her voice onto the phone's memory. At the time, the writers working for Vannasin relied entirely on pencil and paper, and did not yet employ this use of hand-held digital technology; in contrast with the Vannasin staff, the students' techniques of digital recording were comparatively innovative.



Figure 6.96: A Sinxay student uses her mobile phone to verbally record details of a statistical display that was bypassed by the guide.

As the tour passed from the darkness of 1954 into the darkness of 1955 there was a changing of the guards, another young female soldier/guide took over directing the tour. At this point in transition between exhibits the students once again congregated around the guide.

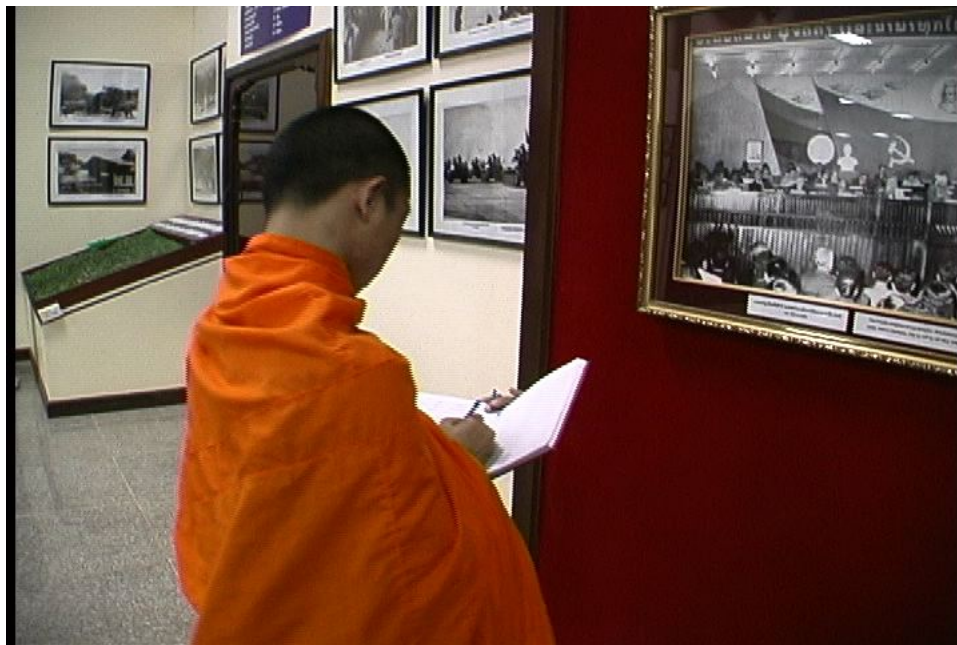


Figure 6.97: After examining the display captions, a Sinxay student jots down notes about a photo depicting the Fourth Party Congress of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (ພັກປະຊາຊົນປະຕິວັດລາວ) held in November 1986.

Student pen and paper note-taking practices (see Figure 6.97) continued, though became less frequent as they advanced through the era of American imperialism. Rules explained by the guides at the onset of the tour specifically prohibited the object: “cameras.” The rules, however, did not specifically prohibit the practice of “taking photographs.” With the electricity back on, and ample illumination, a few students made frequent use of the digital photo features of their mobile phones (see Figure 6.98 and 6.99).



Figure 6.98: A Sinxay student uses her mobile phone to take a photograph of a picture labeled “Chemical corps on vocational exercise.”



Figure 6.99: Once the lights are on, a student returns to the era of Fangum to record digital images of paintings that the group had previously passed in the dark. Here she uses her mobile phone to snap a close-up picture of a painting's display caption.

Digital picture taking with mobile phones was practiced within the direct line of sight of the soldier/guides, though always at some distance from the guides. Students using photo features on mobile phones took close-up shots of display captions as well as wide shots of the entire item on display. When the lights came on, those students engaged in digital photography eventually made their way back through the exhibit space, photographing displays they had previously passed in the darkness. The students made no efforts to conceal their practices of mobile phone photography, but this was not the case with the prohibited tactile exploration of objects.

**Tactile explorations where touch is prohibited:**

Downstairs before embarking on the tour, the soldiers informed the students that they should not touch items on display. A number of objects throughout the museum were labeled with small signs stating, "Do not touch." Despite the rules and labels, tactile explorations constituted a common form of interacting with the items on display. Touch, as I detail at the end of this chapter, would also prove a means of punctuating expression by students in their prodding of the rules and Party narrative.



Figure 6.100: Pictured in the background of this photo on the left hand side a group of students are huddled around the guide as she explains an exhibit. A few meters away from the guide the three students in the foreground are conducting tactile explorations of a different exhibit. The student on the left side of the photo uses his pen to tap against the displayed wreckage of a fighter plane flown by the accomplices of imperialist America. The student near the center of the photo touches the wreckage with his right hand.

Through thumping with a flick of one's finger, knocking with one's knuckles, tapping with the non-writing end of a ball point pen, students explored the acoustic results and made educated guesses about the material composition of objects on display. When the soldier/guides were not within visual range of the student's actions, only those items housed behind Plexiglas appeared to be off limits or out of range of the student's touch.

Cloaked in the darkness of the lingering power outage, tactile explorations of objects on display took place within close proximity of the guides. More than one student provided others with whispered narrations of their tactile explorations of the exhibit. Standing in the dark in front of a display of items recovered from the accomplices of imperialist America, Khean and Khoon (progressing through the space a few meters in advance of the guide's tour) joked about the size of a hand-held radio. Khoon leans over to touch the item and Khean giggles as he comments "oh, this one is heavy," then jokes about how heavy it would be to carry around if contemporary mobile phones were that size. Khean and Khoon moved on to another display as Xiong (a male university student) and one of the young monks approach. Xiong identified one of the items on the table as a parachute, and then reached out to feel the surface of a flight helmet.

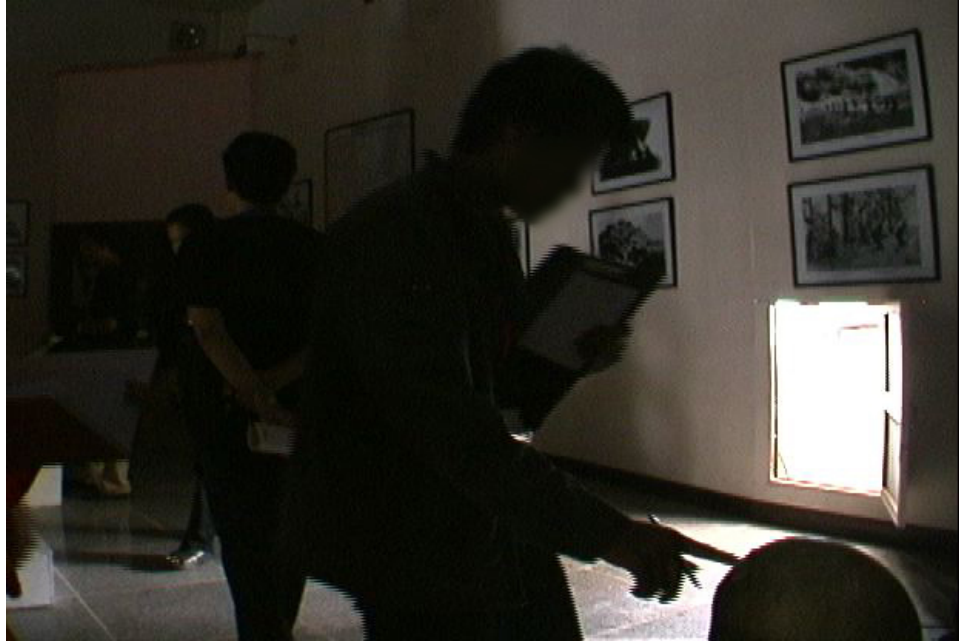


Figure 6.101: In the darkness, out of sight of the guide, a student gently runs his finger across the pocked and pitted surface of an enemy combatant's flight helmet.

As explained earlier, the lights were out for much of the tour. While Xiong and the young monk stood at the recovered item exhibit examining the helmet the guide was just about three quarters of the way through the tour. This was when the lights flickered on. The sound of many breathing a collective sigh of relief filled the room, but the lights meant that the cover of darkness no longer shielded the students' actions. Exposed in the light, the students changed their actions while in close proximity to the guide, and their visible actions of sneaking a feel became much more cautious and subtle.



Figure 6.102: Moments after the lights come on a student glances around, moves close to a display and gently knocks upon the helmet of an imperialist collaborator.

Alounny, Vatsana, and Sagone (three female university students) approached the display as Xiong and the young monk moved forward to the next. Alounny glanced about, and then leaned close to the display space to gently knock upon an army helmet. She leaned back and whispered something she had discovered to Sagone.

As the guide directs the group around the corner of a display to another part of the exhibition, six students, including Khamlah remain huddled around a downed Thai drone aircraft. A small label perched atop the drone read: “Do not touch.” Students beside Khamlah leaned forward for a close look at the aircraft, with their hands folded carefully behind their backs. Khamlah glanced around, then reached forward and gave the fuselage three quick flicks with her left index finger.



Figure 6.103: Thai drone aircraft on display with telephoto lens protruding from the front.  
Figure 6.104: Khamlah tapping on the surface of the drone as she and others explore the material composition of the craft.

The aircraft appeared to be made from aluminum, but Khamlah's flicks result in a dull fiberglass sound. She ran her finger along the inside of the fuselage from where a nose-cone was apparently dislodged and a telephoto lens now protrudes, then gave the outside another three quick flicks. Moving her hand to a slightly higher position on the fuselage she tapped the surface. The students turned and walked to rejoin the group of students standing closer to the guide.

The expressly prohibited behavior, conducted outside of the range of view of the guide, had provided the group with an expanded understanding of the object on display. All those who were gathered at the object with Khamlah now knew what it sounded like when it was thumped. With that information one could surmise about the material makeup of the craft. Their prohibited explorations provided the students with insights beyond those given through the guide's cursory descriptions of objects on display, and contributed to understandings outside of the guides' well-practiced production of the toured military-historic narrative. While some of these explorations may best be understood as student attempts at augmenting understandings in harmony with the imaginary produced through the guide's narration of displayed military-historic representations, other student explorations were creative productions of their own narratives and disruptive in a manner beyond simply not being attuned to the guides' verbal narration.

#### **Student produced narratives:**

As one might imagine among a group of young people with an expressed affinity for writing, the students also used the opportunity of the visit to produce their own narrations. While the guide's narration presented information as factual, the students were not bound to the same type of wrote recitation from a single perspective.

The movement of students a distance forward from the guides opened opportunities for some to question the exhibits. When the guide had only progressed to the year 757, Bounmee (the National University student with a penchant for creative disruption of class activities) and two other male students were already up to somewhere around the 1800's. Bounmee and the others stood very close to the glass of a dark display case peering in at purportedly ancient weaponry. Without the guide's narration they discussed the items in their own terms.

Bounmee (holding his unopened notebook behind his back, clearly uninterested in copying down the information the guide was reciting) whispered a humorous comment expressing apparent disbelief in the reality of a very large weapon in the display: "That weapon is so big it would take two people to hold it." Bounmee was not directly stating his disbelief in the item's authenticity, rather he approached the subject with a statement that was a stark contrast to the 'everything here on display is factual' style of narration the guide employed a few meters away. Questioning the authenticity of the object on display was an indirect, though pointed questioning the authenticity of the narrative the military guide was at that same moment attempting to produce. Even expressed in a whisper with no intention of others hearing it, Bounmee's comment proved rather surprising to the two young men standing beside him, invoking laughter that they struggled to stifle. Students did not engage in such whispered questioning of the exhibited imaginary within earshot of the guide.



Figure 6.105: Separated from the guide, Bounmee and two other male students stand peering into a case purportedly displaying ancient weapons, and joke about the practicality of actually using the pieces on exhibit.

For much of the early sections of the tour the guide walked backwards through the exhibit space, facing those students who followed her in a group. Some of the students who proceeded through the exhibit, in front of the group, behind her back, and out of her line of site had rather creative interactions with the items on display. As two young men, Khean and Khoon, walked slightly in advance of the group, they came upon a display of French colonial era rifles with attached bayonets. Khean pretended to pull a rifle from the display, and holding the imaginary weapon in his hand he silently pantomimed how one would pull the bayonet out of an opponent in the midst of battle. A few meters behind the two mimes, fifteen students appeared to be listening to the guide deliver a well-rehearsed explanation of the significance of photographs hung on the wall.

Khean and Khoon continued to quietly enact a series of creative and entertaining engagements with the material objects on display. As the guide carried on with her description of the photos, the two young men advanced to the next rack of colonial era rifles. Khean leaned over the rifles peering down the barrel of one. Suddenly an imaginary bullet shot through the barrel, and Khean whipped his head backwards narrowly avoiding the make-believe projectile as it flew from the gun and struck the ceiling above. Through such collaborative engagements various students produced their own narratives at the periphery of the guided tour, enlivening the tour with creative and imaginative interactions.



Figure 6.106: On the left side of the image the guide stands describing photographs hung on the wall. On the right side of the photo two students proceeding through the exhibit space behind her back are about to pretend the rifles on display suddenly discharge through the ceiling narrowly missing the head of the young man pictured leaning over the barrel of the guns.

Once the lights were on and the guided tour had ended, groups of students ventured back into the previous dark exhibit space to revisit what the darkness had prevented them from seeing. With the soldier/guides standing far outside of earshot of their conversations, some students provided each other with humorously casual narrations of the exhibits. One group of three young men stopped to examine a painting of Fa Ngum, the Party-revered king sitting on a throne-like chair atop an elephant. One of the students acted as the guide, narrating the exhibit for his two friends. The student, however, dropped the reverential vocabulary the soldier/guide had used when she spoke of the same painting. He elicited giggles among his friends by taking on the role of the guide and casually and simply stating: “Look at the big man on the great big elephant.” Gone were the tones of reverence. Gone too was the mythologized story of triumph over foreign aggressors. In the student’s narration of the painting Fa Ngum was simply “the big man on the great big elephant.” In the setting of the museum, and in light of the formality of the tour they had just completed, the student’s stripping of Fa Ngum down to a man produced a considerable amount of humor. His narration was a verbal prodding of the guided tour, a prodding of the reverential image of the Party and its leaders the guided tour and the exhibit were intended to produce.

As the three moved on to a second painting, the student/guide approached the canvas, and attempted to engage his two friends in a discussion about whether the artist realistically depicted the death of soldiers. His opinion was clear: the artist failed in his/her attempt at realism. His critique, like Bounmee’s critique regarding the weapons, was much more than a simple critique of an object, it was a playful questioning of the

authenticity at the foundation of the entire imaginary they had just been presented. Out of earshot from the soldier/guides, and in than hands of the peer/guide, the objects on display are not untouchable representations of unquestioned historical truths, but rather objects and narratives to be questionably prodded. He punctuated his point by breaking the rule of touch, and irreverently poking two of the questionably painted corpses with his finger (see figure 6.107).



Figure 6.107: With no guides nearby, a student touches one of the figures of a dead soldier as he discusses with others whether it was painted in a realistic manner.

### **Conclusion:**

Through the presentation of text and images above I've detailed how the Ministry of Information and Culture, through the Vannasin Unit's Sinxay Pen's Camp, incorporated field trips to other government institutions as part of the practices of remembering the social body of Lao propagandists and the inculcation of a "life capital" for prospective young writers. These field trips were an integral part of attempting to produce a continuity of practice in the transition between established Ministry writers and future writers for the single Party State.

Through the tours of the displays at the Lao National Museum and the Lao People's Army Museum the Sinxay Pen's Camp students were guided through the preamble of the Lao constitution and introduced to the evolution of the single Party State and the importance of memory (i.e. memory of the struggles against colonial rule, foreign aggression, and imperialism) and the Lao People's Revolutionary Party for the development of the nation. At the Lao National Film Archive and Video Center the Sinxay students were introduced to the work of the Ministry in support of the Party through the production of memory.<sup>25</sup> The pastiche of archival footage spliced together with a compelling narrative, and contemporary footage of the memorial ceremony, produced an emotionally moving representation of the Ministry's argument for the

Party's work towards preserving the memory of those who died as the result of American bombing.

The defense of the “richness and beauty” of the nation against western imperialism is a fundamental component of the narrative of the Lao constitution, the document narrating the legitimacy of the Party's rule. Producing the memory of “the multiethnic Lao people” engaged in the “difficult and arduous struggles full of great sacrifices until they managed to crush the yokes of domination and oppression of the colonial and feudal regimes” will be part of the duties of the young Sinxay students who eventually do become members of the Ministry's pool of writers. Producing media to mitigate the threats of social transformation (i.e. the threat to the tripartite identity composed of one's labor, the State, and the family) as members of Lao society increasingly engage in capital accumulation will also be part of the labor of these writers as they enter into the social practices of the Ministry.

As was evident during the tours of the museums, while students may be moving in parallel with the guides through the exhibits (i.e. in parallel with the narrative of the Party), many moved back and fourth between a close adherence to the guide and her message, and a periphery out of sight of the guide where the objects exhibited could be more creatively explored. Within the institutions of the State and in the presence of Lao State authorities, the young want-to-be writers prodded, creatively explored, and re-narrated what they were presented, despite the fact that many of such prodding explorations were expressly prohibited, and some of their re-narrations disrupted the reverence of the officially presented version of Lao history/social memory.

The next chapter takes up where this one leaves off – exploring the tensions and relations of resistance that are produced when the older generation of writers engages prospective newcomers in the process of conforming their creative expression to the structures expected by members of the Ministry's community of writers.

---

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> The three exceptions being: Somsavat the active duty soldier, Chanthaboun the fruit vender, and Ms. Khamphone who is an employee of the State Printing House.

<sup>2</sup> The initial promulgation of the New Economic Mechanism is described in chapter two.

<sup>3</sup> I am drawing upon the concepts of continuity and displacement developed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (Lave and Wenger 1991 pp. 113-117).

<sup>4</sup> The *bacci soukhuan* is commonly referred to in English as “a spirit calling ceremony” (see Tambiah 1970; Cheesman 2004).

<sup>5</sup> The *khane* is a reed instrument that continues to be a central instrument used in Lao folk music.

<sup>6</sup> (Constitution of the Lao PDR 2005)

<sup>7</sup> (See Phongkhao 2002, 2004)

<sup>8</sup> (Sonesourinh 2002)

<sup>9</sup> (Evans 2002 p. 10; Karlström 2009 p. 62)

<sup>10</sup> (Vorakoun 2004)

<sup>11</sup> (Marking the 50th anniversary of the LPRP 2005)

<sup>12</sup> For example, see Evans(Evans 2009).

---

<sup>13</sup> It is important to note that the concept and narratives of just and legitimate rule over populations have deep historical roots in the region that continue to influence contemporary politics in what is present day mainland Southeast Asia (see Asoka et al. 1978).

<sup>14</sup> The borders of the area that constitute contemporary Lao PDR were established in recent historical times. For example, the border between the French protectorate of *Le Laos Français* and Siam was not established until the signing of the Franco-Siamese treaty of 1863 (see Winichakul 1994, 1996).

<sup>15</sup> (See Ferguson and Gupta 2002 p. 984)

<sup>16</sup> Hence long before the contemporary borders (see Winichakul 1994, 1996).

<sup>17</sup> (See Anderson 1991)

<sup>18</sup> (Phengphachan 2006)

<sup>19</sup> (ສິມມະນິ 2006)

<sup>20</sup> (ພິຈິຕ et al. 2006)

<sup>21</sup> Voice-over reflections of Mr. Saengphet from the film *Forget Oneself*. Transcribed and translated by the author with invaluable assistance provided by Dalounny Phonsouny.

<sup>22</sup> Lyrics by by Phongsawan Boulom (ພິງສະຫວັນ ບູລົມ), from the final song in the film *Forget Oneself*. Transcribed and translated by the author with invaluable assistance provided by Dalounny Phonsouny.

<sup>23</sup> (See Bourdet 2000; Stuart-Fox 2005; Than and Tan 1997)

<sup>24</sup> As an employee of the Ministry of Information and Culture making a documentary about the training of writers I was allowed to bring my camera into the museum and record the tour and displays.

<sup>25</sup> In the conclusion of her book *Post-war Laos: The Politics of Culture, History and Identity* Vatthana Pholsena argues, “As the country progressively opens itself to the market economy and international tourism, anti-capitalist and anti-Western imperialist rhetoric is no longer appropriate for galvanizing the population behind the leadership.” Judging from what was screened as part of the inculcation of young writers for the Ministry, it would be difficult to imagine that those Ministry employees who produced *The Sorrow of Piew Cave* and *Forget Oneself* concur with what Pholsena deems appropriate for galvanizing the population behind the Party (see Pholsena 2006).

## Chapter 7

### **Relations of resistance – adaptive-perpetuation and the intergenerational struggles in the practices of conformity**

#### **Introduction:**

Through the field trips to the museums and film archives we have developed an understanding of the type of content and subject matter the Vannasin administrators would like to have flowing through the tips of the aspiring writers pens. We are left, however with the question of: how exactly does the older generation aim to achieve a conformity in practice that will result in this flow of ‘life capital,’ the flow of writing that projects, supports, and fosters the older generation’s desired image of the Party and its single-Party rule? How do the members of the older generation inculcate conformity of practice? How is the practice of conformity to be understood in practices of adaptive-perpetuation?

Learning to be a Lao writer, in no small part, means learning to conform one’s work to the structural expectations of those who are participants in the community of writers actively producing materials for the Ministry of Information and Culture. However, conformity must be understood broadly, as to encompass and apply to not simply the products of one’s labor, but also to the social relations of the community of practice. As a result, the older generation’s approaches to inculcating conformity in the incorporation of outsiders into the ongoing social practices of the community are multi-dimensional and diverse.

A considerable amount of labor is invested (by members of both the older generation and the younger generation) in the production of the younger generation’s conformity of practice. In this chapter I examine how practices of inculcation that fostered camaraderie among peers simultaneously reinforced the social divide between novice writers, and the older generation of practitioners. The activities examined in this chapter also shed light on how young people involved in the Ministry’s training of writers labored to conform their artistic products to meet the structural expectations of the Ministry of Information and Culture employees. This labor of conformity, however, was in many respects inseparable from a production of intergenerational tensions. Therefore, a central question explored here is: How are tensions and relations of resistance produced and mediated in relation to the older generation’s efforts of inculcating practices of conformity? In the pages that follow I detail how two generations come to a head negotiating and determining the gives and takes of what will constitute the future of a practice they are both inseparably involved in adapting and perpetuating. Their mutual interests – and their production of their social identities as practitioners of a form of artistic expression are bound up in the future of the practice – but adaptive-perpetuation of the practice, the products, and the community of practice are threatened by tensions produced through their interactions around conformity.

I show that a key aspect of the inculcation of conformity is to provide the aspiring community members with enticement – a glimpse behind the curtain to an alluring and attractive staged ‘back stage’<sup>1</sup> where the practitioners can be seen enjoying the benefits of being part of the community of practice. Producing conditions where there is a stark and

highly noticeable difference between what is afforded to those who are members of the community of practice (conforming) and those who are outside of its walls is an important aspect of attempting to entice young people into peripheral participation. Simultaneously, such practices of staged rewards are employed to foster camaraderie among those who do labor within the community of practice. Their engagement in the receipt of rewards, and the display of these rewards to those who have an expressed interest in joining the community constitutes a means of producing cohesion among the members of the older generation of practitioners.

Members of the older generation, however, do not simply rely upon the performance of rewards as a means of encouraging conformity in practice. Rather, the members of the older generation approach the production of conformity in practice among the young in multiple diverse and varied ways. Combined with efforts at enticement through the visual and auditory presentation of self-rewards, some members of the older generation labor to produce supportive venues where the young people can experience both the thrill of sharing the products of their labor and the adulation of their peers. Others wield a heavier hand, and approach efforts at producing conformity in practice through such means as public humiliation of non-conformists.

The peer popularity of the products of young aspiring practitioners, and disapproval of these products by members of the older generation, provide us insight into the fact that the young aspiring practitioners (in contrast to the gate-keeping members of the older generation seeking to produce conformity in practice) may in fact be more attuned to the necessary changes in practice and products needed for successful adaptive-perpetuation of the community of practice. The interactions between members of the older generation and the young reveal another form of intergenerational tension in the practices of adaptive-perpetuation: tensions related to the older generation's resistance to adapting their structural understandings to the contemporary changing nature of what constitutes "Lao" identity among the members of the broader Lao society.

The chapter centers on activities related to a "practice camping" trip organized by Mr. Paengan to simultaneously serve as, 1) a reward for the hard work of the Vannasin staff and Sinxay Pen's Camp instructors, and 2) an instructional and preparatory outing for the Sinxay Pen's camp students. In his description of the intentions of the camp Mr. Paengan explained to me that the activity was considered "practice camping" for students as it provided students practice on two different levels. First the camp constituted the point in the course where lectures on writing ended and students began to engage in the supervised practice of writing and putting the information gleaned from field trips and lectures into practice. This was the point where the structural expectations introduced through lectures and the "inspiration and the life capital (ຫີນຮອນຊີວິດ)" inculcated through museum and film archive visits, converged and came "through the tip of their pens, for society and their friends to read . . . ." Secondly, he stressed that the "practice camping" activity provided students with an opportunity to experience first-hand what camping was like, enabling them to better prepare themselves for an upcoming two night camping excursion which would serve as the major culminating activity for the camp prior to a certification ceremony.

However, Mr. Dee described an additional goal of the practice camping and camping components of the Sinxay Pen's Camp training program as bringing students together in order to provide students an opportunity for learning how to work together. A

phrase he used to describe the intended interaction of students was “ການຝຶກຢູ່ຮ່ວມກັນ” which may be best translated as “practice being together” or “practicing togetherness.” Mr. Dee stated that this practice of togetherness was “not just about writing, but about how to cook together, eat together. . . sleep together in the same location . . . and participate in activities together.” Mr. Dee explained, that through such practices of togetherness during the practice camping and camping activities, students would “learn how to deal with problems when they arise, and find solutions in order to move beyond their difficulties.”

In chapter five I provided a brief description of how (after Bounmee’s attempts at gaining meaningful feedback on his composition from Mr. Soubanh were rebuffed) Bounmee, Somsanouk, Noukham, Thippavanh circulated a draft of Bounmee’s lyrics amongst themselves, and collectively (and covertly) worked on the piece during Mr. Chaomaly’s lecture on songwriting. In chapter six I described how students worked collaboratively, in parallel with the movement of the tours of the museums, to further explore aspects of the displays and produce new narratives for the toured objects. I begin this chapter examining a point in the course shortly before the “practice camping” trip, around the middle of August, when the lectures on structure of Lao writing (described in chapter five) were continuing, and soon after the field trips to the Museums and National Film Archive (discussed in chapter six) had ended.

In each of these examples we see the students coming together to produce a social space, outside of the purview of the camp administrators, where they can freely interact, collaborate and share the products of their labor. One of the primary goals of the practice camping trip was to provide the students with supervised practice in writing. In light of this I begin with a description of the students’ peer collaboration, peer critique and expressions of appreciation, to give the reader an idea of how the students interacted with each other away from the supervision of instructors, during the ‘in between’ times (between lectures) prior to the “practice camping” excursion. This description will provide the reader with an understanding of how the student-initiated-engagements with each other, outside the scope of the older generation’s supervision, compared with the students’ collaborative engagements organized by the members of the older generation during supervised practice of writing. My intent is also to provide some foreshadowing for the reader enabling the reader to understand later in the chapter how, as a result of the older generation’s expectations that students work collectively together to produce a product (in this case a song), students congregated around those young aspiring writers who already had rather polished work ready for presentation and the group adopted these products as their own.

### **Peer Collaboration, Critique, and Appreciation outside the view of the older generation:**

Up through to the middle of August the writer’s training course was composed primarily of lectures and field trips. While the staff had provided limited opportunities for the students to share their musical work, the instructional staff did not provide opportunities for the students to work collaboratively to produce such work. Student collaboration on student-generated writing, although not structured into the camp program up to this point, was not something the members of the older generation had to forcefully labor to produce. Rather, students created their own opportunities for

collaboration during class time. Bounmee was far from the only student who employed the wall of attentive students to produce a collaborative workspace during lectures. However, activities of collaboration, critique and appreciation of each others work were engaged in with undivided attention of the participants primarily during the break time between classes. These interactions among students took place while the teachers were outside of the classroom, during the 'free time' between structured instruction. Student collaboration occurred spontaneously out of sight of the instructors.

During the noon break on August 11<sup>th</sup>, ten students gathered in the back of the room collaboratively discussing and practicing moves for a classical style dance that would be performed during the upcoming certification ceremony. Classical dance has elemental structures of movement, positioning, and timing that were produced through generations of social interactions with subtle and not so subtle variations arising through context and contact with other practitioners over time.<sup>2</sup>

Houmphanh, a male university student with more dance experience than the young high school students suggested a basic choreography. Noukham, the youngest high school student in the group contributed hand movements to the body positioning choreographed by Houmphanh. Other students commented on the moves and modeled what they believed would be fitting hand movements. Two other students joined Houmphanh and Noukham, in unison in a line side by side they moved a few steps forward, and a few steps back, practicing their simultaneous hand movements. Noukham noticed her steps were off and quietly she moved behind Houmphanh to shadow his moves perfecting her step.

With Houmphanh and Noukham we see that even within the group of students there exist practices of apprenticeship. Noukham, a relatively novice dancer engages with Houmphanh, moving along with his experienced movements, to produce and perfect her performance of the dance. Dance was a collaborative engagement, not a solitary task to be performed alone. Noukham, the novice, was taken under the wing of the older students and guided through the practice in this relatively safe (i.e. out of view of the public) practice space. No one was forcing Noukham into the dance; she was entering as a participant on her own volition. This development of moves through engagement in the actual practice of dance stood in stark contrast to the rigid didactic approach the older generation employed for teaching the structures of writing during lecture.

The ten students engaged in developing the dance collaborated, modeling movements; questioning others in regards to their own positioning, timing and movements; critiquing the moves of others; and refining their own movements to align with what the other group members determine to be the proper way to perform. Through this collaboration each student shared the role of instructor, each student shared the role of student, and each student contributed his or her expertise.

Importantly, and unlike the intended structure of lectures, the students used the single large meeting hall not as a venue in which all present were expected to be focused simultaneously on one subject, but rather as a space in which multiple different practices could be simultaneously taking place. Not everyone was expected to focus on dance, those interested in dance focused on dance, those interested in other subjects engaged in those other subjects. This is important because break time provided the opportunity for students interests to guide student activities, it was therefore a time where students interests came to the surface, visible in their engagements with others.

At the same moment as Noukham was engaging in dance, a few paces away, two young monks sat together at a table in the middle of the room silently writing side by side. A couple of desks in front of the monks, two young women, Thongphim (a young female elementary school teacher) and Phouththalom (a quiet and reserved female high school student), sat together working through the composition of song lyrics. Phouththalom flipped through a book of Lao song lyrics and her notes while chatting to a friend on her mobile phone. Thongphim had written her lyrics in a large hard cover note book typical of what the Vannasin accountants use for record keeping. She placed a smaller notebook on top of the larger one and began to jot down some ideas.

Bounmee, sitting at a desk in front of Thongphim and Phouththalom, turned around in his seat and gently removed Thongphim's large red notebook from beneath her smaller book, and placed this collection of her lyrics on his table. In a soft quiet voice he began to sing her lyrics aloud. Thongphim stood and moved to his side. She interpreted his singing gently stating, "No. No, that is not correct. Slower. Listen." She had a different tune and pacing in mind for the lyrics and modeled the tune and pacing she intended. Together Thongphim and Bounmee worked through the page aloud.

Although Bounmee was one who used the shield of students' bodies to engage with others during lectures, his engagements during break were quite different. No longer stifled by the need to whisper, he was able to sing Thongphim's lyrics at a volume for her to clearly hear how he perceived her piece. With all the other students in the room focused on various other activities Thongphim, who was usually quite shy, expressed a freedom of vocalizing her work, a freedom of voice and song that did not exist in the structure of the lectures, but rather in the margins and unintended spaces of that structure.

Khamlah, sitting next to Bounmee was busy writing in her own notebook. Somsanouk (a young student at the National University who always appeared to be in a joking and jovial mood) approached Khamlah (the female university student whom others joked had many male suitors) from behind, noticing him out of the corner of her eye she covered her work so he couldn't see it. It was not quite at a stage at which Khamlah was willing to share it. She and Somsanouk shared in a joking banter. She slid a piece of paper over her words on the top half of the page, leaving open the bottom half of the page where she continued to write, glancing up at him she smiled and told him "It isn't ready yet." Somsanouk walked over to stand beside and listen to Thongphim as she continued to sing her lyrics aloud.

Khamlah's production was not taking place under the time constraints that would govern class assignments – time constraints imposed by the members of the older generation and Ministry administrators. During the upcoming practice camp her production would have to fit within a rigid timeframe. But here in the space between lectures delivered by the members of the older generation her productive activities of thinking and writing could take place at her own pace.

On the opening day of the camp the older generation of writers delivered self-introductions, detailing aspects of their lives. The works they produced were readily available to the young, revealing in many respects their interests and contributions to the Party and its institutions. For the most part the members of the older generation of writers approached the getting-to-know-you activities from the standpoint that it was the students' responsibility to get to know the members of the older generation of writers,

and not the other way around. The young people, through these break time activities were, however very involved in making opportunities to share information about themselves, their interests, the forms of expression that captivated their attention, the subject matter around which their interests and work revolved. There were no such opportunities for the younger generation to share their lives with the older generation of writers, the older generation departed at lunch, cloistering with each other over meals or retreating to socialize with friends in different parts of the Ministry.

As Ajaan Phoumjai was relatively alone in interacting with the Sinxay Culture Club students, few among the Sinxay Pen's Camp knew of Seang's burning desire to write and perform pop songs. Seang was a vocational school student studying road construction and paving, although the path he hoped to build for himself was a career in music. He was the only student who attended both the Sinxay Culture Club (model) training a number of months earlier, and the Sinxay Pen's Camp (writers) training. Foresight, produced through Saeng's painfully off-key a cappella rendition of a contemporary Lao pop song early in the course of the Culture Club training, induced club members to cringe each time he stepped forward to perform for the club. After an initial hearing of Seang's voice Mr. Soubanh also appeared pained by Seang's eagerness to volunteer song performances. But in the break time between lectures fellow students embraced his need for development, and he in return shared his appreciation of their work.

As Khamlah continued to work on her not-ready-to-be-shared writing, Phonpaseuth and Seang sat on the stage at the front of the room, in a corner right up against the red velvet curtain. Seang was attending the writer's camp in pursuit of his dream of becoming a singer/songwriter. Seang, held a small thumb-sized digital recorder in front of Phonpaseuth recording Phonpaseuth as he sang and played the guitar. Seang monitored the audio through small ear-bud headphones attached to the recorder.

The song Phonpaseuth performed was a song he had composed titled "Memories of good things" (note: the lyrics are presented later in this chapter). As with all of his compositions, Phonpaseuth had written this song in the *paeng sa ting* (ເພງສະຕິງ) style. *Paeng sa ting* was not the style of songwriting taught by either Mr. Soubanh (the Lao National Radio Host) or Mr. Chaomaly (the lyricist). Phonpaseuth's talent for guitar playing and singing were not typical of a young high school student his age, and as he sang with a passion his facial expressions appeared to reflect sincere sentiments and emotions in tune with the lyrics. On the corner of the stage away from the main group of students in the room, Phonpaseuth gave a heartfelt performance. Phonpaseuth's facial expressions matched the passion of the lyrics. As he strummed the chords his voice resonated with a longing for a distant love.

At this point in time Phonpaseuth had yet to become involved with the student performances in front of the entire class. Seang, on the other hand, had already sung in front of the class. Phonpaseuth and Seang were two of the students who crowded around the table with lyrics vying for the attention of Mr. Soubanh (the radio host and song writer) on the days he came to teach. But Phonpaseuth didn't push his way up to the front; rather he lingered quietly at the periphery of the group of students waiting until everyone else had had a turn trying to get Mr. Soubanh to read their work. Phonpaseuth's demeanor was not that of someone who is shy, but rather that of someone who puts careful thought into what they do. Phonpaseuth appeared increasingly confident in his

abilities as more students performed in front of the class. But, his performances (and they weren't collaborations, they were performances of already polished pieces), like today's tended to be low key, off on the periphery of the main group, to an audience of one or two appreciative students.

Saeng's appreciation of Phonpaseuth's talent was evident in the act of his recording Phonpaseuth's performance. The break between lectures, outside of the line of sight and earshot of the lecturers provided the students with opportunities to practice for such forms of peer appreciation.

Phonpaseuth's song was not a collaboratively produced piece. He did not present it in a manner to be critiqued. Rather his use of break time was that of polished performance, producing opportunities for peer appreciation. Like the acts of collaboration and critique, the performance and appreciation – the practices of displaying respect for the talent of others – took place during the breaks, away from the supervision of instructors, and contributed to the fostering of a respectful solidarity among the talented students taking part in the course.

The description above provides us with a view of the manner in which students engaged with each other outside of the structured supervision of the members of the older generation of writers. I present this at the start of this chapter to provide us a point of reference with which we can build an understanding of the intergenerational tensions that arise when the older generation of writers and the younger generation of aspiring writers intersect through the supervised practice of writing.

What follows below is a description of the “practice camping” activity organized by Mr. Paengan and the administrators of Vannasin Magazine. I begin with a description of how the activity was introduced to students, and how the act of introducing/launching the activity in a particular manner both reflects important practices of non-questioning that take place within the Ministry, and simultaneously informs the administrators about which students among the group will exhibit difficulties with such practices.

### **Top down mobilization - mobilizing young people to move towards unknown destinations:**

Questioning of authority runs counter to the administration's expectations of social norms in authoritarian organizational structures where directives flow from the top-down (e.g. from administrators to the staff under their supervision). During my initial year working within the Ministry of Information and Culture I frequently questioned my co-workers as to why we were engaging in particular activities the logic of which I could not personally determine. The most frequent response to my queries came in the form of: “Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ said we are to do this” (with a name of a different higher level Ministry administrator filling the blank depending on the particular context and task). It was not that the staff didn't question the logic of directives and activities, rather, it was commonly understood within the social organization that directives from higher-ups had to be followed even if the purpose and logic behind such activities proved questionable. This did not mean that questioning/commenting on the logic of the activities was not done, rather questioning and commenting was expressed indirectly in a manner that would in no way prevent the top-down directive from being followed.

In an institution where remuneration for one's full-time job responsibilities is derived primarily through the "extra-work" one is able to leverage through their official employment (rather than simply through the official pay-scale) there exist multiple forms of labor (i.e. forms of labor that do not appear logically related to one's officially designated job responsibilities) that, for purposes of preserving these forms of income generation, remain unquestioned. Probing too deeply into such activities could threaten the existence of the forms of income generation that enable low-paid employees to labor in support of the single-Party State and its institutions. In turn, not probing was a form of conforming to the existing social norms of the organization.

Unbeknownst to the students, most of the Vannasin staff and the members of the older generation of writers at this point in time, Mr. Paengan had big plans for both the Sinxay Pen's Camp students and the Sinxay Culture Club members. Mr. Paengan had witnessed what Mr. Annouson had created with Lao Art Media. He had heard of the lucrative contracts beginning to be awarded to Lao Art Media for UN sponsored dramas. Mr. Paengan's plan was to develop a rival production group, creating a significant form of *viek peeset* that would have enabled him to leverage his responsibilities over the youth training programs for supplemental income generation to augment his low paid labor for the Ministry. His plan would have combined the talents of both the graduates of the camp, and the members of the club – forming an organization he would call "The Sixay Stars." His vision was the talented young writers would produce scripts and songs, and the beautiful young models would serve as actresses, actors, and singers, creating music and dramatic productions that would be marketed and sponsored in various ways to generate an income.

Mr. Paengan's plans would have opened a number of potentially lucrative pathways to extra income accumulation, not just for him, but potentially for the writers and Vannasin staff members he chose to include in the administration of the organization. Mr. Paengan got as far as forming a governing board to which he had appointed a number of the employees under his supervision and camp instructors. I was not asked to be a member of this board, but rather I was told I was on this board, my assumption is that many of the others found themselves in this same position (i.e. following the directives of someone who held authority over their permission to engage in a particular practice). His staff had composed, printed and laminated Sinxay Stars identification cards. And he had composed and printed binding and exclusive contracts for the young people (the idea was that talented young people would sign the contracts preventing them from moving to work for Lao Art Media or any other production company that might arise as a competitor in the future). The dream, however, collapsed soon after the first meeting, as Mr. Paengan was promoted up and out of the Publishing and Libraries Department (i.e. up and out of the hierarchical control over Vannasin and the two youth organizations) before the Sinxay Stars could be fully developed.

What I write about below took place during the period of time when Mr. Paengan was quietly holding onto his ideas, determining which young people, would be invited to join the future Sinxay Stars. Two of his, and his staff's tasks during the training were to: 1) assess which students would comply unquestioningly and follow directives from the older generation, even if the ultimate ends were unknown or unclear; and 2) attempt to inculcate behaviors of unquestioningly moving towards unknown destinations. In this

section I present one example of an activity designed to function as this form of assessment and inculcation.

At multiple points during the course of the Sinxay Pen's Camp students were not fully aware of the ultimate destinations planned for them by the camp director, Mr. Paengan. The students knew that towards the end of the Sinxay Pen's Camp session there would be an overnight trip, but the destination of that trip had yet to be revealed. On the afternoon of August 11<sup>th</sup> Mr. Paengan surprised the students with the fact that there was a "practice camping" trip planned in preparation for the overnight trip.

Shortly after Seang and Phonpaseuth's recording session, Mr. Paengan and Mr. Sisavath entered the large meeting hall. The students who were still outside filed in and everyone took their seats. Mr. Paengan stood behind a desk at the front of the room and led the students through a brainstorming activity – the students were to think of all the types of things that one might need when going on a camping trip. Mr. Sisavath with a marker in hand, stood at a whiteboard diligently writing down the camping related nouns students suggested.

Mr. Paengan explained to the students that prior to actually going on the planned overnight camping trip, they would all partake in a practice camping trip – a day trip to a remote location where they could practice camping and prepare for the actual overnight camping trip. In private, away from the students, Mr. Paengan explained to me that one cannot simply take a group of students on an overnight trip, one must ease them into it, enable them to safely experience something similar so that they would have the frame of mind to think about what they would need and do on the actual trip. Taking them on the "practice camping" trip would provide the students with the experience needed to enable them to be prepared for the subsequent overnight trip towards the end of the Sinxay Pen's Camp. Mr. Paengan's approach to the ultimate camping trip paralleled his approach to preparing students for writing for the Ministry. Mr. Paengan was going to employ a sink-or-swim approach to their participation, rather, his approach was that of easing one into practice – and entry through guided practice in a carefully controlled and supervised environment.

After informing the students that they would be participating in a "practice camping" trip Mr. Paengan refused to tell the students the intended destination. When the brainstorming of items needed for camping was complete he told them that they were to meet Mr. Sisavath by a large tree in front of the market behind the National University of Laos, and that from that meeting point Mr. Sisavath would lead them on a hike to the ultimate destination. The interactions between Mr. Paengan and the students became quite humorous at this point as the students attempted to pry a disclosure of the location from Mr. Paengan through questioning. Some vocally began devising a plan to ask Mr. Sisavath for the actual destination. Overhearing this, Mr. Paengan added that it would do little good for the students to ask Mr. Sisavath about the intended destination. At this point Mr. Sisavath smiled broadly and laughed at the situation in the middle of which he had been placed.

When a student asked how far they would need to go from the market, Mr. Paengan informed the group that they would need to be prepared to hike over more than ten kilometers. A number of students expressed surprise at this distance with a collective "Oh ho!" The excitement in the room was almost palpable, and there was a considerable amount of laughing as classmates turned to each other to discuss the idea of hiking more

than ten kilometers. Some of the students expressed their disbelief, to which Mr. Paengan retorted that he was telling them the truth. Mr. Sisavath flashed a smile, silently indicating that he knew the truth about the secret destination, but would not reveal it, and then Mr. Paengan excused him from the room.

In his office, away from the students, Mr. Paengan refused to inform me of the destination. He simply repeated that the destination would be more than ten kilometers from the tree where I would meet Mr. Sisavath on Saturday morning. Mr. Sisavath told me that he actually knew the destination, but he was not allowed to tell anyone. Mr. Paengan's loyal staff would not purposefully reveal his secrets.

This small example from the camp speaks volumes of the loyalty of staff members. It is a micro example of widely spread practices of loyalty, fidelity, and dependability among staff members that are produced through reciprocal practices of exchange within the hierarchical social relations in government units. The keeping of secrets is rewarded, and in the case of Mr. Sisavath the reward for his faithful keeping of the secret waited at the practice camp site.<sup>3</sup>

As the sun rose on Saturday the students congregated beneath the large tree in the lot in front of the market. All but two wore their black Sinxay Pen's Camp t-shirts. On this day the women wore pants rather than their tube skirts. The students were all dressed in comfortable clothing, some with hats, some wearing jackets (not because it was cold, but rather to shield their skin from the sun).

From the market they walked along the dusty red soiled roads. Weaving through neighborhoods that gradually gave way to verdant rice fields. Five of the students carried parasols and allowed others to huddle closely in the shade next to them as they marched towards a still unknown destination. Some students carried packs of water bottles, others carried rolled plastic picnic mats, and some had guitars. Each student had writing utensils and paper. Twelve of the students drove motorcycles slowly in front of the pack stopping at intersections and forks in the roadway waiting for Mr. Sisavath to catch up and provide further directions.



Figure 7.1: Tail end of a long line of students marching towards an unknown destination for the Sinxay Pen's Camp "practice camping" outing.

The secret destination, it turned out, was far less than ten kilometers from the tree at the market. The destination was in fact an empty lot owned by Mr. Paengan. A lot directly adjacent to the walled property upon which his two-story home was built. Passing the gates of Mr. Paengan's home students could see the Vannasin staff and Mr. Paengan's wife and daughter within making preparations for their party. A party for the Vannasin staff and the Pen's Camp instructors; a party for those members of the Party; a party that would run in parallel with the student's "practice camping" located on the opposite side of the cinderblock wall dividing Mr. Paengan's land.

The students congregated under the shade of the large tree in the middle of the lot. Those who had brought woven plastic mats laid them out over the weeds and grass, creating an area for students to gather and sit in groups. Mr. Dee (casually dressed in his untucked Sinxay t-shirt, a black baseball cap, and khaki slacks) was already at the location, waiting with a notebook in hand. Some students settled onto the mats others stood or squatted assembled in the shade beneath the tree. Mr. Dee opened his notebook and read to them the schedule of the day's activities. Activities were planned from the point of arrival to 4:30 pm, and as he read the list of activities aloud, the students verbally expressed their delight with the plan through collective expressions of "Ahhh" and "Nehhhh!"

The walk activity revealed to the camp administrators both: a) which students would openly question the directives of the older generation/which students would unquestionably follow the directives of the older generation (this was revealed both on the day that Mr. Paengan announced the practice camp excursion, and on the subsequent days leading up to it), b) problems that the staff did not anticipate. An example of such a problem was that the youngest of the female students (young girls who were still high school students at the time) did not have the same personal decision making autonomy as

the older female students (e.g. female students already away from home, living at the University, and not under the direct supervision of parents). The parents of a couple of young female Sinxay Pen's Camp students telephoned the Vannasin office to inform the administrators that they would not allow their daughters to depart to an unknown destination, while other parents of young women avoided questioning authority, and simply did not allow their children to participate.

The "practice camping" march was an activity in which students were actively engaged in the practice of marching collectively towards an unknown destination. This form of top-down authoritarian mass mobilization of labor for unknown ends is not uncommon within the social practices of the Ministry. Unquestioning conformity to directives of administrators is a key characteristic enabling participants to actively engage in the ongoing labor of the Ministry. In light of this, the student's march can be understood as supervised practice in conformity to social behaviors that are fundamental to the perpetuation of this institution of the State. In chapter eight I return to the theme of mobilizing students towards unknown destinations. The example of the mobilization of the students for "practice camp" foreshadowed the larger mobilization (the Sinxay Stars) that, unbeknownst to the students, Mr. Paengan had in the works.

### **The concurrent production of conformity and camaraderie:**

One of Mr. Paengan's stated goals with the trips was to place the students in surroundings that would inspire writing, surroundings that would provide the subject for the students' creative expression. As the activities for the day commenced, nine students moved to the edge of the shaded area to sit on a mat with Mr. Soubanh as he discussed songwriting. The majority of students joined Mr. Dee for a poetry writing activity.

Mr. Dee's lectures focused primarily on the structural expectations for poetic works. By this point in the course the students shared a fairly clear understanding of the structures to which their works were expected to conform in order to qualify for publication through the Vannasin Magazine unit. Mr. Dee's first assignment for the students was to write a poem following the conventions and structures of Lao poetry (which he taught during the preceding lecture portion of the course). He instructed the students to draw on the inspiration of the day's surrounding environment for their subject matter.

For the most part, those who had memorized or retained notes of the Lao *gon* (ກອນ) poetic structure presented by Mr. Dee in lecture, ventured off to seek their inspiration across the fields, down the road, and away from the *gatan* tree. Those who had not yet memorized the *gon* (ກອນ) structure consulted their notebooks and fellow students who had a better understanding of the structure (see figure 7.2 below). Somsanouk did not have his notebook, and professed no recollection of the structure of Lao poetry, but this claim seemed to be humorously deployed and recognized as merely an excuse to sidle up next to pretty young women and ask for their assistance. Mr. Dee himself took part in the poem composition activity, walking a ways away from the tree, finding his poem at the edge of a rice field.



Figure 7.2: A female student diagrams the Lao *gon* (ກອນ) poetic structure for a male student who claimed to have left his notebook in his dorm and forgotten the lessons learned in lecture.



Figure 7.3: Two students sit in the shade of a rice farmer's *sala*, drawing on the surroundings for poetic inspiration.

As the writing period drew to a close a number of the students regrouped under the *gatan* tree to proof-read each other's work. With the assistance of several students Mr. Dee called everyone back to the shade, and announced that now that they had

finished writing they would have an opportunity to stand among the group and present what they had just created.

As Mr. Dee and Mr. Sisavath listened, students voluntarily stood to read their work to the group. All poems (no matter how rough or polished) received a collective applause from the group. The exceptionally well-crafted poems elicited stronger applause and expressions of “Ooooooh!” Peeking up at the audience from under the bill of her black baseball cap Keochinda (a university student) flashed a bright dimpled smile, stood, and in a smooth sweet deep voice (thick with her southern Lao accent), she read a poem she had titled, “Birds in the middle of the rice fields”:

Simply looking about – in the middle of the rice fields  
noticing mynah birds – walking on vines  
some of them – eat food in the fields  
flying in the same direction – along the route of the rice fields.

Her words elicited polite applause from her classmates. Hardly a moment passed before another student stood to read.

While most of the poems had subject matter that dealt with the students’ direct observation of nature, some wrote about man made objects they observed. The visits to the film archive and museums did not flow through the tips of their pens. The students working with Mr. Soubanh collectively produced a single piece about an ugly guitar that one of the students had brought along on the outing. These students collectively presented a piece, each one standing to deliver their single line, then sitting back down on the mat next to the ugly guitar as the next contributor rose to read:

This guitar isn’t pretty – but it has a beautiful sound  
it makes us - float inward  
sit and think – the heart does not forget or become lost  
its sound emanates – providing music that is graceful.



Figure 7.4: The “ugly guitar” that inspired student poetry.

Under the shade of the tree the forum proved welcoming for even the most shy and soft-spoken young man attending the camp. Saleumphon stood to deliver his poem nervously clutching his paper with both hands, announced the title, and with a smile gestured upwards towards the large tree that both shaded the group and inspired his work titled, “Shade to remember”:

When one comes to sit under the tree – the name is “*gatan* tree”  
one imagines inside one’s heart – humming about the past  
when we were young – we used to sit under the shade  
even at this time – we rest in the coolness.

As the activity drew to a close, seventeen of the students had voluntarily stood below the limbs of the *gatan* tree to share their work aloud. As the students finished their poetic presentations the atmosphere in the cool shade beneath the tree became more festive. It was nearing lunchtime and groups of students congregated on different woven plastic mats, and some began to prepare the food they had brought for lunch. Mr. Dee himself gave the final reading before the song writing activities were to begin.

Reading his poem, the quiet and humble Mr. Dee presented to the students a work that incorporated techniques for imbuing the surroundings with life. Through personification he transformed the neighboring rice field from an object – something simply to be observed - into a character – an emotional being with desires and human feelings, thus enabling the listener to relate to the field on an emotional level equivalent to how one might relate with fellow human beings. With a smile he stated, “I haven’t given this a name yet. Listen please.” Then speaking at a volume loud enough to be heard by those surrounding the trunk of the tree he began:

The sun touches the middle of the rice field - forming a beautiful image  
as the breeze flows past - the green leaves of the rice plants  
it is exactly like painting - an intensely vivid design  
those who view this praise - and discuss it  
but the rice field lacks a young woman - and remains sadly dejected  
seeing but only a shadow of the past - sitting in wait  
surrendering to the furrowing of the plough of her boyfriend - at the edge of the  
old rice field path  
not seeing the shadow of the young woman - the rice field is gloomy  
dear young woman.

The students vocalized their awe with Mr. Dee's composition, and punctuated it with applause. In the same period of time allotted to the students for poetic creation, Mr. Dee (while simultaneously engaged in supervising students on the West side of the wall and socializing with Vannasin staff and camp instructors on the East side of the wall), artfully crafted an awe inspiring poetic example – exemplifying how a Lao poet applies the techniques and conventions (which he had previously taught through lecture) to bring to life observations of one's surroundings.

Under Mr. Dee's direction the practice camping poetry-writing activity was not a forum for expressed *evaluation* of student work. The students had received ample lectures on the expected conventions of Lao poetry, and they were expected to be aware of those conventions by this point in the course. The morning's assignment was also not an activity of critique – in the public forum he created under the *gatan* tree no one was told of changes or alterations that should be made to a work – rather each piece was applauded, no matter how rough or polished. Mr. Dee's activity enabled students to work together, to help each other understand the expected poetic conventions Mr. Dee had taught in lecture. The presentations were voluntary, no one was required to stand and share their work. The lack of critique fostered a social environment in which even the most bashful of students felt comfortable enough to stand and present. And Mr. Dee concluded the activity presenting his own exemplary sample of what an experienced poet could produce in the same circumstances. In this final sense, while his poem was a purposeful display of his mastery, with such displays he demonstrated that he did not need to be domineering and dictatorial in order to remind the students who the master was.

Under Mr. Dee's direction, students actively engaged in the production of work conforming to poetic conventions he had taught, and voluntarily shared the products of their labor with each other in a welcoming and appreciative social setting. Beyond a simple activity of conformity, Mr. Dee's activity was a lesson in the practice of being together (ການຝຶກຢູ່ຮວມກັນ). Under Mr. Dee's direction the students engaged in the production of both 1) poetic work that conformed to his stated structural expectations, and 2) a 'togetherness' (camaraderie) among those who labor to conform.

### **A social divide – physically segregated concomitant practices of instruction and reward:**

In acts of inculcating conformity the older generation are faced with the significant task of conveying to the younger generation that there exists a potential

reward as a result of the younger generation's conformity to the expectations of the members of the older generation. A significant component of the practice camping session was displaying to the students (though keeping them apart from participation in) the rewarding of the Vannasin staff and camp instructors.

Though physically separated by a tall cinderblock wall, the "practice camping" for the students on the west side of the wall was inseparable from what was taking place on the east side of the wall in and around Mr. Paengan's home. Within the gates of Mr. Paengan's compound on the east side of the wall, Mr. Paengan's family and the Vannasin staff were treating themselves and the Pens Camp instructors to a sumptuous party. As Mr. Paengan later explained to me, hosting the party was his means of expressing gratitude for the hard work the Vannasin staff and instructors contributed to the success of the camp.

With few resources at his disposal to adequately compensate the staff and instructors for their labor, the social gathering at his home provided a form of reward. The consumption of barbequed meat, sticky rice, and Beer Lao in the comfortable compound of the boss constituted a pressure valve, through which Vannasin staff members and instructors could relax their behavior, interact casually, and collectively release tensions outside of the workplace. When paired with what Mr. Paengan termed "practice camping," the activities on the east side of the wall might be more accurately called a "practice party," and more accurately viewed of as the preparations for a larger reward facing the staff and instructors concomitant with the actual overnight camping trip for which the students were "practicing."



Figure 7.5: In the center of the photo students sit huddled in the shade beneath a large *gatan* tree in the middle of a vacant lot. On the left of the photo is the cinderblock wall that separated this vacant lot from Mr. Paengan's home, and separated the students' "practice camping" from the staff party happening simultaneously on the opposite side of the wall.

As the students wrote and rewrote their drafts of poems and songs their conversations touched on multiple subjects. The cinderblocks were unable to contain the mouthwatering smells of grilled meat and sounds of celebration that wafted over the wall to meet the senses of the students working in the west. At one point Mr. Paengan's daughter cranked up the volume on the stereo to a decibel level that caused some students on the other side of the wall to joke about the difficulty of finding inspiration in the natural surroundings with a party raging close by.

While all the comforts of Mr. Paengan's home existed on the east side of the wall, the camp venue on the west side of the wall was comparatively rugged. The male students were content to relieve themselves by "shooting rabbits" in the brush. A photograph of one male student, caught by surprise by the photographer as he crouched among the branches of a bush attempting to defecate, became a long lasting source of laughter among the students for weeks to follow. The photo did not expose any body parts, but through his crouched pose his actions were easily recognizable. The hilarity of the photo was compounded by the fact that it vividly captured the exact moment of shock and protest when he suddenly realized he was being photographed mid bowel movement.

Avoiding the use of the bush a small number of female students quietly ventured over to the east side of the wall to use the restroom in pairs and groups of three or four at a time. Their body postures on the east side of the wall were in sharp contrast to their behaviors on the west. Within the gated compound of Mr. Paengan's home these female students walked with trepidation, attempting to go directly to the restroom without interrupting the social interactions of the staff and instructors through whose midst they passed. Lowering their upper bodies slightly, in respectful supplication, they walked quickly and quietly to the restroom and back out the gate with little interaction. These students seeking a restroom, and Chanthaboun (the relatively older fruit vendor from Mrs. Anoumone's village) were the only aspiring writers who ventured to the east side of the wall.

Aside from Mr. Dee, Mr. Sisavath and Mr. Paengan, during the morning hours the Vannasin staff remained cloistered partying in the walled compound on the east side of the wall. Instructors (such as Mr. Soubanh) made frequent trips through Mr. Paengan's gate, partying on the east, and then walked back to the west to instruct and inspect student progress on assignments.

Concomitant activities separated by a walled divide were part of larger practices of the incorporation of youth into labor for the Ministry of Information and Culture. In chapter four I briefly mentioned how a glass wall and uniforms were used to demark a separation between the non-Ministry "marketing department" and the Vannasin staff; in the practices of coercive core technological incorporation of the "marketing department" the uniforms and glass wall demarked the separation of practice between insiders and outsiders. Here too, on the "practice camping" excursion a physical divide was used to demark and segregate the concomitant social practices of newcomers and longtime legitimate social participants within the Vannasin office.

The stark differences between activities on both sides of the wall and the physical divide between the Party member's party and the students' "practice camping" activities functioned as a means of making visible the peripheral social positioning of the aspiring writers from the ongoing social practices of the older generation of writers. This visible

divide between Vannasin staff members/camp instructors enjoying the rewards for their labor, and students striving to prove themselves worthy of participation in the labor for the Ministry would be repeated during the actual camping excursion in Vang Vieng. The visible and audible display of staff/instructor rewards for service to the Ministry was a significant aspect of the inculcation of aspiring writers; a display of the rewards afforded to those who conformed their labor to expectations of the older generation.

### **Consumption, a crab, and camaraderie:**

The venue (i.e. hosting the camp in a field as opposed to in an institute of the State) opened opportunities for social behaviors among both the staff and students that would have been unthinkable within the confines of the Ministry complex, museums or film archive. As was true during other instructional activities (e.g. tours of the museum and lectures), during the “practice camping” students engaged in multiple creative disengagements with the older generation that were antithetical to their attending to the older generation’s attempts at instruction. The students’ disengagements were forms of rebellion against the older generations’ expectations for behavioral conformity. Though not an intended outcome of the day’s activities the young people’s antithetical behavior did contribute to form of peer camaraderie, a form of togetherness shared among the young aspiring writers collectively experiencing a top-down imposition of the older generation’s attempts at inculcating “practices of togetherness.”

Early in the day alcohol was flowing on both sides of Mr. Paengan’s cinderblock wall. The student consumption was taking place covertly hidden in plain sight of the staff. The staff consumption was taking place on the east side of the wall – unseen by the students, but easily noticeable when the staff members ventured to the west side of the wall. Drinking on the student side of the wall appeared to be a contributor to the relaxed jovial behaviors of some. And the jovial behaviors contributed to the camaraderie of the group.

At a lull between students’ poetic presentations a female student leapt to her feet screaming and sprung away from her group in a dance of fright. This was followed immediately by uproarious laughter from those who had been sitting beside her. Everyone’s attention was now focused on these activities at the periphery of the mass of seated students. While composing his poem in the rice fields Bounmee had found a palm-sized crab. He had kept it hidden, wrapped in a small strip of red cloth. During the poetry presentations he was apparently carefully determining the student whom he should target with a crab surprise. Judging from the volume of the scream, the duration of the young woman’s dance of fright, and the resulting level of laughter, his sudden placement of the squirming pinching crab (inches from this young woman’s face) could not have produced a better result.



Figure 7.6: Bounmee holds the feisty squirming rice field crab he employed in his prank in the midst of poetry presentations.

Bounmee's relaxed behavior was undoubtedly fueled by the contents of his water bottle. Bounmee had replaced the water with a powerful crystal-clear fermented rice alcohol. A whiff of the bottle's contents stung the nose and caused one's eyes to water. Visually the alcohol is indistinguishable from water, which enabled him to stealthily imbibe in direct line of sight of the instructors. It was still prior to noon, and nearly half of the large bottle's contents were consumed. Bounmee, however, was not drinking alone – for the students drinking was a social activity. During the writing period he quietly approached others offering them an opportunity to share in his refreshment. While a number of students frowned at Bounmee's offer of a sip, the glowing rosy complexions of others played traitor to their consumption.

Even though not all students drank, the shared secret of the act of covert imbibing unbeknownst to the instructors constituted a form of social inclusion in the student group. Though relatively few students shared in the actual drink, many shared knowledge of the drinking. This shared secret both constituted and reflected the camaraderie among the students. The covert drinking of some students was not the only shared secret of the day. Sitting among the students, wearing a Sinxay Pen's Camp shirt, and participating in the student activities, was a young man who was not enrolled as a student, his unauthorized presence was also a shared secret among a number of students.

In the lecture hall format it was impossible for instructors (who taught positioned at the front of the room) to become familiar with the face of each student attending the course. Simply wearing the Sinxay Pen's Camp T-shirt, this young person who was not officially enrolled in the camp was able to participate in camp activities. This is a reversal of what we saw with Leo (the recording studio employee described in chapter five), where an individual officially enrolled was, in actuality, a non-participant. The young man dressed in the camp T-shirt was the roommate of Khampheuy. He had

borrowed Khampheuy's shirt to join the day's activities. The face of the gregarious Khampheuy was a familiar face to all, and Khampheuy wore a plain black T-shirt, that few would notice was without a logo. Khampheuy's roommate, wearing a Sinxay Pen's Camp T-shirt, blended in and fully participated in the day's activities. He joined the others in poetry writing, and he stood with the group to perform the song for the camp administrators at the end of the "practice camping" day.

The shared knowledge of activities, such as covert imbibing and unauthorized participation of non-registered individuals, produced one form of camaraderie. Shared secrets (e.g. the unmentioned destination among the staff, and hidden imbibing among the students) were similar key elements in the production of forms of camaraderie separately among the staff and among the students. The crab prank, overt and momentarily disruptive of the poetry sharing activity, produced (much in the same way as the photo of the male student caught attempting to relieve himself in the bush) another form of camaraderie, the shared laugh.

The act of laughter drew the students away from the activity arranged by the instructor, and towards the tangential activity created by the student.<sup>4</sup> It was a momentary shift in control over the collective activities of group – a shift that put a student (i.e. a student on the periphery of the group and periphery of participation in the instructor led activities of the group) in momentary control over the group's attention and activities. It is difficult to imagine that Bounmee would have known the crab would have caused such a large disruption, a shifting of the entire focus of the group onto their little section of the periphery, but it was clear his actions were well planned and intentional.

This form of play on the periphery of the older generation's designated instructional activity is parallel to the out-of-the-line-of-sight-of-the-guides enactment performed by Khean and Khoon during the trips to the Lao National Museum and the Lao People's Army Museum in chapter five. Some of these peripheral activities such as sliding across the polished floor, and touching items on display were primarily exploratory activities. Others, particularly the ones with humor as a goal (such as striking a pose to mimic a statue on display, the pantomime regarding the firing of a rifle, and the introduction of the crab), were collaborative engagements among students enabling students to momentarily shift the focus from the figure of authority (be it the museum guide, soldier/guide, or instructor) leveraging the laugh to momentarily divert attention from the figure of authority, to the students on the periphery. As the crab induced laughter died down Mr. Dee called the group back to order and invited the students to continue sharing their work.

Despite his frequent visits to the party on the east side of the wall, Mr. Dee's wit and reasoning remained sober, sharp and unimpaired. Mr. Dee is not a drinker. His body's violent rejection of alcohol is incapacitating, and to safeguard his health his friends and co-workers avoided pressuring him to drink at parties and events. Others, however, were the recipients of almost constant encouragement from their peers.

The communal consumption of alcohol was part of the activities of building social camaraderie among the members of the social group. As the group members (instructors and Vannasin staff) sat in a circle on the tiled floor of Mr. Paengnang's kitchen conversing, they passed a single glass and a large bottle of beer clock-wise around the circle through the hands of each of the party's participants. The person who received the

glass was encouraged and expected to drink the entire contents of the glass (leaving only the ice cubes), then refill the glass with beer and pass it on to the person sitting or standing immediately beside them. The shared glass increased the pressure to drink the contents quickly, as it was the only glass in the room for all others to use. This activity insured that all participants were united in drinking – and that the available alcohol was fairly distributed among the group members. In such party settings Mr. Dee’s health enabled him to turn down the offered alcohol without disrupting the camaraderie.

After completing the poetry activity Mr. Dee handed the full responsibility of instruction to Mr. Soubanh. As was mentioned in chapter six, throughout the course of the Pen’s Camp, Mr. Soubanh increasingly turned to imbibing to fortify himself for potential interactions with the students. Mr. Soubanh spent the morning participating in the festivities on the east side of the wall and the instructional activities on the west side of the wall, and by the time he launched into his introduction for the day’s musical activities it was rather obvious (through his cadence, humor, coloration, and physical sway) that the revelry on the east flowed through his veins.

### **Ridicule, public humiliation, and the transformation of social behaviors:**

The older generation’s efforts to inculcate and foster conformity within the body of aspiring writers took different forms throughout the course of the day of “practice camping.” During his morning session in the shade under the *gatan* tree Mr. Dee created a supportive venue for the young aspiring writers to creatively explore and share their poetic composition within the structural expectations of the older generation. Mr. Paengan established a visual and auditory display of the rewards available to those whose social practices conform with the Ministry employees and the older generation of established writers. The appreciative venue for sharing created by Mr. Dee, and the display of rewards choreographed by Mr. Paengan can be understood as carrots in a ‘carrot and stick’ approach to fostering conformity among the student population. Mr. Soubanh’s approach, however, was more in line with deploying a ‘stick’ as a means to foster conformity with the expectations of the older generation. As wielded by Mr. Soubanh, the stick need not be applied to all, but rather it need only be applied to a select few while in plain sight of, and as an example to all others.

Mr. Dee had launched the day’s “practice camping” activities with an exercise that encouraged the sharing of creative expression. The forum he fostered (encouraging applause for every work, no matter how rough or polished), drew forth public poetic performances from even the most shy of students. Under Mr. Dee’s gentle guidance, the day’s activities had begun on a collegial high note. As Mr. Dee passed the directorial baton to Mr. Soubanh, the activities transitioned from poetry to song writing, and the instructional techniques contributed to a transformation in the social behaviors of the students. The baton in Mr. Dee’s approach to instruction was that of a conductor, the baton in Mr. Soubanh’s approach was that of an officer of the law.

Initially it seemed as if Mr. Soubanh (behaving like a jovial Bacchus) tossed the students into a free-for-all of individualism. High-spirited and maintaining a constantly adjusting stance similar to that of someone attempting to stand still on the deck of a buoyant raft, Mr. Soubanh delivered the following instructions:

We have all gathered here because we want to be stars. We have all different sorts of stars. Not the red stars. The sparkly stars. The stars that shine. One star that is the brightest in the group. You can write what you want.

You have to have a dream first. A small dream in your heart. A small dream can become music. For example, “Star in the heart” [the title of a popular song]. This title you will write it into a poem, or write into lyrics, they have the same meaning. But the music will enter your heart.

We have learned already. Now we are going to write whatever we want. You don’t have to write what I just told you, that was just an example. Just write a small amount, and then you can perform it to show each other. If this were an actual one you would have to complete it.

Mr. Soubanh’s instruction didn’t inspire collaborative production; rather it sparked an immediate enactment of individualized student performances of previously composed works. Those students who had patiently spent time during lecture huddled waiting at the table of Mr. Soubanh (see chapter five) enthusiastically jumped at this opportunity to perform their songs for him in front of the group. Directly after Mr. Soubanh delivered his verbal instructions two students stood in succession and sang a cappella versions of songs they had written and been eagerly waiting weeks to perform.

As the second student passionately sang an off-key pop-style love song Mr. Soubanh could hardly control his laughter. In an attempt to disguise his mirth Mr. Soubanh eventually settled on squatting on the ground nearby, dropping his head and chuckling to himself. Initially the student (crooning passionately with his face tilted upwards and eyes half closed) did not appear to notice Mr. Soubanh. As an audible snicker shot through Mr. Soubanh’s nose the student opened his eyes wide and caught sight of Mr. Soubanh squatting on the ground laughing. A startled panic stricken look flashed across the student’s face, he blushed, but without losing a beat continued his performance.

When the student completed his song, Mr. Soubanh rose and turned to the seated students asking aloud: “Did you guys know what he was singing about?” From his tone it was clear that the question was not sincere, rather Mr. Soubanh was ridiculing the young man. Ridiculing the student in front of his assembled peers. Mr. Soubanh then turned to the student and delivered a lesson in humiliation. He asked (in a tone dripping with mock sincerity and curiosity), “What is this song about? Why are you mumbling? Could you explain to me why you were mumbling in a hole?” (Note: the Lao word for “throat” is “neck hole” – Mr. Soubanh stopped short of completely saying the word “throat” leaving the student “mumbling in a hole.”). Apparently grasping the gist of the critique Mr. Soubanh was delivering, the student bashfully covered his mouth in embarrassment. Stooping slightly and looking rather sheepish in front of the assembled students, the young man stated, “This music is sad music that one would sing by themselves.” Then he turned and retreated to sit in his space on a mat among his peers.



Figure 7.7: Mr. Soubanh (on the left, arms crossed in front of his chest, holding a stack of student lyrics) stands facing a student as he concludes a lesson in public humiliation. The student (on the right) bashfully covers his mouth in embarrassment. The students in the background avert their eyes as Mr. Soubanh continues his ridicule of the student's performance.

After Mr. Soubanh's public humiliation of this student, other students opted not to stand and share their work. Rather, students turned to each other, and/or turned to their notebooks and began to work on lyrics quietly. A handful of students particularly interested in song writing worked independently polishing work they had produced at a previous point in time. Some of these students approached Mr. Soubanh with their work individually, opening their notebooks and quietly singing the lyrics to him as he read along. Mr. Soubanh often stopped their whispered performances mid lyric to suggest a change. The group that had worked with Mr. Soubanh during the morning poetry-writing period collectively worked on transforming the ugly guitar poem into lyrics.

As lunch approached students began to congregate on mats around those students who had the most polished pieces, pieces ready to perform. Mr. Soubanh had expressed an expectation of musical performances at the end of the lyric writing activities – and students gathered around those students with the most polished and complete work (work that would be least likely to induce public humiliation from Mr. Soubanh).

Ten students (including three of the youngest high school students attending the camp) congregated around Phonpaseuth, his guitar, and his song "Memories of good things." Six students gathered on the mat with Chanthaboun (the poetic fruit vendor) and Somlith (a male university student quite adept at playing the guitar). Eleven students gathered around Bounteum (a student in the University's Faculty of Education who was the first student to stand and perform earlier in the day apparently passing Mr. Soubanh's inspection without ridicule prior to Mr. Soubanh's public humiliation of the other student). The students who had earlier collectively written the ugly guitar song while

working under Mr. Soubanh's direct supervision continued to sit together at lunchtime. Students' congregation in groups was a retreat from public individualized attempts at expression. It was clear that the welcoming format of Mr. Dee, that encouraged a collective respect for (and literally applauded) all attempts at poetic expression, was vastly different than the humiliation-of-the-weakest format created by Mr. Soubanh. By gathering in groups to prepare a collective "group" performance, students essentially fortified themselves against individual attack. The potential for individualized public humiliation and ridicule was decreased through the act of congregation and selection of the most polished work of a group member for collective presentation.

In the course of just a few hours the members of the older generation deployed a range of approaches to fostering student conformity. Mr. Soubanh's approach instigated collaborative grouping, through which the students dispersed the blow of Mr. Soubanh's instructional baton. Importantly, Mr. Soubanh's activity simultaneously fostered intra-group cooperation, and inter-group competition. Through his instructional activities, the resulting grouping, and inter-group competition Mr. Soubanh enabled the students to experience and conform their behaviors to forms of social relations one finds within-and-between work units and departments inside the Ministry of Information and Culture.

### **Meals, social segregation and camaraderie:**

At mealtime the social segregation between generations became more readily apparent. With the arrival of the designated time for lunch, the students remained in their songwriting groups and began collectively preparing food that they would share for their noontime meal. As mentioned in the introduction of the chapter Mr. Dee described the "practice camping" and camping trips as providing the students not simply an opportunity to write together, but, importantly, the camping activities were intended to provide the students with opportunity to experience and gain practice in how to be together (ການຝຶກຢູ່ຮ່ວມກັນ) through activities such as food preparation and sharing meals.

As preparation for lunch got under way Mr. Soubanh announced he was implementing a new contest, and would judge the groups upon which one was able to produce the best papaya salad. Under Mr. Soubanh's instigation the group members remained dependent upon each other and the groups remained in competition with each other. Mr. Dee, Mr. Sisavath (Mr. Dee's assistant), Mr. Soubanh (the songwriter/radio host), and Mr. Bounpheng (the banker and translator of Vietnamese literature) gathered with the students on west side of the wall during the early preparations for lunch. Mr. Sisavath worked with a number of students starting a campfire for cooking, and he brought a large tub of water to the student side so they could rinse their hands. But for the most part these staff members and instructors were present only briefly, sampling the food the students prepared.

After the short time at the beginning of the lunch period, students' and Vannasin staff/camp instructors' lunches were segregated. Aside from the few who ventured east through Mr. Paengan's gates to find the restroom, students remained on the west side of the wall and the staff and instructors remained on the east. Despite a concurrent timing, the "together" of 'learning to cook and eat together' did not refer to a mutual participation of both staff and students collectively in shared activities of cooking and eating.

By this time in the afternoon all of the Vannasin staff were at Mr. Paengan's house, all, with the exception of Ajaan Phoumjai. Late in the lunch break a white panel van pulled up the dusty road and parked in front of Mr. Paengan's gate. The van had large white stickers affixed to the sides advertising his concert/fashion show joint venture with Leo. This was quite unusual as on a daily basis Ajaan Phoumjai drove a rather worn Chinese knock-off "Honda" motorcycle. Mr. Paengan himself didn't own a four-wheeled vehicle; he too drove to the Ministry on a daily basis on a motorcycle even older and more well worn than that of Ajaan Phoumjai. Ajaan Phoumjai showing up remarkably late in a gleaming white van with glossy posters advertising his *viek peeset* was rather ostentatious, and by no means went unnoticed.

Despite having a van that would have seated many, Ajaan Phoumjai arrived at the party without a model in tow. This was decidedly unusual, and Mr. Soubanh quickly took note asking in surprise, "Phoumjai, did you bring any models?!" As he placed a bottle of Johnnie Walker red label on the table within easy reach of Mr. Paengan and Mr. Soubanh, Ajaan Phoumjai replied, "No, today I only have Johnnie." The sharing of the whisky in a single glass (as was done with the beer in Mr. Paengan's kitchen) was a further contribution to the practices of camaraderie among the staff and instructors.

Simultaneously, on the students' side of the wall, groups of students were collectively engaged in post-meal collaborative song and dance. With ten students from various meal groups at one mat, Somlith strummed the guitar, and Somsanouk drummed on an overturned plastic bucket, and the group sang a popular older song about the beauty of the northern region, the intelligence of the women, their capacity for planting rice and working for the government. The lyrics reflected back on the time of the American War, telling the listener that women from Xieng Khuang were pure of heart, learning to be soldiers, under the shade of the local trees, protecting the population from the American criminals of the sky (note, the noun ໂຈນ sung here in reference to Americans also connotes: outlaw, bandit, thief, pillager, robber, plunderer). The musical performance was upbeat and spirited. A few feet in front of the woven mat Alounny led another group of five students in a quick paced line dance, modeling the steps the others are to follow.



Figure 7.8: Students performing a line dance. On the left of the photograph Khampheuy, wearing his plain black t-shirt (as he had loaned his Sinxay Pen’s camp shirt to his roommate), joins the dance in the middle of the group, and he uses empty water bottles as percussive instruments to accompany the singing and guitar. On the right edge of the photograph Bounmee stands observing while nursing a water bottle filled with fermented rice alcohol.

Though on separate sides of a wall, the time of the meal was a significant period of engaging in what Mr. Dee referred to as the practice of being together (ການຝຶກຢູ່ຮວມກັນ) – students being together with students, and instructors/Vannasin staff being with each other. The activities of lunch on both sides of the wall (from the communal preparation of food, through to the collaborative engagement in music and dance) were from Mr. Dee’s perspective, a significant component in the training of writers. Even at lunch the students were being coached to relate with each other in a manner that conformed to the social relations within the Vannasin Unit. By leaving the students to themselves, and congregating on the east side of the wall, the instructors and Vannasin staff were also modeling the close social association of those actively engaged in the practice of publishing through the Vannasin unit of the Ministry of Information and Culture.

**“Our Lao music” – finding harmony with the gate-keeper’s structural expectations:**

After lunch the students reassembled in their groups. The group that assembled around Phonpaseuth began preparations for singing his song aloud. Phonpaseuth slowly spoke his lyrics as each student wrote the words down onto their own pieces of paper, then the group moved their woven mat away from the *gatan* tree to practice a considerable distance from the other groups.

As the students were practicing for their group performances Mr. Soubanh made his rounds, visiting each of the groups and providing them feedback. The group of students gathered around Phonpaseuth was ready to perform for Mr. Soubanh when he

arrived. With the exception of Phonpaseuth, the students stood around the periphery of the mat facing in towards each other, most holding a copy of the lyrics in their hands. Phonpaseuth sat cross-legged in the center of the mat, balancing his guitar on his thigh as he played and sang.



Figure 7.9: Phonpaseuth sits in center of the group’s woven mat playing guitar while the other members of his group stand circled around him singing the lyrics he had penned.

Mr. Soubanh stood listening with a copy of the lyrics in hand. Phonpaseuth’s song falls into the Lao stylistic category of *paeng sa ting* (ເພງສະຕິງ, which roughly translates to pop-music, a style of music popular among younger urban audiences). Phonpaseuth played a chord progression for eight bars as the students began to pace themselves to the beat waiting for the music to cycle back to where the lyrics begin. With a nod from Phonpaseuth they began:

What caused  
us to meet each other?  
In the spirit of partnership  
with extremely tight bonds

Different people, different hearts  
never before associated  
Coming together as one  
attached

(The last note of “attached” was held for half a bar as Phonpaseuth strummed to the end of the bar before the lyrics started again. This is where the chorus started – and this start of the chorus became a significant point in Mr. Soubanh’s critique.)

I glanced at you  
you smiled in return  
Catching sight  
we were attracted to each other

The things of this world  
are not as important  
As the night  
we united

(The students held the last note for half a bar as Phonpaseuth continued to play to the end of the bar before the lyrics picked up again.)

These good memories  
will stay with us forever  
Never fading from the heart  
or becoming lost

That day was that way  
this day it will remain the same  
The passing of time  
will not change it

(Again the students held the last note as Phonpaseuth continued to play to the end of the bar before the lyrics picked up again.)

If the day comes  
that we must be separated to opposite ends of the sky  
I shall remember each word we've spoken  
and your soft sweet eyes

All the things in the present  
need no sweetening  
Everything that has happened from the past up until now  
should not be forgotten

(At this point Phonpaseuth played eight bars without accompanying lyrics. When the chord progression cycled back around to the top the students began singing again, repeating the chorus.)

I glanced at you  
you smiled in return  
Catching sight  
We were attracted to each other

The things of this world  
are not as important  
As the night

we united

(The students held the last note for half a bar as Phonpaseuth continued to play to the end of the bar before the lyrics picked up again.)

These good memories  
will stay with us forever  
Never fading from the heart  
or becoming lost

That day was that way  
this day it will remain the same  
The passing of time  
will not change it

(Again the students held the last note as Phonpaseuth continued to play to the end of the bar before the lyrics picked up again.)

If the day comes  
that we must be separated to opposite ends of the sky  
I shall remember each word we've spoken  
and your soft sweet eyes

All the things in the present  
need no sweetening  
Everything that has happened from the past up until now  
should not be forgotten

(The students held the last note as Phonpaseuth strummed to the end of a bar – then Phonpaseuth stopped strumming for an entire bar as the students sang the following line in unison.)

Link your little finger with mine  
and promise.

The beat after the word “promise” was where Phonpaseuth continued to strum the guitar, working towards another eight chord progression to conclude the song, but Mr. Soubanh tapped Phonpaseuth on the shoulder with his pen – preventing Phonpaseuth from completing the performance.

Mr. Soubanh asked the group who wrote the lyrics. When Phonpaseuth stood to acknowledge that he had written the lyrics, Mr. Soubanh told Phonpaseuth that he had written his lyrics wrong. “Where is the break?” Mr. Soubanh demanded, questioning Phonpaseuth as to the location of where the lyrics transitioned into a chorus. Phonpaseuth indicated that it was at the top of the page, with the choral repeat starting at the line “I glanced at you.” Expressing a negative reaction to this, Mr. Soubanh interjected: “Neh! That is wrong! Do it again!” Pointing to the top of the page (where Phonpaseuth had indicated the lyrics repeat) Mr. Soubanh continued, “If you make the break here it isn't music.” Mr. Soubanh was clearly informing all those gathered around

Phonpaseuth that if one's work did not follow the structure Mr. Soubanh expected, the work did not constitute music.

Phonpaseuth and a female student pointed to the lyrics in Mr. Soubanh's hand showing him the point low on the page where Phonpaseuth played the eight bar break before the repeat of the chorus and said, "Teacher, the break is down here." Continuing they pointed to the line at the top of the page where the chorus started and explained, "the chorus repeats up here."

Mr. Soubanh insisted that Lao composers could not have a chorus so close to the beginning of the song. "It can't be this way," he stated adamantly. Pointing to a point about four inches from the bottom of the page Mr. Soubanh asserted, "In *our* Lao music you must have the chorus come in here." Mr. Soubanh moved his pen lower to a point about three inches from the bottom of the page and said, "Thai songs have the chorus come in here." Mr. Soubanh's statements revealed the structural distinctions he saw as defining features of nationally identifiable work – for a work to be "*our* Lao music" it would have to have the chorus repeat in a specific point. He stressed a structural difference as an identifying element, a structural element that enabled him to make a distinction between music that could be classified as "*our* Lao music."

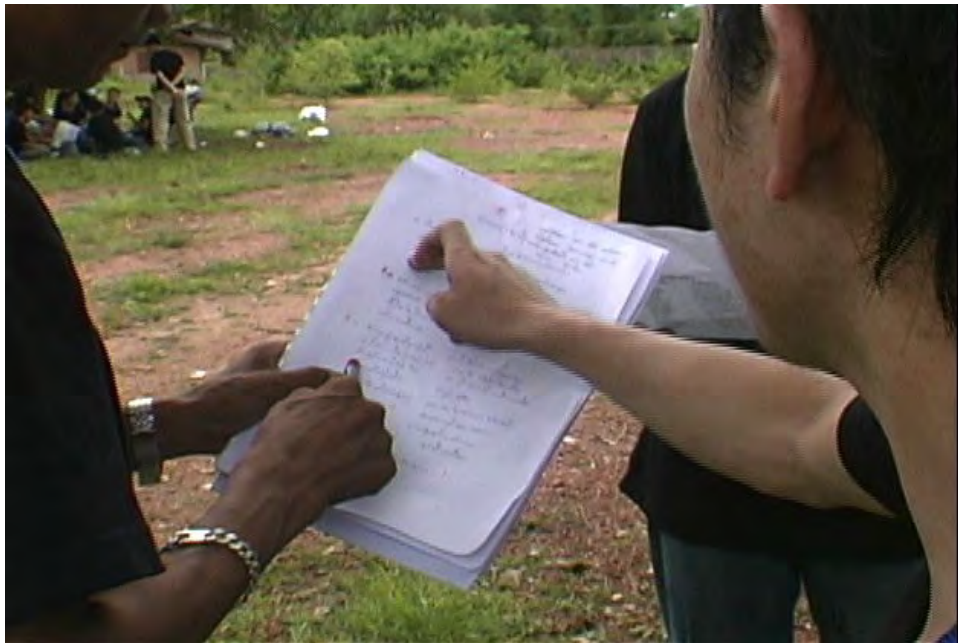


Figure 7.10: Mr. Soubanh (holding lyrics on the left side of photo) uses a pen to point to where he says lyrics of song should begin to repeat according to his structural definition of "*our* Lao music." Phonpaseuth (on the right side of photo) uses his finger to point to the spot where he began the repeat of lyrics for the chorus of his song.

In Phonpaseuth's performance he replaced the first eight bars of the song with a musical fill – an acoustic guitar bridge of sorts in which Phonpaseuth replaced the following lyrics with guitar music alone:

What caused  
us to meet each other?  
In the spirit of partnership  
with extremely tight bonds

Different people, different hearts  
never before associated  
Coming together as one  
attached

Phonpaseuth used this bridge as a musical fill, separating the first singing of the chorus, from the vocal repeat of the lyrics. It was an acoustic break that lasted only eight bars (covering the exact number of bars left unsung) before circling back to pick up the lyrics from the subsequent line: “I glanced at you, you smiled in return.” Pointing to the spot on lyric sheet where Phonpaseuth performed the bridge (the eight bars starting with “What caused us to meet each other?”) Mr. Soubanh adamantly insisted, “The musicians are not going to come in over this part! If it [the lyrics] comes in it will come in all the way.” Again Mr. Soubanh was adamant about structure as he added, “The music can’t go in at the part where it is not supposed to go.” Mr. Soubanh was directly telling Phonpaseuth and those in the group that had formed around Phonpaseuth’s lyrics, that in order to have a song align with the structures of what the older generation deemed to be “our Lao music,” Phonpaseuth’s chorus had to be either a complete repeat of the entire lyrics of the song from top to bottom, or a repeat of part of the lyrics starting somewhere below the sixteenth bar of the song.

Phonpaseuth’s creativity did not match with Mr. Soubanh’s definition of “*our* Lao music.” Phonpaseuth tried to ask if the musical transition between the two performances of the chorus could come in near the bottom of the page. Mr. Soubanh shook his head and mumbled, “it is not going to go that way” then added, “if you repeat the chorus you need to repeat it from the top of the chorus” implying that Phonpaseuth’s eight bar acoustic bridge couldn’t be interjected and used to substitute for the singing of lyrics. Mr. Soubanh insisted, “You repeat the chorus once and you are finished. . . . The music can’t be used to make the connection for you.”

Bounmee had been standing behind Mr. Soubanh, and (in a rather sycophantic move) he reached forward to point to the exact spot on the page where Mr. Soubanh was insisting a break should occur and suggested making the break at that line, which read: “These good memories will stay with us forever.” Of course Mr. Soubanh agreed with the exact change he had been arguing had to be made. Mr. Soubanh nodded and left with a wave of his hand (similar to how one might brush away an annoying fly), saying, “Practice it again.”

Phonpaseuth stood momentarily frozen in one spot, looking dejected and deep in thought. Bounmee’s public recognition of the structure Mr. Soubanh demanded put an end to Mr. Soubanh’s discussion of the point with Phonpaseuth. Phonpaseuth’s look of dejection made it clear that he wasn’t ready to conform to Mr. Soubanh’s suggested transformation. But the decision was no longer in Phonpaseuth’s hands alone. When the group congregated around Phonpaseuth and his song, the song transformed from being the sole possession of Phonpaseuth, to being the product of the group. The work was the

group's piece; Phonpaseuth no longer had individualized decision-making authority over the piece and how it was performed.

Bounmee's expressed recognition of Mr. Soubanh's demand put an end to the group's discussion with Mr. Soubanh. While the others had remained relatively silent allowing Phonpaseuth to defend his creation, Bounmee publically indicated that he recognized and could verbalize the change in the structure of the song that Mr. Soubanh was demanding. With one group member understanding the structural demand Mr. Soubanh had no further need to stand around and discuss the point.

A female student thawed Phonpaseuth's frozen state, cheerfully saying, "Sing it again. Sing it again." Phonpaseuth turned to the group and began to give them his feedback on their performance, focusing primarily on the note a number of the young women failed to hit in singing the word "sweetening." It was clear that the group would capitulate to Mr. Soubanh's critique – they would change what constituted the chorus to meet Mr. Soubanh's requirements for structure.

In his critique of Phonpaseuth's song Mr. Soubanh made no mention of the subject of the song or the meaning of the lyrics, rather his critique focused entirely on the structure of the song. In order to meet Mr. Soubanh's approval, Phonpaseuth's song had to match what Mr. Soubanh expressed as the defining structural conventions of "our Lao music." The stressed "our" Mr. Soubanh employed was not an all inclusive "our," rather, it was clear that from Mr. Soubanh's perspective the students did not occupy a social position within the "our" that would enable the students to creatively explore musical structures that fell outside conventions that he (as a legitimate representative of the older generation, the "our") deemed to be representative of "our Lao music." The students were on the west side of the wall, the "our" socialized on the east side. In Lao PDR it was the members of Mr. Soubanh's "our" who determined what could, and couldn't be played on Lao National Radio's airwaves. Through these interactions with Mr. Soubanh, Phonpaseuth, and the members of the group gathered around him, were becoming practitioners of the practice of conforming their work to meet the structural expectations and demands of those who socialized on the eastern side of the wall.

### **Performing conformity and the performed critique of non-conformity:**

The subject matter of the works students created was for the most part focused upon the issues of immediate importance and interest of the young people participating in the course. Common themes that constituted the bulk of students' lyrical compositions were love, unrequited love, inability to reach someone one loved on one's mobile phone, etc.

Mr. Paengan had stated that a goal of the film archive and museum trips were to provide the students with "inspiration, the capital of life (ທຶນຮອນຊີວິດ)," content to stir their imagination, and assist with the development of ideas for writing. As the day of "practice camping" was winding to a close we had yet to hear anyone step forward with themes of the field trips following, as Mr. Paengan had said, "through the tips of their pens, for society and their friends to read, or to share with others about what they think."

The last activity of the practice camp day was the group song performances. The group that had gathered around Mr. Soubanh during poetry writing was the first group to perform and they sang a song built around the lyrics of the ugly guitar poem. The second group to perform was group of students who had congregated around Chanthaboun, the

fruit vendor from a town just south of the capital city. He was older than most of the students, and had a rather encyclopedic memory for Lao popular song lyrics. During the lunch break he refreshed his memory of lyrics with a Ministry publication on song lyrics, and was a central figure in the students' lunchtime group sing-along activities.

Chanthaboun was a friend of the Vannasin accounting assistant, and frequently socialized with the staff in the Vannasin office during breaks in writers training instruction over the duration of the course. Chanthaboun was well attuned to the type of subject matter that would prove appealing to the Ministry of Information and Culture staff. Chanthaboun was a mediator of sorts, a person able to move between the social realms of the students and the social realm the camp administrators, with a social gravity that attracted the pragmatic students into his orbit. However, his age and interactions with the faculty made him a bit of an outsider with the students, his student status made him an outsider among the older generation of writers.

Those who gathered in a group around Chanthaboun and his song during the practice camp were quite talented young poetry and lyric writers who were also able to sing along with many of the songs popularly played on Lao National Radio. Each of the six students who gathered around Chanthaboun was a rather exceptional writer/performer in his/her own right. Weeks later, at the camp's closing ceremony three of the six would win honors from their instructors and peers in recognition of the quality of work they produced; one would be the winning student poet, one would be the winning student song writer, and another would win for her short story. But at this time they gathered as a group around Chanthaboun, providing back up music and clapping for his singing of the lyrics.

Chanthaboun's group, like the others, performed elevated on a mound beneath the *gatan* tree, the groups positioned themselves on a woven mat, standing, kneeling and sitting to face the assembled course instructors - Mr. Paegnan, Mrs. Phounsavath (the story writer), Mr. Bounpheng (the translator of Vietnamese literature), Mr. Dee, and Mr. Soubanh (the DJ and song writer), Mr. Paegnan's son, Mrs. Somboune (the book keeping staff member at Vannasin and neighbor and friend of Chanthaboun) and Mr. Sisavath (the newest Vannasin staff writer working during camp as an assistant under Mr. Dee) were also present to watch and listen.

As Chanthaboun took his position on the performance mat, Somlith sat down cross-legged in front of him with his guitar balanced upon his right knee. Somsanouk squatted beside Somlith poised at an overturned eighteen liter white plastic bucket, with a twenty centimeter stick clutched tightly in his right fist, and the palm and fingertips of his left hand resting on the upturned bottom of the bucket, ready to drum. Somsanouk's stick hitting the side of the bucket provided a high rim-shot sound, his right hand created the sound of a bass drum. Three female members of the group sat on the mat beside Somsanouk, and the one remaining male member squatted just off the mat to the right of Chanthaboun.

As his group assembled around him, Chanthaboun explained that the idea for this song came to him when he was out eating at a restaurant with friends and saw someone with a pierced navel. Cheerfully Chanthaboun announced to the audience, "Clap your hands and have fun with this as well." As they began Mr. Soubanh interrupted, yelling from the audience, "Did you announce the name of your song yet?" The students all laughed as Chanthaboun said he forgot to do that, and then he announced that the name

of the song was: “Earring forgot the ear.” Somlith started to strum the chords of the song, Somsanouk picked up the beat on the bucket, the four others clapped in time with Somsanouk’s beat, and Chanthaboun began to sing:

Dangle dangle dangle  
Oh why is it hanging on your navel?  
Looking at it, it looks like an earring  
What is hanging on your navel?

Or is it a new style of decoration?  
Young women put them in  
to make young men look at it.

Anyone who sees it wants to look at it.  
Everyone wants to stare at it.  
Entering into one’s vision, when one observes it closely  
they’ll die from a heart attack!

Young women  
wear extremes  
Shirts are short short  
Seeing it is a shock

The shape of your body  
is beautiful  
It is too bad the pretty woman  
doesn’t know how to be shy.

I want to tell you young woman  
so you will know  
Ow! I want to tell you young woman  
so you will know

If you were alone  
it would be dangerous

The traditions  
of our homeland  
Wearing the silk skirts of the past,  
is still very pretty

Young women  
should maintain and preserve  
Young women  
should maintain and preserve

## Things within the traditions of our mothers are disappearing

At this point the guitarist strummed eight bars of the chord progression with no lyrical accompaniment. When Somlith reached the end of this musical bridge Chanthaboun started singing the lyrics once more in their entirety. This full repeat of the entire lyrics matched what Mr. Soubanh expressed as the structural expectations for “*our* Lao music.”

Judging from the applause at the completion of its performance, the song was clearly a hit with both the students and staff. The lyrics were a poetic rebuke of a young woman who displayed a pierced navel. The admonishment focused on the social practice of moving away from the “traditions of our homeland,” and stressed the need for young women to maintain and preserve the components of the “traditions of our mothers.” The words conjured concepts of a respected unaltered past handed down from mother to daughter; a geographically situated historical lineage of traditions threatened by “new styles” unwittingly introduced into Lao society by the young.

On the whole, the song would have worked well as the audio accompaniment to a display in the National Museum, or as the sound track to a National Film Archive and Video Center production such as Forget Oneself (see chapter six). Chanthaboun’s lyrics had a moralistic call to protect and preserve an idealized and imagined static social order that harmonized well with many of the messages produced by the Ministry of Information and Culture.

The final line of the song (ເຄື່ອງທາງໃນວິດຄອງ ຂອງ ແມ່ເຮົາເຊື້ອມຫາຍ), was cleverly written so that it could be interpreted in more than one way. The phrase “ເຊື້ອມຫາຍ” at the end of the line was a compound of two words that formed a phrase meaning “deteriorate and disappear,” conveying the idea of deterioration to the point of oblivion (which I have translated as “disappearing”). This concluding part of the line wasn’t particularly open to wide and diverse interpretations; the meaning was pretty direct. The first part of the sentence, however, was composed in such a way as to leave ample room for interpretation.

The first part of the line read, “ເຄື່ອງທາງໃນວິດຄອງ ຂອງ ແມ່ເຮົາ” which translated as: “Things within the traditions of our mothers.” On a surface level one could understand this as meaning ‘The components of the traditions of our mothers.’ The line could also be read as, “the things that are within the traditions of our mothers.” Read this way the skirt and clothing of the mother could be understood as the “traditions of our mother” and the “things within” could imply the body parts wrapped in the traditional clothing of a woman. Read the second way the lyrics imply that the parts of the Lao woman’s body that are not normally (or not deemed socially appropriate to be) exposed for public viewing are under threat. The second interpretation fits well with the rest of the lyrics in which the singer expressed shock over the display of a decorated navel - the navel being a part of the body that is usually under the wraps of a low-land Lao woman’s skirt; the navel and mid-rift are not things that low-land Lao women typically expose for public view.

The lyrics call the listener’s attention to the inappropriateness of the young woman’s behavior, an inappropriateness based on “traditions” and divergence from those traditions and social norms. Chanthaboun (much like Mr. Soubanh did with his humiliation of the pining crooner) was calling the audience’s attention to the

inappropriate public performance of the young woman in a humorous and belittling manner. The song itself was a call for conformity with social norms.

Unlike Phonpaseuth's song, Chanthaboun's song both adhered to the structure that Mr. Soubanh expected of a Lao song, and the subject matter resonated with the moralistic messages of cultural maintenance and preservation one might expect from those charged with overseeing issues of culture. Phonpaseuth's group was the last of the groups to take to the mat and perform. Phonpaseuth sat down on the overturned plastic bucket, and the other members of the group gathered in a semicircle behind him, facing the audience. The group had changed what constituted the chorus by eight bars. Rather than starting the chorus at the line with "I glanced at you," (as they had done during practice performance for Mr. Soubanh) the students now repeated the lyrics eight bars beyond this point at the line which started: "These good memories." Their performance now met Mr. Soubanh's structural demands for "Lao music." However, it was clear to those of us in the audience that Chanthaboun's song had the advantage over Phonpaseuth's work in the areas of subject matter and message.

### **Conclusion:**

Inherent in practices of adaptive-perpetuation are intergenerational tensions that arise through the older generation's vested interests in having the young generation conform their social practices to the ongoing social practices of the older generation. Conformity must be understood broadly, as to encompass and apply to not simply the end product of the younger generation's labor (e.g. in the case of the Sinxay Pen's Camp expectations of conformity do not merely apply to the end written products produced through labor), but also to the actual social relations involved in production. As a result, the older generation's approaches to inculcating conformity the incorporation of outsiders into the ongoing social practices the group are multi-dimensional and diverse.

The older generation of Lao propagandists are themselves perpetually engaged in a form of labor (in service to the Party and the Ministry of Information and Culture) that aims at the production of social conformity. Keeping this in mind, the interactions between Mr. Soubanh and the students (particularly his interactions with Phonpaseuth described above) reveal another form of intergenerational tension that exists in adaptive-perpetuation, these are tensions surrounding the older generation's resistance to adapting their structural understandings to the changing nature of what constitutes "Lao" identity. The fact that the largest number of the youngest students in the training camp congregated around Phonpaseuth and the work he produced indicates that perhaps he, rather than Mr. Soubanh, may be more attuned to what contemporary young people in Lao PDR are eager to hear and be a part of. Mr. Soubanh's dismissive write-off of the product of Phonpaseuth's labor purely on structural grounds is reflective of the tension that exists within the older generation when faced with the task of crafting propaganda to alter the behavior of a post-economic reform audience.

In the following chapter I present a description of the Sinxay Pen's Camp multi-night camping trip focusing on the older generation's aims at engaging students in "the practice of togetherness." The two-night trip revealed multiple aspects of how the members of the older generation of writers produce themselves as threats to adaptive-perpetuation.

---

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> I owe considerable debt to Dean MacCannell and Erving Goffman here. MacCannell's work on the production of a "back stage" for tourists immediately popped to mind during the "practice camping" trip described in the body of this chapter. The staged rewards of staff members were in no small part a purposeful carefully crafted presentation of a social self in a carefully crafted performance of what was purported to be an everyday life type of activity for the Vannasin employees and instructors (See MacCannell 1999; Goffman 1959).

<sup>2</sup> Here are I am referencing the ethnographic explorations of Deborah Wong and her examination of classical dance in Thailand (Wong 2001).

<sup>3</sup> As a non-paid foreigner volunteering in the Ministry it was often assumed that I would not share the same faithful loyalty to my supervisors as those whose income and employment depended upon those supervisors. I found I was frequently approached by others and asked to reveal what I, and they, knew my supervisors did not want revealed. During an ASEAN visit I accompanied Mr. Paengan and the ASEAN delegates on an overnight excursion to a resort. When we returned to Vientiane Mr. Paengan's daughter jokingly asked her father "So dad, who did you sleep with on the over night trip?" He told her he hadn't slept with anyone, that he had slept faithfully alone. She immediately turned to me and demanded, "Charlie who did my father sleep with last night?" When I replied in Lao with mock sincerity "I don't know," Mr. Paengan laughed and said I was learning to be a good Lao employee.

<sup>4</sup> In this respect it has an element of similarity with "the laff" as discussed by Willis (Willis 1981, 2001).

**An intra-generational struggle - understanding the older generation as a threat to the practice and communities of practice through which they produce their social identity**

**Introduction:**

In the previous chapter I detailed aspects of the production of conformity and the intergenerational tensions produced as aspiring practitioners and members of the older generation of practitioners met head to head on the field of guided practice. For the community of writers this venture into a mass inculcation of young people for the purposes of adaptive perpetuation constituted a significant change in their practices of production. It was a transition from producing written products to producing producers of written products. It was also a significant step in opening of the community and the practices around which the community had formed, to young outsiders. The struggles to maintain conformity in practice, and conformity in the social relations of practice were key aspects of the older generation's labors of inculcation during the camp.

But how does one maintain conformity while fostering the recognized-as-necessary changes in practice that led to the attempts at incorporating the young people in the first place? After all, the administrators of Vannasin organized the camp when faced with both the need for change, and the perceived need for young new practitioners to produce that change. In the practices of adaptive perpetuation the newcomers are perceived by the old-timers to produce potential *threats of change* (e.g. threats to the “our Lao” that the older generation labored to protect and maintain) – in turn, the practices of the old (not the least of which includes the attempts to enforce conformity in practice to counter the perceived threats of change) constitute *threats to change*. Therefore, an important question that arises through the exploration of adaptive-perpetuation is: In the attempts at engaging in adaptive-perpetuation of a community of practice how do the members of the older generation of practitioners produce themselves as threats to the adaptive-perpetuation of the practice and communities of practice through which they produce their social identity? Through the presentation of a two night camping trip near the end of the camp I detail multiple aspects of how the members of the older generation produce themselves as threats to adaptive-perpetuation.

The Vannasin administration's aim with the camping trip to the popular tourist destination of Vang Vieng was to engage the students more extensively in both the supervised practices of writing for the Ministry and “practice being together” (described in chapter seven). Importantly, with respect to practice being together, the activities of the camping trip were intended to engage the students in peripheral participation in a broad range of social practices (beyond simply putting pen to paper and recreating expected structures of writing) that constitute fundamental elements of being a writer for the Ministry of Information and Culture. As Mr. Dee explained later, this was to provide the students with opportunities to “deal with problems when they arise, and find solutions in order to move beyond their difficulties.” However, what became apparent during the course of the two-night trip was that many of the ‘difficulties’ the students faced were directly related to the deeply engrained social practices of the members of the older generation.

Deeply entrenched social practices of members of the older generation individually and collectively produce diverse challenges to the legitimate peripheral participation of the aspiring practitioners. In the following pages I use the experiences of the students during the camping trip to show how such challenges were produced during the course of the overnight trip, and how students went about mediating the tensions and navigating around the obstacles constituted through the social practices of the members of the older generation. On the following pages I present a number of vignettes from the two night camp to: a) provide the reader with an understanding of the kinds of activities the members of the two generations engaged in during the trip, and, b) make visible the social practices of the members of the two generations as they labored to develop ways of relating with each other. The vignettes can be looked at individually to gain insights into a particular social practice of the members of the older generation that could produce challenges to developing practices of peripheral participation and adaptive-perpetuation. The magnitude of the older generation's challenges to adaptive-perpetuation, however, becomes clear when we look at the social practices within the vignettes collectively.

I open the chapter with a look at the student's exposure to the older generation's practices of social segregation and hierarchical communication patterns. This leads us to an understanding of how practices of segregation and top down communication among the older generation produce the need for young people to collectively determine their own actions, actions that run counter to the plans developed by administrators, actions through which they wrest control of their activities out of the hands of the members of the older generation. Following this I move to a discussion of the dialectics of labor-leisure – a concept that is important to grasp in order to understand how certain behaviors of members of the older generation (behaviors that would not have been permissible in the setting of the Ministry) could be tolerated, or ignored by other members of the older generation in the context of the camp.

I move from labor-leisure to a look at a game of social literacy, a game through which students are rewarded for their knowledge of the members of the lineage of writers among which the administrators of the camp imagine themselves a part. The game reveals a form of backwards envisioning of the community of practice, a backwards thinking that often precludes a vision for the future of the organization. From the game I transition to an examination of the student's development of practices of self-censorship – a practice that threatens to hide what might be their most marketable work from the eyes of the older generation of writers. This brings us to a candlelight ceremony on the last night of the camp, a ceremony that was not a passing of the torch, but rather a reminder that a hierarchical teacher/student relationship would be maintained between the generations even at the completion of the training.

On the final morning of the camp the administration had the students perform the works that they had produced in conformity with the expectations of the older generation, this performance, however was not the typical student/peer audience performance of conformity, but rather it was a very public performance in front of the lens of a Lao National Television crew. It was a showcasing of the older generation's labor, though the young people were the central focus, their performances were not revealing of a youthful change in the products of the Vannasin Unit, but rather but revealing of conformity of social practice, and the hard work the administrators had contributed to produce this conformity. The final vignette I share is from the bus trip back to Vientiane – the social

practices on the bus were developed through the course of the camp and the camping trip through “practice being together,” and these social practices revealed that male and female students were traveling concurrently towards gender disparate destinations.

**Exposure to and experiencing social segregation and information flows:**

“Practice being together” and the practice of writing within the Ministry of Information and Culture involve aspects of social segregation, and hierarchical flows of information. Through their trip to Vang Vieng the students experienced first-hand the segregation that exists between insiders and outsiders in the community of practice of writers for the Ministry. The trip also enabled students to gain further experience with the top down hierarchical flows of information within units of the Ministry. Developing understandings in regard to these aspects of the labor of writing for the Ministry and Party were not preplanned elements of the curriculum purposefully designed by members of the older generation, but rather these important lessons arose through the students’ experience of the journey.

As the sun was rising on the morning of Friday August 18<sup>th</sup> Sinxay Pen’s Camp students arrived at the Ministry of Information and Culture compound on foot, via motorbike, jumbo, and tuk-tuk. Parents of a number of the young women dropped their children off at the gates, roommates and friends dropped off others. Arriving between intermittent downpours the students came with camping gear in tow (pots, pans, blankets, woven plastic mats, plates and utensils, extra clothing, towels, soap . . .). They lined their bags along the wall of the building, sheltered from the rain, and out of the way of any Ministry Officials who would soon be arriving to work.

A large old blue and white public bus lumbered up in front of the gates. The transmission made a loud grinding sound as the driver shifted gears. Spewing a black puff of diesel exhaust, the driver carefully backed the hulking bus through the gates of the Ministry compound. This was the bus that would be taking the students on their camping trip. The driver disembarked, lifted the doors to the under-floor storage area, and students began to shove their camping gear aboard for the journey.



Figure 8.1: The public bus chartered to transport Sinxay Pen's Camp students to Vang Vieng, loading passengers and gear in front of the Ministry on the morning of Friday August 18, 2009.

The Vannasin staff and the Sinxay Pen's Camp instructors did not ride on an old public bus, rather they rode in a Ministry owned bus, a bus which the Ministry received as a gift from the government of Japan. The Vannasin staff and camp instructors' bus was air-conditioned, clean, relatively quiet, and had seats that were far more comfortable than those of the older city public bus chartered for transporting the students. Earlier in the camp the Ministry's busses were used for the museum and film archive field trips within the city. Having experienced comfortable rides upon the Ministry's busses, the students were well aware of the differences between staff and student camping transportation.

Not all of the students were able to participate in the two-night trip. The two Buddhist novices and the young monk had also had to skip the "practice camping" trip earlier in the session. Among them, the sixteen year old high-school student was also absent from the overnight trip and the practice camping. And there were a number of students (particularly those who were employed) who had various responsibilities in Vientiane on Friday and would travel to Vang Vieng on their own via public transportation late Friday night or on Saturday.



Figure 8.2: Sinxay Pen’s Camp students aboard the chartered public bus traveling to camp in Vang Vieng.

Of the thirty-seven students who did climb aboard the bus, none knew their ultimate destination. Like the “practice camping” excursion (and akin to his unmentioned plans for the Sinxay Stars), Mr. Paengan would only tell the students the general location of where they would be going: Vang Viang. He revealed this only after considerable pressure, when it was clear that parents, and those students who would have to travel to the camp on their own on Saturday needed to know the general area where the students would camp. The exact location in Vang Vieng was kept a secret, no matter how the students asked, the staff would not reveal where they would be participating in activities and residing overnight.

During the four hours aboard the bus students engaged in a number of different activities. The primary group activity was the singing of popular songs. Somsanouk sitting at the rear of the bus provided the percussive backbeat for the songs on his overturned eighteen liter plastic bucket. Chanthaboun, sitting in the front on the transmission housing between the driver and door, maintained the beat clapping. The songs were all Lao popular songs that one hears repeatedly on Lao National Radio (the style of these songs would meet Mr. Soubanh’s approval). While Chanthaboun, and Bounteurm sang along with almost every song, and others joined in when the group rotated through to a song for which they knew the lyrics. A number of students spent much of the ride writing (lyrics, poems, and short stories). Everyone engaged in sightseeing through the windows of the bus at one time or another. A few students struggling with motion sickness appeared almost as green as the lush environment through which the bus traveled.



Figure 8.3: Leaving Vientiane one student checks the fading signal of his mobile phone, as his seatmate composes a poem in his notebook.

Long before departing from Vientiane students were wondering about where they might be spending the night, and as the bus passed the cement factory on the outskirts of Vang Vieng the bus was abuzz with speculation about the destination. The driver steered the bus slowly into the part of town peppered with guesthouses, pulling onto the road that runs parallel with the Song River. Students at the front of the bus let out an excited shout and pointed when they caught sight of the Sinxay Pen's Camp banner (the camp banner with sponsorship logos affixed which regularly hung on the red velvet curtain behind the lecturers in the Ministry's large meeting hall). The banner was tied to the chain link fence surrounding the Collège Ethnique (ໂຮງຮຽນສາມັນຊົນເຜົ່າ ethnic minorities school).



Figure 8.4: Students disembarking from the chartered public bus at the Collège Ethnique (ໂຮງຮຽນສາມັນຊົນເຜົ່າ ethnic minorities school) in Vang Vieng.

A number of weeks prior to the camping excursion Mr. Paengan had sent two of his male staff members to Vang Vieng to scout possible locations for the Pen's Camp. Upon their return the staff members reported the positive aspects of the school to Mr. Paengan. The school is located within easy walking distance from the river and a number of scenic locales. The structures of the facility box in a large football pitch on three sides, the west side of the pitch is opened to the roadway and an inspiring view of the limestone karst outcroppings on the opposite side of the Song River. It would seem an ideal location where students can relax and find inspiration for writing.



Figure 8.5: the grounds of the Collège Ethnique (ໂຮງຮຽນສາມັນຊົນເຜົ່າ ethnic minorities school) in Vang Vieng as viewed from the roadway.



Figure 8.6: View from the administration building of the Collège Ethnique (ໂຮງຮຽນສາມັນຊົນເຜົ່າ ethnic minorities school) in Vang Vieng, looking out across the football pitch and roadway towards rain clouds enveloping the limestone karst outcroppings on the opposite side of the Song River.

Importantly, the school was also within easy walking distance from the guesthouse where Vannasin staff members, instructors, and their families would reside. The guesthouse owner had agreed to provide the accommodations in exchange for advertising in Vannasin Magazine.



Figure 8.7: Ministry of Information and Culture bus parked on the street in front of the guesthouse where Vannasin staff, Sinxay Pen's Camp instructors, and family members stayed during the outing to Vang Vieng.

The vacant ethnic minority student dorms, however, were in a state of disrepair; Mr. Paengan and the Sinxay students were appalled by the conditions. These facilities stood in stark contrast to the relatively luxurious guesthouse accommodations enjoyed by the Vannasin staff, instructors and their family members. The ceiling of the dorm was collapsing into the structure as rain flowed through the roof and formed puddles on the floor. The two large rooms were dark, dank and dirty. With one light fixture directly under a flow of rainwater, there was just the remaining single florescent light to provide illumination for both rooms of the dorm.

The latrine behind the school was overflowing with fecal matter. The outdoor area designated for bathing (i.e. bathing from a cold water spigot in the open) was strewn with thick layers of accumulated garbage and refuse. Students who ventured through the mud and garbage to view the latrine tended to come running back literally gagging in disgust.

The extreme state of disrepair proved revealing of the lack of an upward flow of negative information in the hierarchical levels of employment within the Vannasin unit. The facilities were unsuitable for housing the students from the writer's camp. This was clear to the shocked students and to the assembled instructors and staff. The Vannasin staff members who had traveled to scout the location however had not conveyed the negative aspects of the dorms to Mr. Paengan, his staff had not informed him of how

dilapidated the dorms were. Mr. Paengan did not find out about the true dilapidated state of the dorms until we all arrived on the scene. He, like the students, was clearly shocked and dismayed by the conditions.

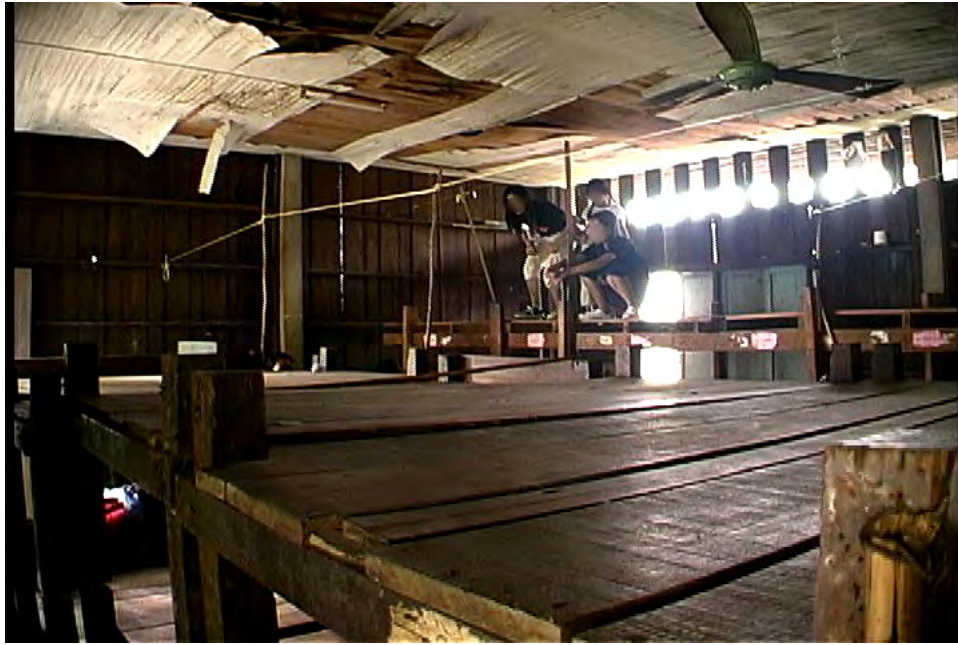


Figure 8.8: Sinxay students, resting briefly during clean-up activities, squat atop the wooden plank bunks, and watch rain flow through the water damaged plywood ceiling of the student dorm at the ethnic minority school in Vang Vieng.



Figure 8.9: A female student throws her hands up in disgust and shock upon seeing (and catching a whiff of) the overflowing latrines in the garbage strewn bathing area behind the student dorms at the ethnic minority school in Vang Vieng (note: the latrine is the corrugated tin structure behind the shrubs in the center of the photo).

Sonesack, a student at the nation's law school, was the most vocal about the situation. In a soft, though determined voice he repeatedly stated aloud that the conditions, though bearable for male Sinxay students, were not suitable for accommodating the female students. Female students, he argued, have certain needs (which he did not delineate) that the conditions of the dorm did not provide.



Figure 8.10: Sinxay Pen's Camp banner (with sponsorship logos attached) hung between porch posts at the dorm of the ethnic minority school in Vang Vieng.

As another wave of heavy rain poured down upon the ethnic minority school, the Sinxay Pen's Camp banner was moved from the fence at the roadway, and tied to the posts in front of the dorm. With the hanging of the banner, the dorms became the designated space for the Sinxay Pen's Camp activities. The Vannasin staff, and the instructors who were present then retreated to the comforts of their guesthouse, leaving the students to work on their first assignment of the camp: cleaning the dorm.

Through the bus ride to Vang Vieng and the shock supplied by the condition of the dorms the students gained direct first-hand experience with both the social segregation that exists between members of the social body of writers and others, and the hierarchical flows of communication that exist within the Ministry of Information and Culture. Riding on the wooden floored non-air conditioned public bus the students were well aware of the significant difference in the level of comfort simultaneously being experienced by the camp administrators, Vannasin staff, and instructors on the Ministry's bus. The dorms of the Collège Ethnique stood in stark contrast to the accommodations afforded the members of the older generation of writers and the Vannasin administrators. The conditions of the dorms and the dismay expressed by Vannasin administrators informed the students of the flows of communication that existed within the hierarchical structure of the Vannasin unit: directives (that may obfuscate actual end destinations) flow downward in the hierarchical structure, negative evaluations, assessments, and reports do not flow upward. The trip to Vang Vieng, thus proved edifying. These lessons, though not purposefully structured into the camp curriculum, were essential for illuminating important aspects of the ongoing practices of writing for the Ministry and the single-Party State.

In the older generation's attempts at producing opportunities for peripheral participation of youth, these established practices of exclusion manifest themselves as

intra-generational threats to the incorporation of the labor of youth - - threats to the practices of adaptive-perpetuation. The difference between the students' public bus ride, and the older generation's air-conditioned Ministry bus ride was quite successful in producing a discourse of envy among the students. For quite a few of the students, the striking difference between the unquestionably abysmal conditions of the dorms and the conditions of the older generation's guesthouse pushed the students far beyond the point of envy to the point of being appalled. Appalled not just at what some members of the Ministry staff had deemed fit for their accommodations, but further appalled on a multitude of other levels not the least of which being that the surprise endpoint had proven to be such a surprise even for Mr. Paengan himself.

### **Students collectively taking control of situations:**

Through their collective labor cleaning the dorms and a subsequent writing assignment, students worked to figure out solutions to the problematic conditions with which they were faced. The cleaning and group writing activity times were periods of collective problem solving on issues beyond those simply related to aspects of writing and lyric composition. Prior to the trip to Vang Vieng, the student's taking control of situations had been limited primarily to break-time activities, and distractions at the periphery of tour groups and group lessons. The situations they faced in Vang Vieng, however, demanded collective solutions for the wellbeing and safety of themselves and members of their group. The conditions of the dorms, the behavior of one of the instructors and the lack of a means to share negative information upward in the hierarchy also contributed to a growing gender divide within the ranks of the student body.

Working together the students cleaned the dorm and created a space suitable for group writing activities. The students did not have access to the classroom building and its desks and benches, they were limited to what existed inside and outside the dorm. Once the wooden bunks were cleaned off and the rooms swept from bottom to top students laid plastic mats on the bunks and gathered in groups upon the mats. On the original printed schedule for the camp students were to "discuss the trip and activities between the mountains, open your heart and open your pen tip to write down how you feel . . . ." In practice this first activity for groups was the assignment to collaboratively compose new group songs.

The groups approached the assignment of group song writing in different ways. The group that had formed around Mr. Soubanh (the Lao National Radio host and songwriter) at the practice camp seemed content to simply sit around and chat for a considerable length of time prior to writing lyrics. Once again Bounteum whipped out a fairly complete page of lyrics for the members of his group to critique. The group that had assembled around Phonpaseuth, and the group that had assembled around Chanthaboun both involved all group members contributing ideas and feedback, drawing material from their experiences with the Sinxay Pen's Camp and the road trip to Vang Vieng.

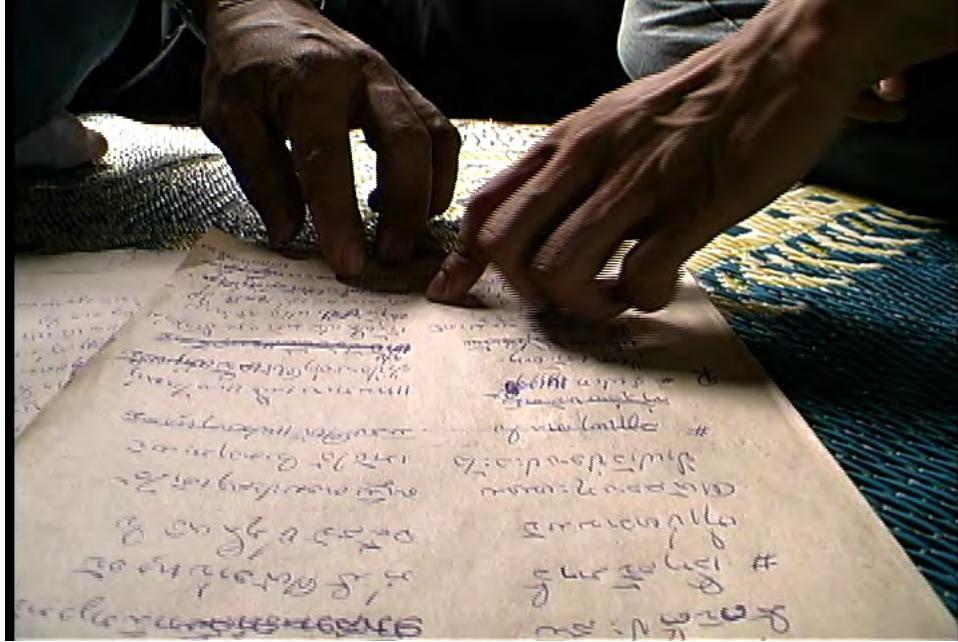


Figure 8.11: Bounteum and Somsanouk look over and discuss the lyrics Bounteum has penned for a ‘group song.’



Figure 8.12: The group that gathered around Chanthaboun sit atop a bunk discussing and collectively composing lyrics for a new group song.



Figure 8.13: A student in the group that gathered around Phonpaseuth jotting down ideas for lyrics as the students collaborate in the creation of a new group song.

While the students were at work on their new group songs Mrs. Onchanh, the Vannasin accountant, made her rounds through the dorm. Mrs. Onchanh carried a large black purse that held bills bundled together with rubber bands. Following the list of student names she tracked down the young people in the dorm, and, in exchange for a signature on the list, distributed to each, a small cash per diem, to cover that student's food expenses for the three days. The written schedule described this disbursement of funds as a small token given from the heart of the camp organizers. It is likely that the camp administrators did not imagine exactly how the female students would eventually pool these funds for their collective wellbeing.

Mr. Soubanh, fueled by celebrations outside the gates of the school, ambled back to the dorms, then reeled from group to group listening to each group perform the same songs they had played during the day of practice camping. His attention was not entirely focused on the performances, but rather on specific performers. Sidling up to female students he maintained his upright posture with the aid of inanimate objects (walls, doorframes, benches . . .) as the animated female objects of his attention fled in a direction opposite to that of his approach.

Word quickly spread among the female students of his inebriated behavior, behavior that a number of the young women described as discomfiting (sidling up in close proximity to young women, uninvited contact, and reportedly the whispered invitations to some that they could bathe at his guesthouse should they not want to bathe in the filthy conditions of the dorms). In solidarity, a number of female students quickly mobilized into a group in close proximity to a university aged student who was the recipient of a substantial portion of his unwanted attention; the grouping of peers prevented the young woman from being isolated and cornered alone by Mr. Soubanh. A number of university-aged female students casually, though purposefully, placed

themselves between the lyricist and younger high school aged females. This grouping and social organization among the young female students provided a buffer between the lyricist and the targets of his unwanted attention. While word spread among the students of Mr. Soubanh's behavior, it did not flow upwards in the hierarchical organization of the camp administration. The students had already witnessed (in regards to the appalling conditions of the dorms) that important negative information did not flow upwards via the staff of the Vannasin unit.

As the students cleaned the dorm, and took part in the afternoon's activities, they took it upon themselves to figure out alternative accommodations. Central to many of the conversations about alternative accommodations were the subjects of being able to lock one's door at night, clean rooms and restrooms, and private bathing facilities. In their groups, a number of students decided they would venture out during free time (i.e. between activities) to look for guesthouse accommodations. Collectively they figured out how they could join together in small groups to pool their limited finances (e.g. the funds distributed by Mrs. Onchanh earlier in the day) in order to cover the cost of the guesthouse rooms. A handful of young men (many claiming to be looking out for the wellbeing of the female students, though some clearly desiring more comfortable accommodations), and all of the female students decided to sleep in guesthouses around town, this left only men in the dorms at night.

In the late afternoon the women from Chanthaboun's group left to bathe in the guesthouse where they would be residing, and the men (who decided to stay in the at the Collège Ethnique) bathed out among the refuse behind the dorm. After showering, with no women around, the men found themselves responsible for having to collaboratively prepare the meal. It quickly became apparent that the men in this group normally did not do their own cooking. Most of the other groups gave up on preparing their own food, and went to the market to purchase prepared dishes, but the men in Chanthaboun's group were determined to cook the majority of the meal themselves. The absence of women with experience in food preparation threw the cooking activities into a bit of disarray. Among other things Chanthaboun was unsure as to how much water was needed to boil rice, a young man was unsure as to how processes certain leaves to make the stock for bamboo soup, another student unsure was how mushrooms should be cut for a dish, but through discussions with each other they were able to come up with solutions to each of their quandaries.



Figure 8.14: A young man prepares *ya nang* soup stock for bamboo soup.



Figure 8.15: A young man checks to see if rice is boiling.



Figure 8.16: A student whittles a tree branch into a pestle (as the members of his group forgot to bring one with them from Vientiane).

By the time the young women had bathed, changed clothing and returned the men had the meal preparations well under way. Joking about how the food looked and smelled, and how the young men were busily cooking, the young women were visibly amused by the fact that the men were preparing the dinner. As Khamlah had done in the museum tour, she pulled out her mobile phone to record photographs of the novel things she was observing and experiencing –in this case it was men preparing a meal for women.

The behavior of Mr. Soubanh, the lack of a means for negative information to flow upwards in the hierarchy of camp administration, the resulting discomfort of the young women in the group, all combined to contribute to the practices of “togetherness” that maintained a social body of writers with men at its core and women producing space of their own at the periphery. This was a gender-divided “togetherness” – a “togetherness” of men with minimal opportunities for the input from women. This perpetuation of the social practices of the older generation was not a specifically designed aspect of the camp curriculum; rather, the lessons arose through, and as a result of the ongoing social practices of the members of the older generation of writers. Although during lectures the classroom instruction was delivered through pedagogical practices that appeared equally accessible to both male and female students, the act of going camping with the members of the older generation of writers immersed students within the actual practices of the writers, contributing to the perpetuation of the gendered divide within the social body of Lao writers working for Vannasin. It must be understood that Mr. Dee’s summation of the purpose of the camp as providing the students opportunities to “practice being together,” should not be construed to mean the administrators were attempting to foster some form of equity in participation – rather, “practice being together” must be understood as immersing students in the ongoing social practices of the

body of writers, the social practices that have perpetuated the social hierarchy of the institution and those who labor to maintain it.

### **Dialectics of leisure – labor**

How do administrators of the Ministry maintain a social hierarchy in a low wage work environment? On the surface it might seem that there is little incentive for employees to continue their employment for the Ministry, especially when employees are occupying the bottom rungs of the social hierarchy. As I discussed in chapter three, Ministry employment does afford unique opportunities for leveraging one's labor for capital accumulation. Administrators must balance their demands on employees to insure that staff members have opportunities to produce the income they need to afford their low wage government employment. There is another factor, the careful and purposeful orchestration of which is another means of retaining employees, and this is the maintenance of a balance of labor-leisure. The camping trip to Vang Vieng provides us an ideal opportunity to explore the dialectics of labor-leisure within an institution of the single-Party State. In this section I expand upon the concept of rewarding staff, concluding with the concept of the production of envy. Envy it would seem would constitute a deleterious emotion to produce within and between work units within an institution, however the production of envy is a deeply engrained social practice and important aspect of the administration of work units within the Ministry. The camping trip to Vang Vieng enabled the students the opportunity to peripherally engage in this practice.

As the next day broke the rain continued to pour down in heavy curtains moving slowly across the topography. In the early morning hours the students were free from scheduled activities and training. Between downpours groups the students ventured out on foot to explore the surrounding area.

Rather than standing among the refuse behind the ethnic minority school dorm to wash, Somsanouk and a few of the other young men grabbed their towels and hiked through the rain to bathe in the Song River. There was not much time between downpours or the start of group activities, so groups of students generally did not go very far. Many walked down to the river to admire the cloud shrouded limestone outcroppings on the other side.



Figure 8.17: A group of Sinxay students pose for a group photo on a toll bridge above the Song River as the next curtain of rain clouds envelop the limestone karsts in the background.

The Vannasin staff, the instructors, and their family members had the Ministry's bus to shuttle them about town and to the tourist destinations around the city. Unlike the staff and instructors, as soon as the students had disembarked the public bus that delivered them to the camp was back in service as a public bus, leaving the students to venture out and about in the rain on foot. Because the staff's guesthouse was just up the road from the school, the students were able to observe the Ministry bus passing by as the staff, instructors, and their families departed and returned from sightseeing and outings over the course of the weekend.

The Vannasin Staff and Instructors did not travel on the trip alone. The trip was a journey for many Vannasin family members as well. For example: Mr. Paengan was accompanied by his wife, daughter and an in-law; Mr. Dee was in the company of his eight year old daughter, and wife; Mr. Bounpheng (the translator of Vietnamese literature/Banker) was in Vang Vieng with his wife.

It is impossible to completely disaggregate labor from leisure in this Lao context. Mr. Paengan described the trip to me as a "reward" for the hard work of his staff, yet the Vannasin staff and instructors would not be able to have a trip to Vang Vieng without the trip being a working trip. For the Vannasin staff the trip to Vang Vieng was simultaneously a reward and a duty; simultaneously low paid labor and compensation for their low paid labor.

The rewarding aspects of the trip were visible in the demeanor of the staff, most notably Mrs. Viengmany. On a daily basis when working as the technical staff (one of the lowest paid positions) in the office Mrs. Viengmany seldom smiled. Her eyes were devoid of spark or lively interest. She completed her work slowly, ploddingly with a

glazed-over unfocused stare that one might expect from someone with a concussion, drifting in and out of consciousness.

The first time I saw Mrs. Viengmany in Vang Vieng I didn't immediately recognize her. It was not simply because she was casually dressed in a tank top and shorts, but primarily because her demeanor was entirely different than what was typical at the office. As I sat with the camp administrators sharing a beer under the cool shade of the guesthouse's *sala* Mrs. Viengmany, on one of the guesthouse's bicycles came careening from the roadway through the gate laughing uproariously. The pavement was slick, and rather than using the breaks on the bike she extended her legs, sliding her sandals across the rain covered concrete skidding to a stop. In Vang Vieng Mrs. Viengmany was not the slow and sullen Mrs. Viengmany from the Vannasin office; rather she embodied a beautiful lively gleeful joy. Even when her aunt, Mrs. Onchanh told her to help prepare food for the instructors, she undertook the orders with a smile, and a bounce in her step.

Labor and leisure were inextricably intertwined throughout their days in Vang Viang (and they were similarly intertwined during the "practice camping" at Mr. Paengan's). While the staff drank, feasted and went on sight seeing outings, there were moments in each day when different staff members were working to support the training activities, be it cooking for staff/instructors, distributing per diem payments, filling out the account books for receipts from the trip, helping to think about issues that suddenly arose, playing host/hostess to instructors, providing camaraderie, or supervising students. Their labor and leisure were mutually dependent and mutually constitutive.

As was the case during practice camping on Mr. Paengan's property, the rewarding of staff (instructional staff as well as Vannasin staff) was physically separated from the activities in which the students were engaged, yet the practices of reward were on display; made visible to the students at a distance and through gates, fences, and across walls. There existed a stark observable contrast between the lodging, transportation, and activities of the staff and students. The contrast heightened students' abilities to notice what is available to the staff. While working on assignments and camp activities students would call it to the attention of others when they would see the Ministry's bus (filled with Vannasin staff, instructors, and family members) traveling out on the roadway past the ethnic minority school heading toward tourist sites. Inevitably this would lead to discussions (seeped with tones of envy) focused on the students' speculations as to where the staff members were headed, and what the staff members and their families would see and do once they got to these imagined destinations. Students who happened to have first-hand observations of the staff/family celebrations (e.g. from passing the guest house during lunch break or in the evening) were quick to report these observations back to the members of their group when student activities reconvened. Gossip about the staff activities spread quickly between the student groups as they worked, visited the restroom, bathed, and ate. The display of the staff's leisure activities, mode of transportation and accommodations were observable reminder to the students of what is available to those who do become part of the community of Vannasin writers.

The printed schedule for Saturday the 19<sup>th</sup> of August said that at 8:30 am students would gather in groups and could work wherever they desired to work, "at the mouth of the cave, along the bank of the Song River, under a tree." But, because of the near constant rain, the students were primarily confined to the shelter of the dorm and the

covered walkways of the school. For students Saturday morning was a relatively quite time for writing.

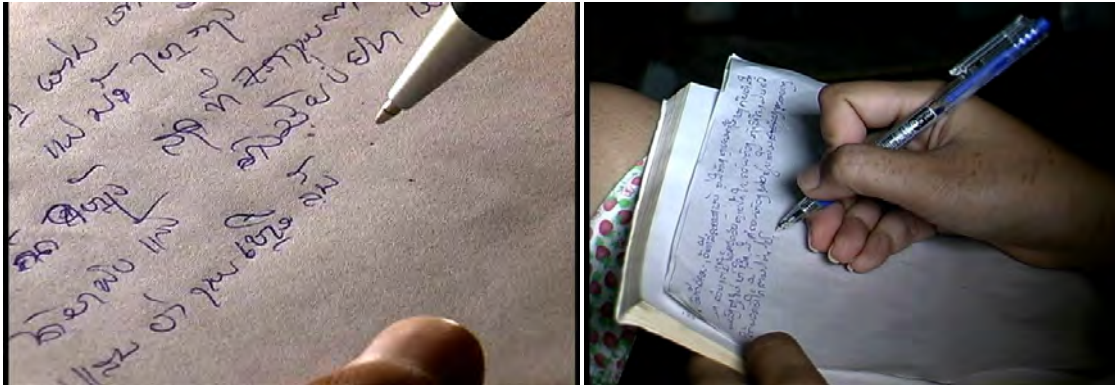


Figure 8.18: Sinxay students putting pen to paper, working on compositions sheltered from the rains in the dorm of the ethnic minority school in Vang Vieng.

Mr. Paengan had delegated the day-to-day operations of the camp to Mr. Dee. Mr. Dee, juggling the entertainment of his eight-year-old daughter and overseeing the activities for all of the Sinxay students amid tempestuous weather, was the staff member with the fewest opportunities for leisure in Vang Vieng.

Midmorning on Saturday Mr. Dee came to the student dorms to share with them a poem he had written drawing on his experiences with the journey. Xiong played a rather mournful sounding song on a bamboo flute as the students huddled on bunks around where Mr. Dee stood. With the rain pouring down upon the tin roof and his daughter hugging him around his waist, Mr. Dee read the poem he had composed:

Title: From Vientiane traveling to Vang Vieng

Traveling from Vientiane to the area of Vang Vieng - Everyone is making noise  
making an extreme amount of noise - some of them are absorbed in singing music  
some of them are excited - seeing the room where they will sleep  
some people want to move – want to leave  
go to a good place for staying and eating – a place that has electricity and water  
some people ask about – a scenic place to visit  
view the forest – heart excited  
part of the group speaks of travel to the cave – viewing the scenic granite  
outcroppings  
tomorrow will be good to go – it isn't far to reach  
the sound of clapping echoes – waiting for another day  
everyone has a delicious sleep – waiting to wake in the morning  
regretfully - the sky and rain do not agree with one's heart  
a new day comes pouring steadily - pouring down continuously  
the feeling of being truly fed up with the rain arrives - anxiousness  
an important day like this – rain should avoid  
when you see my heart far away from home – why do you come?

leave us be for two or three days – that is all that I ask  
I wish that it would stop raining – pouring and sprinkling  
the excitement to go to Jang cave – has existed for a long time  
but the rain is dripping – continuously steadily dropping  
not paying attention to the people waiting – despondent  
the rain refuses to listen – to the sounds of the people  
despite bad conditions the rain does not stop – it is dirty and wet as well  
send these words to the rain –please rain,  
don't fall forever – please stop  
the person writing this poem – is sad, miserable, unhappy  
my child wants to travel to the cave – there is no relief.

The poem was revealing of Mr. Dee's experiences during the camping. The conditions which led to his pleading to the rains are not fully revealed until the final line of the poem, and upon hearing the last line the audience is able reflect upon the preceding lines and see how they are repetitively structured in parallel with the incessant prodding of an eight-year-old, trapped inside for days due to rain. Once Mr. Dee reaches the final line the students are able to understand that constant incessant repetitive actions of the rain that produce his misery are exponentially compounded by his child's desires, and there is no relief from either the rainfall, or his child, and the compounded misery the two in conjunction produce.

Sharing such work with the students not only enabled the students to see how an senior poet draws on his experiences for material; the sharing also endeared Mr. Dee to the students, enabling a building a sympathetic bonds through the sharing his emotions and experience. It was obvious to all the students that Mr. Dee devoted a tremendous amount of time and energy to their instruction for little immediate reward.

It is important to note, however, that the burdens of labor on Vannasin sponsored trips, though not evenly dispersed among staff on each journey, shifts with different journeys. In the case of the Pen's Camp and practice camping activities the burden of the labor fell upon the shoulders of Mr. Dee, and Ajaan Phoumjai was relatively free to leisurely enjoy Vang Vieng. A number of months later Ajaan Phoumjai would be responsible for a Vannasin staff trip to the University of Khon Khaen in Thailand where Sinxay models under Ajaan Phoumjai's charge were to participate in a cultural exchange. During the Khon Khaen trip the burden of the labor would fall primarily to Ajaan Phoumjai, enabling Mr. Dee and his family to have a more leisurely experience of Thailand.

We must understand that for the Vannasin staff, labor and leisure are inseparably bound by what Ollman describes as "links of mutual dependence."<sup>1</sup> Leisure is produced through its apparent contradiction, labor, and likewise labor is produced through its apparent contradiction, leisure. The staff's social practices of labor and leisure, which if viewed in isolation might appear as opposite and distinct, are internally and inseparably related.<sup>2</sup>

It is also helpful to understand the relations of mutual dependency entailed within the social body's production of leisure. Ajaan Phoumjai and Mrs. Viengmany's opportunity for leisure in Vang Viang are dependent upon the labor of Mr. Dee. Research and analysis that focuses solely upon "the temporarily leisured" person in the

“place away from home”<sup>3</sup> would preclude an accurate understanding of the broader political-economic context in which Lao tourists such as Ajaan Phoumjai, Mr. Dee and Mrs. Viengmany are immersed. The Pen’s Camp trip to Vang Vieng made visible the mutual dependence/penetration of labor/leisure within the social body of Ministry propagandists.

Further, it is important to note, the travel activities produced a commodity (with shared ownership among the Vannasin staff and instructors), a commodity with exchange value within the Ministry: travel narratives. Back at the Ministry the Vannasin staff’s narratives about their time away focused almost entirely on their leisure activities during the Vang Vieng camp. They reminisced aloud and publicly among peers from different units of the Ministry about their trip to the cave, an event on the bus, almost as if the entire trip was simply a leisure activity. Gone from the narratives were tales of accounting, negotiations with the school administrators, per-diem distribution, sitting through student presentations, instruction, etc. Upon their return the staff employed their travel tales in their social relations with others in the Ministry as a form of exchange – distributing tales of travel in exchange for the envy of other Ministry employees.

In the social relations of the Ministry where low paid labor is the norm, the tales of Ministry supported travel constitutes a form of capital (what Mr. Paengan refers to as ທຶນຮອນຊີວິດ “capital of life”). This capital of life is accumulated by the Vannasin staff on such outings, and expressed not only through the tips of one’s pen in the act of writing (as Mr. Paengan had indicated), but also for invoking envy among colleagues in other departments throughout the Ministry upon one’s return. The exchange of narratives for the production of envy is a component of the internal competition between Ministry units. Regaling others with tales one’s of collaborative leisure with members of one’s work unit occurs with considerable frequency within the Ministry. When the staff of the Human Resources Department was able to go on a picnic retreat during work hours to the property of one of the employees, they returned to regale the Vannasin staff with the joys and pleasures they experienced on their outing thus reciprocating in the exchange of envy.

The production of envy was one means through which Mr. Paengang created enticements for the young people. Displaying the accommodations and celebrations of those who constituted the community of practice of writers was a purposeful move to demonstrate to the young what rewards might await those who conform their practices to meet the demands of the members of the older generation. But once again, conformity of practice, not change in practice would be the key to opening the doors to the enviable opportunities afforded the members of this exclusive community.

### **Playing the game of social literacy –extending the concept of a community of practitioners backwards through time:**

Upon hearing his poem and witnessing his near constant presence with the students in the damp and unpleasant conditions of the dorms, few in attendance would construe Mr. Dee’s position and experience as enviable. There was the recognition, however, that Mr. Dee was a member of an important social body, a body of writers, among whom many of the students wanted to be a part. Standing in the section of the dorm with the least amount of water dripping through the ceiling, shortly after reading his poem to the students, Mr. Dee called them together to play a game. Most of the students

gathered around standing, and some took seats on the bunks in the room. Mr. Dee hugged a stack of five books to his chest.

The game was a game of social literacy, a game in which students were judged and rewarded for their abilities to express their understanding of the social body of authors upon whom the Ministry looked favorably. The game revealed an important aspect of “being together,” that is, in order to be part of the practice of propaganda production for the Ministry, one is expected to know one’s place within a lineage, a lineage that is not a lineage of kin, but rather a lineage of practitioners. The contemporary older generation of writers conceptualize themselves within a social body of practitioners, envisioned and understood as a social body that stretches back across time – a body in which practitioners have multiple identities (given names and sometimes multiple pen names). Being able to identify the members of this expansive body, both by given and pen names, and identify works associated with each was the talent rewarded in Mr. Dee’s game.

Mr. Dee began by asking which of the assembled students would like to participate. The idea was that students would participate as representatives of their writing groups, that is, the groups that had formed to produce group songs during the day of practice camping. There were more students interested in playing than could be accommodated in a single turn, so the students decided who would participate first through playing a preliminary odd-person out hand-game. Phonpaseuth won and stood in the midst of the huddled group of students as Mr. Dee asked the first question: “The author of the story *The Inheritor*, what is his/her name?”

Mr. Dee’s first question was imbued with multiple aspects inherent in the activity itself. The students, like the title of the story, were envisioned by the older generation to be potential inheritors, successors, and heirs to the labor of writing for the Party and its institutions. As the question demanded, their ability to correctly identify and express their knowledge about the members of the social body of writers (i.e. the members of the older generation of writers), the body of writers whom they would succeed, was something for which they would be rewarded. Phonpaseuth froze, deep in thought. Oupakone stood next to Phonpaseuth holding his mobile phone in his left hand watching the seconds tick past on the phone’s illuminated screen as he timed Phonpaseuth’s response.

When Mr. Dee momentarily turned his back on Phonpaseuth, Phonpaseuth attempted a whispered consultation with one of the members of his group, but others took note of this and voiced their displeasure at the attempt. Eventually Phonpaseuth conceded that he did not have the answer. He stepped back into the huddled crowd and a female student, Inkham, stepped forward into the space in front of Mr. Dee. Inkham’s father was a journalist, and she had studied writing with Douang Deuane Bounyavong, she was one of the most well read students in the camp. She nervously shifted the balance of her weight from one leg to the other and back as Mr. Dee prepared to ask her his first question: “Who is the author of the story *Waves of the Ninth Month* or *Mekong River Waves*?”

As soon as the words had left his lips Inkham replied with the correct answer. Mr. Dee presented her with a second question: “In addition to that story, what has this author written? Just listing one is okay.” Inkham succeeded in answering this question as well.

Having answered the questions correctly Mr. Dee extended his arms to hold the five books before her, and invited her to select the book she would like to keep as a prize. She was unsure as to which text she should choose and consults with Mr. Dee to find what he feels would best suit her interests. She accepted his choice, held it between her hands, and placing her hands palm-together (with the book in between) she performed a very polite *nop* saying “Thank you teacher.” She turned and moved through the students to the rear of the group with her prized book in hand. As a reward for displaying her understanding of the social body of Lao writers and the work its members have produced, she was awarded a product of the labor of the older generation of Lao writers – a product of the labor of the older generation for which she herself was being trained as a potential successor.

After some discussion of whose turn it was to go next Oupakone stepped into the center of the circle. Standing looking excited and impatient Oupakone begged Mr. Dee to: “Ask. Ask.” Oupakone’s performance of excited impatience was rather exaggerated. Mr. Dee’s replied to Oupakone’s request and display of excitement with, “You really want to answer, don’t you?” Oupakone’s response to this was direct: “I want a book.” Mr. Dee stood silent for a moment composing the question in his head, then slowly pitched the question to Oupakone: “How many Lao poets have won the South East Asian Write Award?” Oupakone paused for a moment, then said: “Six people.” A number of students in the audience groaned. One person stated aloud “Wrong.” Mr. Dee chuckled and said, “Wrong.”

Oupakone smiled and turned to leave the center of the group, but Mr. Dee continued, prodding deeper into Oupakone’s clearly incorrect answer, refusing to let Oupakone off the hook easily: “Who said there are six poets?” Oupakone began a second performance, a performance of silently contemplating an answer, as if he were able to list the names of the authors in his head and count them off on his fingers. His incorrect answer had already made it clear that he didn’t know the body of writers who had been recognized with the SEAWrite Award. A number of students misinterpreted what Mr. Dee was doing as Mr. Dee giving Oupakone a second chance at winning a book. Bounmee protested against Oupakone being given an opportunity to answer the second question. Bounmee felt that Mr. Dee should have Oupakone take his seat and begin a new round of questioning with a different student, “He was wrong already. Teacher, he was wrong already, that is enough, move on to a new question.” Others began chiming in with Bounmee, and one young man placed his hand on Oupakone’s shoulder in an attempt to move Oupakone from the center of the group.

Mr. Dee, however, wasn’t so much giving Oupakone a second chance, as he was providing Oupakone an opportunity to publicly dig himself a deeper hole. Oupakone had expressed his interest in representing his group, although it was now clear he was ill equipped to compete. Oupakone had performed impatience with Mr. Dee, requesting that he be asked a question with impertinent expressed focus on obtaining a book. Now, when put on the spot, Oupakone rather than backing down continued his charade, pretending to count through the names of the members of the older generation who had received the honor of the SEAWrite Award. Oupakone began to answer incorrectly, and Mr. Dee took over answering the question himself, slowly, allowing the other students in the audience to state aloud the correct answers in unison. Counting on his fingers Mr. Dee explained that poets and other authors together constituted a total of eight SEAWrite

Award winners. With a number of students adding their voices in choral unison, Mr. Dee listed the three Lao poets who had been honored the SEAWrite award.

Surrounding and isolating within their midst the student who publically displayed his ignorance of the honored Lao writers, and in choral unison, Mr. Dee and the students familiar with the body of Lao writers verbalized their shared awareness of the members of the social body of Lao writers who had achieved what is widely considered by them to be the highest honor available to Lao literary figures, the receipt of the SEAWrite Award.

Through this question and answer activity Mr. Dee was able to examine and assess which students were well versed in the social body of Lao literary figures, and reinforce with the group of students that the members of the contemporary body of Ministry approved writers place an importance on their shared awareness of the social body of authors (a social body that is viewed both through a historical and contemporary lens) and their collected works.

The next student took the floor. The young man fiddled nervously with his nametag, then clasped his hands behind his back impatiently shifting his weight from foot to foot. Avoiding eye contact Mr. Dee looked down, and contemplated his question. Then Mr. Dee looked up at the student and asked: “What was the name of the publication for which Mr. Thongkham Manison was awarded the SEA Write Award?” One student let out a loud surprised “Oh!” and others made similar verbal expressions of surprise at the level of difficulty of this question. The student stated: “The story, *For the Young Woman*.” To which Mr. Dee replied, “Wrong.”

Mr. Dee smiled, as he looked around at the gathered students waiting to hear the correct answer, and slowly stated “Mr. Thongkham Manison received the SEAWrite for the book titled *Mother’s Tears*, from the series of books titled *For Love, For the Young Woman*.” As Mr. Dee answered a number of students again verbally expressed surprise at the difficulty of the question. The student to whom the question was originally posed stood smiling, looking dazed, and slowly rubbing the top of his head with his left hand, almost as if the level of difficulty of Mr. Dee’s question had produced a physical trauma within his cranium.

As the student walked through the huddled students toward the back of the group he left a void in the center. Students were still abuzz about the difficulty of the last question and were no longer volunteering to step into the center of the circle. Mr. Dee, trying to encourage a brave volunteer to step forward and field a question shouted above the din “One more!” Books were prized possessions among these young people – and to receive one as a prize for answering questions was motivating. But the possibility of receiving a difficult question, and the resulting “loss of face” in front of one’s peers, seemed to have outweighed the motivation provided by the prize.

Mr. Dee repeated his request for “one more” volunteer multiple times before Alounny, a young University student who grew up in southern Lao PDR, nervously stepped forward into the center of the huddle. After fiddling anxiously with her left earlobe, she clasped both hands in front of her body, smiled broadly, and waited for Mr. Dee’s question. Mr. Dee, taking pains to clearly enunciate his question, asked, “The author Chansee Duansavan, tell me this author’s pennames, this author has two pennames.” A number of students in the group appeared to know the answer and indicated they wish they had been asked this question. Alounny’s visible reaction, however, made it clear that she did not know the answer. The smile immediately

dropped from her face. She looked a bit panicked. The smile crept back onto her face as her eyes darted about the group, as if someone among the crowd surrounding her, someone who did know the answer, might be able to provide it to her visually. Alounny turned and as her gaze concluded its pass over the assembled faces the appearance of nervousness returned, she drew backwards a bit mouthing to members of her group, “I don’t know.”

Turning away from Alounny to face the assembled students Mr. Dee stated, “The author has two pennames, don’t tell me the author’s given name, tell me the pennames. There probably aren’t many people who know this.” The students surrounding Alounny were abuzz with excitement. Despite Mr. Dee’s assertion that few would know the answer, many did seem to know, and there was a considerable murmuring in the crowd. Attempting to quell the growing level of murmurs Mr. Dee chastised the group, “No one else answer this, it is just for the person who has volunteered to come forward and answer.”

Somdy was the culinary student Mr. Soubanh publicly humiliated during his vocal performance at the practice camp. He stood behind Alounny eagerly tapping his pen on his palm. He believed he knew the answer and in a very happy tone said, “Oh, this author is the star of my heart!” Alounny’s hands were no longer clasped, rather her arms were loosely crossed in front of her body, and as she rubbed her hands nervously up and down the opposite arms it appeared as if she were chilled by the experience of standing, ignorant, surrounded by her peers.

Alounny smiled coyly, and asked Mr. Dee if he would provide her some assistance in answering, then asked if he could change the question. Unyielding to her charms Mr. Dee wryly replied: “If I change the question I have to change the person answering.” Alounny had failed out of the round. Mr. Dee provided the gathered students with the two pennames he was seeking.

Bounmee, announcing which student group should send its representative to the center of the circle next, called out: “Group four! Group four!” Yet another nervous looking young man stepped forward into the center of the huddle. He clutched a rolled piece of paper in his right hand as he waited for the question. Mr. Dee stood looking up at the ceiling thinking to himself, then chuckled saying aloud, “Oh, this is a difficult one.” In response to this a female student with a worried expression on her face pleaded, “Teeeeeacher, you have to be careful of our health.” In her pleading Mr. Dee’s actions were framed as if they were causing the young students physical and mental duress.

Mr. Dee continued, slowly delivering the question: “The female author whose pen name is *Woman with the printed skirt*, what is her given name?” The male student stood expressionless, apparently stunned, then glanced to his left, away from Mr. Dee. Oupakone who stood behind the young man, gave him a shove in the back. Recovering from the shove the student looked back at Mr. Dee, as Mr. Dee added “In her stories she writes about etiquette in all aspects of society.”

Fleeting, as it was, Mr. Dee’s hint, that the author’s stories revolve around what the older generation considers to be etiquette and proper behavior in all aspects of Lao society, was as close as his questions would come to content. Mr. Dee’s focus was not on having the students express their understanding of what the stories were about, his questions were not about the characters within the texts, but rather his questions were

about the characters who produced the texts, about the membership of the older generation of writers whom these young students it was hoped would replace.

Houmphanh (an avid reader and student at the National University of Laos) was smiling, evidently aware of the correct answer. The young man who was supposed to answer the question turned slowly toward Houmphanh as his eyes darted about nervously. Mr. Dee repeated, “Usually in her stories she writes about social etiquette.” The student shook his head and turned back to Mr. Dee stating softly, “I’ve never heard of her.” Mr. Dee repeated the author’s penname, “*Woman with the printed skirt.*”

The young man in the center of the crowd appeared both lost and worried. Raising his right hand he tapped the rolled piece of paper against the side of his head as he glanced about the group. Then he dropped his hand to his side, looked back at Mr. Dee and asked, “It isn’t Duangjai Luangphasee, is it?” Standing impassively without giving a visible hint of the student’s success or failure Mr. Dee asked in response, “Is that an answer or a question?” The student indicated it was his response, and Mr. Dee smiled broadly and said, “The answer is wrong.” After allowing the students to discuss things among themselves briefly Mr. Dee told them the name of the author and the author’s second penname.

The next student to step forward into the center of the huddle was Somdy. Somdy was a relatively short young man, and appeared to make up for his diminutive size by being rather outspoken and eager to perform. Mr. Dee joked as Somdy stepped to the fore, “You are so small, are you going to be able to answer this?” The question Mr. Dee presented to Somdy was “Mr. Tiep Vongpakkai, what is his penname?” Hearing the question Somdy glanced at the students observing him repeating part of the question to himself then confidently turned back to Mr. Dee stating, “*Sparkling Star.*” There were no second chances for Somdy, Mr. Dee laughed and smiled stating “Wrong. Tiep Vongpakkai’s penname is *Northern Star.*” As Somdy made his way through the assembled students to go sit dejectedly on the bunk he shouted in exasperation, “Oyi! *Northern Star!*”

The question and answer game went on for more than an hour. In formulating the questions on the spot, Mr. Dee displayed his encyclopedic knowledge of Lao literature and literary figures. As the game progressed with few winners he joked aloud that, with all the incorrect answers, the supply of prize books would last for quite a while.

Who was the author of *The Sound of the Lao Khaen*? What is the penname of Outhine Bounyavong? What is the given name of *Kawkeo Bounma*? Onsee Pasavong, what is his penname? Name one novel by *Dokked*. List the names of at least five revolutionary authors. Mr. Dee mentioned the title of a song, students began to sing its lyrics out loud, and he asked the student standing in the center of the singing huddled mass to name the songwriter.

The final contestants were Somsavat (the soldier) and Chanthaboun (the fruit vendor) competing as a team. As the pair approached the center of the gathering Bounmee joked, “This group must represent a lower grade, that is why they are allowed to have two people answer a question.” Mr. Dee asked the two aspiring songwriters: “Who wrote the story titled *The Bird Flew Over the Palm Leaf*?” Surrounding the two men the room was abuzz with whispered discussion – the answer was widely known among those in the group who immerse themselves in Lao literature. It has been clear to all, however, that Somsavat and Chanthaboun focus their attention primarily on

songwriting. These two older aspiring lyricists were, however, determined to not let a literary question stump them.

With a considerable amount of whispered help coming from their friends standing in the audience behind them, Chanthaboun and Somsavat were able to come up with the first name “Outhine.” This did not suffice Mr. Dee’s desire for the full name of the well-known author (son-in-law of the revered Lao writer and scholar Maha Sila Viravong, late husband of the SEAWrite Award winning Douangdeuane Bounyavong, brother-in-law of literary figure Madame Dara Kanlaya). The soldier and the fruit vendor conferred some more (and friends in the audience mouthed and whispered the name in their direction) then, hesitantly, Somsavat offered “Bounyavong.” Mr. Dee handed a prized book to the clearly happy and relieved Somsavat. With a smile of both relief and achievement Somsavat lifted the book to his nose to appreciatively *hom* (an affectionate sniff) the cover of the coveted prize.

Mr. Dee’s literary game was an activity of social positioning. Through the posing of questions Mr. Dee publicly drew the students forward (in front of their peers) to engage in a display of literacy; literacy that is, in the social positioning of writers within the history and lineage of post-revolutionary Lao publishing. In the activity Mr. Dee, a member of the older generation of writers, rewarded those aspiring writers who had an expansive breadth of understanding of the social relations of post-revolutionary writers. The activity was a visible act of rewarding those who both wished to write and were able to identify the members of the social body whom they could possibly succeed. Through the activity Mr. Dee was able to assess who among the group of students (as the first question hinted) might constitute a worthy *inheritor* of the labor of the older generation.

With reference to this game of social literacy we can begin to understand that what Mr. Dee referred to as, “being together,” is a social practice that extends well beyond those engaged in the contemporaneous mutual occupation of a physical space. Rather, we must understand that “being together” is a practice, perceived by members of the older generation, as extending backwards in time through the social body of practitioners, extending back across time through a lineage of Lao literary figures to the contemporary practitioners. The ‘togetherness’ that Mr. Dee seeks to achieve is a form of unity between the existing, and an imagined pre-existing social body.

During the tour of the Lao National Museum the docent stood in front of the painting depicting the evolution of man and stressed the importance of memory, stating that memory was a key to development, and those beings most developed had the greatest capacity to remember. Conducting his game in front of the students, Mr. Dee was displaying to the assembled, which students among them are most developed, he was making publically visible to all those students which have the greatest capacity to remember. And, he publicly rewarded the select few for their ability to accurately express their awareness of the social body of Lao writers. The rewards for the activity, the prizes distributed to those who were able to accurately express the answers to Mr. Dee’s questions, were Vannasin publications. The prizes were the products of those whom the students strive to be among.

The questions Mr. Dee posed were not about the themes expressed in an author’s work. The questions were not focused on the content of the work produced by a given author, but rather the questions focused on the producers of literary work; the relations of the producers to the revered works of revolutionary and post-revolutionary Lao literature.

In his questions that require students to link pen names to given names, Mr. Dee brought a focus to the author's relations to themselves – a public verbalization of who is actually whom in the world of Lao literary production. In this activity it is a social memory that Mr. Dee is simultaneously fostering and attempting to tap. Being able to access and verbalize this social memory – a memory of the social body of those politically positioned to produce approved publications – is publicly rewarded by Mr. Dee (a Ministry authorized editor of Lao literature – a member of this elite social body of approved and published writers). The activity was in no small way communicating to the students the message: *If you desire to work among us, you must know who we are.*

Importantly, there were no games, activities or rewards for imagining the community of practice forward; students were not rewarded for imagining what the future of the social organization could be. The game, in this respect, reinforced and rewarded a backwards conceptualization of the community of practice, a conceptualization of the organization not as how it would need to be adapted in order to perpetuate the practice and the institutions of the single-Party State forward on into the future. In the face of the need for adaptive-perpetuation the game is symptomatic of dual challenge facing the older generation: their struggle with letting go of the organization of the community of practice of the past, and creating opportunities for and rewarding the young for an envisioning of the social organization of the future.

### **Self-censorship – self-imposed transformations and omissions in student work:**

Through the course of the camp it became apparent that “practice being together” also entailed the students’ developing their abilities to self-censor. In this regard, togetherness involved knowing what products of writing were works that could be shared with members of the older generation, and what products of writing should not be shared with the members of the older generation. This is not to say that students did not produce work that they knew wouldn't meet the approval of their instructors. Students did produce work they didn't intend to share with the members of the older generation, and they produce space among peers within which they could quietly share this self-censored work.

In the late afternoon with the rain continuing to pour down the students were still in the dorms and Mr. Bounpheng began what was to become a long drawn out process of reading aloud student short stories for the student-judged short story competition. Students were expected to listen to each short story and then, back at the Ministry, cast a ballot for the one they thought was best. The winner would be announced during the writers' training completion certification ceremony.

The stories were submitted under pen names, and students (i.e. students who were not the authors of a particular piece) volunteered to read the work aloud. Some of the pieces were relatively rough, and difficulty seeing the hand written texts in the low light of the dorm made reading of the work aloud a challenge. The readings droned on, producing an unrelenting tedium like the rain pounding down on the metal roof, and various students made themselves comfortable on the bunks.

As students began falling asleep Mr. Bounpheng decided to shift the group's locale to a clearing underneath a corrugated metal awning on the edge of the school's football pitch. Here, with nowhere to recline, the students had to sit upright and at least feign listening to each other's work.

Mr. Paengan, Mr. Dee, Mr. Bounpheng and Mr. Soubanh were all now present at the school. On the sidelines the instructors discussed the situation and the decision was made to break up the short story reading over the remaining time at the camp. Here under the metal awning Mr. Soubanh (the radio host) took over direction of the activities. It was finally time, for each group to give their last performance of their original group song, the same songs they had been performing during each of Mr. Soubanh's sessions since the day of the practice camp.



Figure 8.19: At the edge of the school's football pitch, sheltered from the rain under a corrugated metal roof, students and instructors gather for a final performance of group songs.

Joining the activities fresh from the afternoon's celebration at the staff members' guesthouse, Mr. Soubanh's face exhibited a now familiar rosy glow. The students, who had by this time spent many hours repeatedly playing the exact same song for the increasingly pixilated Mr. Soubanh appeared rather unenthusied, although some did manage to muster a performance of enthusiasm when they took to the floor to play their group song one last time.

In the last chapter I provided a description of Mr. Soubanh's methods of instruction during the practice camping outing, explaining his structural expectations for what he termed "our Lao music." By this point in the course the groups were fairly well aware of Mr. Soubanh's expectations for song structure. Likewise students were well aware of the poetic structures desired by Mr. Dee.

Prior to writing a piece of poetry many of the Sinxay students drew a diagram of the expected *gon* (ກອນ) poetic structure on the top corner of their page (see figure 8.20). The diagrams depict the syllable and tone structures Mr. Dee presented during lectures, with circles representing the syllables and Lao tone markers placed in the designated

spots above specific circles. Students used these diagrams as they wrote to insure that their work followed the structure taught in class.

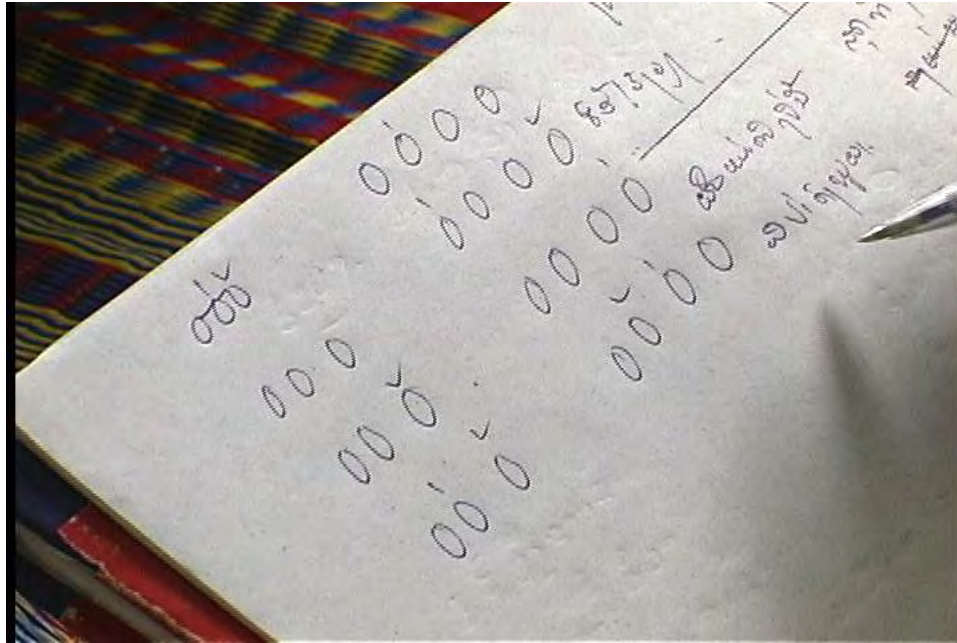


Figure 8.20: Prior to beginning a poetic composition a Sinxay student has drawn himself a diagram of the required *gon* (ገጽ) poetic structure on the top left of his page.

Syllables (represented by circles) and the pattern for intonation (indicated with two different types of small tone marks above certain circles) show the writer the structure to which his poetic production must conform.

Students routinely edited their work while writing (see figure 8.21). Sometimes students would cross out and replace a single word or syllable. At other times a student would cross out and replace an entire line. The resulting drafts of poems, with layers upon layers of changes made on a single page, were often masses of ink on paper almost illegible to all but the author.

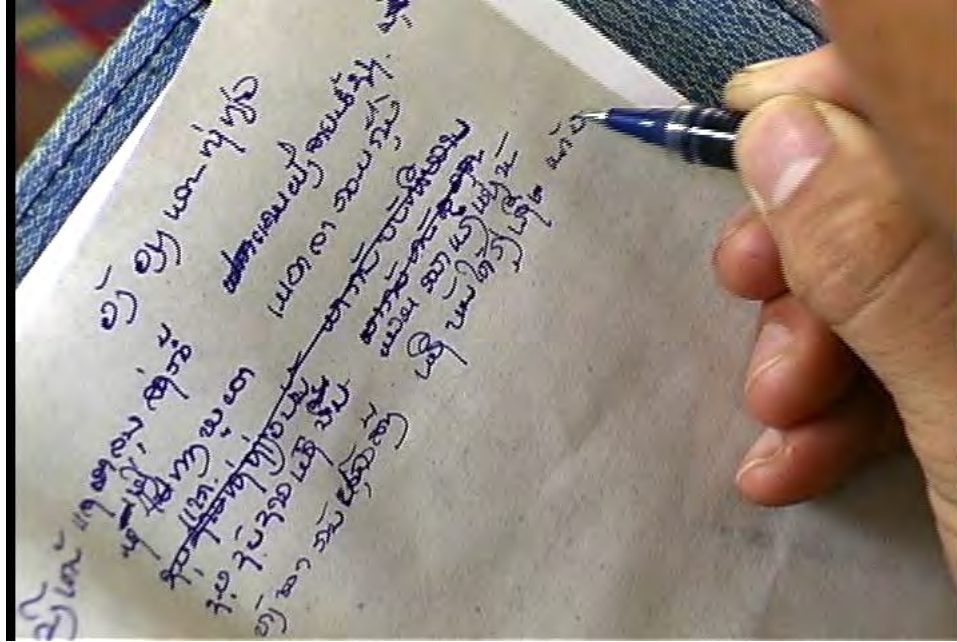


Figure 8.21: This student edits his work as he writes, crossing out and replacing words, and entire lines.

As the camp progressed many of the students were clearly developing practices of self-editing not just in terms of insuring that the work they presented adhered to the structures taught (e.g. ກາບ and ກອນ poetic structures as well as lyrical structures), but also in terms of content. While on the same continuum of self-editing, these practices of selective presentation of content might best be understood as practices of self censorship. Mr. Soubanh’s public humiliation of the soloist during practice camp gave a pretty good indication to the group that Mr. Soubanh did not have a particular fondness for pining love songs. Pining love songs were not what groups focused upon when writing their second group songs in Vang Vieng.

Chanthaboun’s group, which had the best received group song at practice camp, even made changes to the lyrics of “Earring forgot the ear” prior to their judged performance of the song. As I explained in the last chapter, the final line of Chanthaboun’s song was cleverly written in a manner that allowed multiple interpretations of the line (and one possible interpretation was rather suggestive of female body parts normally not discussed or shown in public). During practice camp the students sang the final line as “Things within the traditions of our mothers are disappearing” (ເຄື່ອງທາງ ໃນວິດຄອງຂອວ ແມ່ ເຮົາ ເຊື່ອມຫາຍ). By the time of the final performance in Vang Vieng the group had re-written the line so that it followed the poetic structure but could not be interpreted in more than one way. Gone was the ability to interpret the line as an innuendo for parts of the woman’s body that are not normally exposed. In Vang Vieng the group sang the line: “Our mother’s golden silk skirts will disappear.” With this change, the lyrics were direct, with no room for interpretation or innuendo, and Mr. Soubanh designated the song “Earring forgot the ear” the winning entry in the group song competition.

Writing for the students involved their understanding of the structures the administrators of the camp expect, conforming one's work to those structures, and conforming one's content and subject matter to what one believes the instructors (as administrators of Lao culture) would want to hear (or perhaps more accurately avoiding subject matter and content one thinks the instructors as administrators of Lao culture would not want to hear). This does not mean that all camp time was used for writing material that conformed to the students' conceptions of what the instructors believed was appropriate content. Rather, the students were producing a wide variety of work and developing the practices of being selective about what they submit to the instructors and/or for public performance.

Towards the end of the camp in Vang Vieng I overheard a group of young women talking excitedly about a poem that one of the young men had written. The young man who had authored the poem did not feel the content was appropriate for the Ministry's writers' camp, and chose not to share it publicly with the entire group, rather he shared it selectively with this group of female friends.

A number of the young women felt the work was too good to not be shared, and when I ran into the young women in his absence they were discussing how they could encourage him to let them share the work. When I told them that I would like to hear the piece a number of the young women went off to consult with the author, and eventually he relented and let one of the women read the poem to me.

Standing at the far end of the football pitch, out of earshot from others, as far as one could get from the dorms and still be on the school grounds, the young woman read his poem:

#### Story of a young woman from Vang Vieng

Goodbye VangVieng – sent the sound of the voice  
don't forget this place - land of the mountain  
very beautiful – the River Song doesn't stop flowing  
I was able to meet you – pretty woman in the land of Vang Vieng  
I was able to see your eyes – makes me miss you  
heart has stopped – holding tightly wanting to be with you  
desiring to be a couple with you – entering the same bed with you  
lying down listening to the sweet voice - makes my heart ecstatic  
her smile - is very attractive  
truly beautiful - young pretty woman with a bright face  
just like a swan - elevated extremely special  
more than any woman – among humankind  
at the time of departure – separating from the young woman to go to Vientiane  
yearning for that day – that night we were talking  
the picture of you – is stuck in my mind  
even far from my eye – worrisome sorrow  
but the night passed – I separated from you  
even though the heart – wants to be with you  
the tears – flow desirous  
I present this poem – in lieu of my body  
goodbye

Poems on topics of longing and desire, such as this one, were shared and clearly popular among students. These student products, however, were not performed aloud for instructors or submitted for evaluation during class exercises.

At the very first meeting of the writer's training program Mr. Dee stood and shared how he first gained recognition from his peers as a person with some poetic skill. Mr. Dee's youthful posting of his poem about heartbreak on the student bulletin board at his high school proved popular among his peers and generated the initial recognition among his peers that he is a poetic writer with a talent for expression. Mr. Dee's youthful poem of heartbreak, like the student poem "Story of a young woman from Vang Vieng," was not something produced for publication; these were not works written for the instructors, but rather works written from the heart and circulated among peers.

As with Mr. Dee's youthful experience posting a poetic work, the student author of "The story of a young woman from Vang Vieng" received considerable lauding for the work from peers. The work proved a popular demonstration of skill, despite the fact that the author did not feel the work was appropriate for public performance or submission to the camp instructors. Practices of self-censorship produce work (such as "The story of a young woman from Vang Vieng,") that are circulated and are appreciated within relatively closed communities of practitioners and same aged peers.

Like the student who penned the poem presented above, Phonpaseuth also used the break time to enjoy the aspects of sharing work with others, work that did not conform to the ideals presented by the members of the older generation of writers during lesson time. During evening breaks between lessons and cooking, under the single working florescent bulb in the dorm, Phonpaseuth and a number of the younger members of the student body gathered to play the guitar and sing contemporary Lao pop songs. These were not the types of songs that were sung in unison on the bus ride to Vang Vieng. These were not the types of songs the students were taught to pen by the members of the older generation of writers who served as instructors. When the younger members were together away from the instructors and older students, the singing of pop songs was a unifying activity through which they found a harmony among similar-aged peers.



Figure 8.22: Phonpaseuth plays the guitar as the younger members of the Sinxay students join him in singing Lao pop songs between bunks under the single working light bulb in the dorm.

For the group of students who gathered around Phonpaseuth, free time was a time for group explorations of Vang Vieng; a time together with peers. It was a break time from writing for all. As was the case during the free time between lectures at the Ministry, this free time was where Phonpaseuth (unfettered by structural and content expectations of the instructors) could share his music with appreciative peers. Balancing on the back seat of a bicycle borrowed from a guesthouse, surrounded by other young students also on bikes, he played his pop compositions and sang the lyrics he had penned. The rain soaked roads of the resort town and the riverside gardens they explored together constituted the space where these young people were unrestrained in both composition and expression; a social space away from the eyes and ears of the instructors, a way from the practices of self-censorship they developed under the guidance and supervision of the older generation of writers.



Figure 8.23: With Houmphanh on the pedals and steering, Phonpaseuth rides on the back of a guesthouse bike playing guitar and singing as their group explores Vang Vieng at lunchtime.

A part of learning to write for the Party and its institutions is developing an understanding of what can and cannot be presented in print. This does not mean that the Party's propagandists create only work that is suitable for print, but rather that they produce alternative social spaces within which such creative non-conforming work may be shared. The production of such social spaces for sharing was one aspect of "practice being together" explored by students while camping in Vang Vieng.

The irony of this situation is that the work produced by the members of the young generation of aspiring writers that may in fact be most popular and potentially most marketable to their same aged peers, ends up being circulated only among a the young practitioners themselves. Through the attempts of enforce conformity in practice the work that could potentially prove most marketable, that is, work that holds a high potential for contributing to the adaptive perpetuation of the institution of the single-Party State, ends up being the very work that the young people hide from view. The members of the older generation of practitioners, through their attempts at fostering conformity stifle the youthful potential for contributing to significant transformations in a practice that must change in order for the community of practitioners to remain viable. The members of the older generation of practitioners thus constitute a potentially larger threat to the practice than they young people, by putting in jeopardy the institutional changes of practices of production that may be most needed for successful adaptation of the community of practice.

**Not exactly passing the torch, the closing night candlelight ceremony:**

In preparation for the trip the students had been instructed to pack candles. The candles had not simply been packed for the practical purpose of providing illumination in

the dorm; on the last night the candles were put to use for a ceremonial purpose. After completing the oral presentation of all the students' short stories the assembled instructors and staff (Mr. Dee, Mr. Bounpheng, Mr. Soubanh, and Mr. Sisavath) moved the proceedings to the football pitch. It was on the football pitch, in the drizzle, where the closing night ceremony for the camping trip took place. With small candles in hand all the student participants gathered around a school bench upon which a tall lit candle was placed. A few at a time the students approached the bench, lit their own personal candle from this single flame, then stepped back with candles in hand to form a large circle around the bench. Students assembled together next to their fellow group members around the circumference to perform the new group songs the students had composed collectively during their time in Vang Vieng.



Figure 8.24 and 8.25: Students light their individual candles from a common flame during the final night's closing ceremony. Figure 8.28: Members of the group that formed around Phonpaseuth stand with lyrics and candles in hand attempting to sing their newly composed group song.

In the darkness, illuminated only by the dim flickering candlelight, the groups collectively ended the musical set with the impromptu singing of a Lao popular song: *The Young Women of Xieng Kwang*. The students in the circle who knew how to line dance assembled on one side of the bench, as the others retreated to the periphery to watch. Those in the center danced while a large number of students sang lyrics that celebrated the beauty of the women of the north who protected the people from “the American criminals of the sky.”



Figure 8.26: On the football pitch in front of a bench alit with candles during the final night of the Pen's Camp in Vang Vieng, students perform a line dance to a song that celebrates the beauty and resiliency of the women of the north.

As the wax continued to melt beneath the flickering flames Mr. Dee stepped into the center of the circle to present his closing remarks to the assembled students. Mr. Dee began his remarks with praise for the young people who registered to be a part of the writers training camp:

Since we are going to leave each other tonight I want to say that I've organized practice camps many different times, for students ranging from kindergarteners through to the university level. This time it has been really exceptional, because we have all volunteered. In the past we had to extend invitations, and three or two people would come because they felt obligated to come. But this time the students who came as volunteers, I believe, are people who are gifted.

Mr. Dee's expression was sincere. He was impressed with the work of a number of the students. The overwhelmingly positive experience of the staff and instructors would lead to replication of the camp in subsequent years. After these introductory remarks Mr. Dee presented a metaphor to illustrate how he views the role of himself as an educator, and how he viewed the students during the camp. In his metaphor he compared the students to a pumpkin vine, and his role to that of the garden trellis:

If you were a pumpkin vine you could grow by yourself, without the intervention of anyone. You could slither to the tree and make fruit on your own. Some of the vines might not make it to the tree, because they grow further from the tree. Some vines may grow to the tree, some

vines may grow faster, and some vines may grow slower. But, at this time I believe, I am equivalent to a trellis. I've come to help the pumpkin vines. You haven't found the tree, but you've met the trellis. You've climbed the trellis, flowered, and produced fruit.

The fruit of the pumpkin is equivalent to each product of writing. We help each other to produce, in this training, and in our continued production on into the future after we leave each other. I think about in this manner, and then I feel proud of myself, proud that I am able to help you who are gifted.

The pumpkin vine growing upon the trellis is better than the one that is left to grow naturally on its own. The vine on the trellis will flower faster than it would if left to grow on its own. The pumpkin vine upon the trellis will produce prettier fruit than the one left on the dirt. I think that way, and I am proud that we came together on this stage of literary arts.

And whatever small amount of knowledge I may bring that you will in turn be extended, if you find it is still not sufficient you can come back and I will continue to welcome you, you can come to visit. If you produce stories we can send them back and forth to each other to continue to develop your work.

An important message from Mr. Dee's closing speech to the assembled students is that the students will continue to be perceived as students on into the future – the hierarchical differentiation between students and instructors it seems will be maintained. Mr. Dee does not indicate a stage of graduation, a stage in which the members of the younger generation of aspiring writers will actually become peers of the members of the older generation of writers. His metaphor is not designed for the conceptualization of an option for transformation into another form of being – in his description the students (vines) will continue to be vines, and the members of the older generation (the trellises) will continue to provide support nurturing the production of written works (pumpkins). We get no indication in the metaphor that a pumpkin vine will ever evolve into a trellis, no matter how much support the vine gets from the trellis itself, no matter how much beautiful fruit it produces.

Mr. Dee closed his talk with a poetic passage about the fruits of student labor. Standing in the ever increasing rainfall Mr. Dee stated:

I present these brief words to you:

If we open books to read frequently,  
immediately we will be readers.

But even if we write often,  
we still will not be writers,

if the stories we love don't benefit our readers or benefit society.

These are the words I present to you.

His words make an important message clear: in the eyes of the members of the older generation, writing for one's own love of writing is not writing; writing is only constituted when the written work benefits the readers or society. This is the final

message Mr. Dee delivers to the propagandists-in-training as he closes the final night of camp in Vang Vieng.

The students stood assembled in the increasing rainfall. A feeling of sadness at the closing of the camp seemed to hang in the air. With words expressed aloud for all to hear one student poetically captured the sorrowful feeling, equating the emotions of the moment with the action of the weather: “Now the tears of the sky are falling.” The rain fell as if on cue, with its arrival the students headed for their beds, and the flames of the night’s ritual were extinguished.

The lighting of the candles from a single flame was a planned symbolic act purposefully staged to make visible ‘togetherness.’ The activity was a planned opportunity for the aspiring writers to, as a group, express their gratitude for the instruction provided by members of the older generation of writers. The candle lighting was staged for the purpose of conveying a sense of unity not just among students, but also among the members of the student body and their instructors.

Although the students and instructors lit their candles from a single flame, through Mr. Dee’s closing words we see that, from the older generation’s perspective, the young writers are not viewed of as having passed into the social body of the members of the older generation. The members of the older generation continue to see themselves as the established structural support for young propagandists, and in turn the young propagandists are viewed of as needing ongoing support to shape the products of their labor. Importantly Mr. Dee also conveys the message that writers are only constituted as writers when the work they produce has a benefit for the readers or benefits for society. The capacity to assess and evaluate what exactly constitutes benefits for readers and society, it is clear, resides at an elevated position in the social hierarchy of Lao writers, not simply within the body of the older generation of writers, but more specifically within the segment of the older generation of writers who are Party members working within the Ministry of Information and Culture.

### **Showcasing the products of the older generation’s labor:**

By the final morning of the trip to Vang Vieng Mr. Paengan felt the students were ready to publically share some of the work the students had produced during the course of the camp. The Vannasin unit (in collaboration with the Lao Writer’s Association) also had the responsibility for producing a weekly television show on literature for the Ministry of Information and Culture. Mr. Paengan decided to devote one episode of the show to providing the students a nationally televised forum for them to share these selected works. This was the opportunity for Mr. Paengan to publicly showcase the work of the students under his charge.

Mr. Dee’s wife worked as a producer for LNTV and she served as the host for Vannasin’s literature show. On Sunday morning, she, a LNTV producer, and an LNTV camera operator came to the Vang Vieng ethnic minority school to tape the episode. Many of the students were up early practicing their group songs and making last minute adjustments to their lyrics. There was a buzz of nervous excitement among the students as Mr. Dee’s wife and the LNTV crew arrived.



Figures 8.27 and 8.28: Lao National Television camera operator records the student performances during the last morning of camp in Vang Vieng.

In the drizzle on the football pitch the students assembled to provide the camera with group and solo performances. Under the corrugated metal awning groups and individuals were interviewed about their experiences during the Sinxay writer's training program. Being able to perform on a nationally televised program clearly contributed to a sense of accomplishment among the students. The fact that they were asked to share their work on television was also an indicator to the students that Mr. Paengan felt comfortable with aspects of the work the students were producing under the supervision of the camp's instructional staff.

Importantly, the television show must also be understood as a political move on behalf of Mr. Paengan, the Lao Writer's Association and the Vannasin Unit staff. The show constituted a public demonstration of the labor of the members of the older generation, and their contribution towards helping the Ministry of Information and Culture and the Party meet its needs in the area of propaganda production. The program was a showcase of the products of the labor of the members of the older generation of writers – not the usual written products, but rather their productive products: a body of young writers capable of creating work that supports the goals of the Party while conforming to the requirements for approval by the Ministry.

Those engaged in the practices of adaptive perpetuation were essentially putting on display (for their peers and the public) a non-objective self-report of their contributions towards adaptive perpetuation. Using a propaganda channel of the institution of which they were a part, the television show provided the members of the older generation to give themselves a public pat on the back, for their contributions to the propaganda production of the Ministry. The program was not a documentary about the camp, it did not broadcast the conditions of the dorms, the parallel spaces produced by students for sharing work that did not conform to the older generation's standards, aims, and goals were not included in the production, critique and criticism were not voiced. The motives of producing Sinxay Stars, the trip as a reward of the Vannasin Staff's low wage labor, these were all out of the field of view of the camera's lens. In the show the camp was a smashing success – the next generation of writers for the Party and the institutions of the single-Party State were successfully trained. The non-critical assessment of the camp presented in the show was about as deep a review of the camp as would exist. Student evaluations and instructor evaluations did not fit into the

hierarchical patterns of communication. No pathways for feedback existed for contributing ideas for possible improvements for future training camps that would follow in years to come. The camp was a success because the administrators said it was, end of story.

Change in practice, if perceptible at all, like the increasing opportunities available to the young people for legitimate peripheral participation in the actual practices of the older generation's nested communities of practice, were going to move forward in minute incremental steps, tightly regulated through the older generation's ability to wield its permission granting authority.

### **Traveling together towards gender disparate destinations:**

“Practice being together” as engaged by students and instructors at the camp, not only incorporated the young people into the top-down communication flows and practices of social hierarchies within the older generation of writers and the Ministry of Information and Culture, the camping excursion to Viang Vieng, more than any of the other writers training activities, also functioned to inculcate students in the gendered divide that exists among the older generation of writers working for the Ministry. The social practices of the male members of both the older generation and the aspiring songwriters reinforced a gender disparity in practice – and this was quite visible through patterns of sharing and consuming alcohol on the bus ride back to Vientiane.

After the television show taping and a few final group photographs the students returned to the dorms to gather their belongings and headed to the bus. Forty-one students climbed aboard the public bus for the four-hour drive back to Vientiane. Also aboard the bus was Mr. Sisavath, the young assistant to Mr. Dee. Mr. Sisavath, as the lowest ranking member of the Vannasin staff in the unit's editorial department under the direct supervision of Mr. Dee, was assigned this duty. The other staff members rode in the comfort of the Ministry's bus. An in-law of Mr. Paengan (who felt motion sick on the Ministry's bus and wanted to ride in a vehicle with opened windows) also chose to ride on the student bus back, as did Mr. Soubanh (the radio show host and song writer).

Mr. Soubanh sat on the top of the transmission housing, right up against the front windshield between the driver and the door. Next to Mr. Soubanh, Chanthaboun (the fruit vendor) sat upon the transmission housing, also facing the doorway, as did Somlith (the song writing National University student). These three were the leaders of the singing of popular Lao songs. The group singing of popular songs provided the sound track during the trip from Vang Vieng to Vientiane. Soon after the bus began to roll Somlith shouted to the back requesting that someone loan him a guitar. As soon as it was in his hands the three at the front of the bus began to sing.



Figure 8.29: Sitting on the transmission cover at the front of the bus with his feet at the top of the entry steps Somlith plays the guitar. Next to him are Chanthaboun and Mr. Soubanh.

When the singing commenced, Somsavat (the soldier), who had taken a seat towards the rear of the bus, appeared to quickly realize that the social nexus of musicians vying for connections with Mr. Soubanh was located at the front of the bus. He moved forward squeezing onto a seat close to the three lyricists sitting on the transmission housing.

The songs the students and Mr. Soubanh sang were the popular genera similar in style to those Mr. Soubanh penned and played on Lao National Radio. As other students recognized the selections they too joined in the singing with the musicians. Khamlah's hair streamed through her opened window and appeared to dance in time to the lively music. Some with cameras focused their lenses on the passing landscape, verdant and enveloped in clouds and rain.



Figure 8.30: Drawn through the open window by the rush of air entering the bus through the opened passenger door, Khamlah's hair dances in the wind as she claps and sings along with her peers.



Figure 8.31: Inkham, one of the most well read students in the camp whose father is a Lao journalist, focuses the lens of her father's camera on the passing landscape.

Phonpaseuth, with youthful popular musical tastes not exactly aligned with the musical preferences of the men sitting upon the transmission housing at the front of the bus, isolated himself with in-ear headphones. Sitting towards the rear of the bus he quietly focused on composing lyrics to a new song.



Figure 8.32: With earphones inserted to block out external audio distractions, Phonpaseuth quietly composes lyrics to a new song.

As the bus rumbled south towards Vientiane, a number of students circulated their notebooks to others. The notebooks were used as memory books, and the students circulated the notebooks so that others would be able to write small messages to the owner of the book. In their notes the students wished each other well, recorded memories of a shared experience at camp, some composed short poems to the owners of the books, and some used the books to exchanged phone numbers.

Aside from those suffering from motion sickness, the general spirit on the bus was festive and celebratory. The collaborative singing of Lao songs, the circulation of memory books, and the sharing of food all contributed to an air of jovial camaraderie among the Sinxay Pen's Camp participants.

Unlike the journey from Vientiane to Vang Vieng this return bus was not commissioned solely for the transportation of students. The Ministry of Information and Culture's bus drove directly back to Vientiane with the Vannasin staff and camp instructors aboard, while the driver of the public bus already filled with students made frequent stops along the roadway, picking up more passengers who climbed aboard the already crowded bus. Most of these new passengers boarded with looks of bewilderment on their faces as they squeezed into seats among the singing students.

Positioned at the front of the bus, parallel with the bus driver, Mr. Soubanh's presence steered many of the activities of the ride to Vientiane. The songs sung were those that he would play on his radio show. Those who surrounded him were the younger men with aspirations of becoming Lao lyricists; those with the desire to become

part of the “*our*” in Mr. Soubanh’s definition of “*our* Lao music” (see chapter seven for discussion of his use of this term). Vying for his attention and approval they harmonized their behaviors with his.

One of the young men, a student who had spent a considerable time during the course attempting to get Mr. Soubanh’s attention, readied a bottle of rice alcohol and a glass. As the three at the front led the students in song, this young man stood and respectfully delivered the first drink to Mr. Soubanh.

During the course of the camp Mr. Soubanh’s penchant for imbibing had become obvious to all. As evening approached on the second night of the camp Chanthaboun and Somsavat had invited Mr. Soubanh to dinner. By that point in the camp a number of people had suggested to Mr. Soubanh that he might want to balance his diet with something he could chew. Mr. Soubanh’s response to Chanthaboun and Somsavat was the same response he gave to all who suggested he should eat: “I don’t eat food,” implying that beverages were the only things he consumed. Judging just on the time spent in Vang Vieng, one would have difficulty finding any evidence to argue with his assertion; for the duration of the camp the vast majority of his caloric intake came in the form of fermented beverages.

Mr. Soubanh sat at the helm for this bus ride. The use of alcohol on the return bus ride constituted a major difference between the trip to Vang Vieng and the trip back to Vientiane; the ride to Vang Vieng was relatively dry, the onboard festivities of the ride home were lubricated with a considerable amount of alcohol. Unlike the sharing of food, the collaborative singing, and the circulation of memory books, drinking on the bus was almost entirely a male activity.

After Mr. Soubanh downed the first swig the single shared glass was passed back to the student holding the bottle. He refilled the glass and handed it to Chanthaboun. Chanthaboun drank, and with a grimace passed the glass back to the student with the bottle. The student sommelier refilled the glass, and so as not to interrupt the guitar playing, poured the alcohol directly into the guitarist’s mouth.



Figure 8.33: Sitting at the front of the bus engaged in song, Mr. Soubanh accepts the offer of a glass of rice alcohol from a student.



Figure 8.34: Chanthaboun grimacing as the alcohol burns down his throat and he passes the shared glass back to the student holding the bottle of rice alcohol.



Figure 8.35: The guitarist continues to play as the student holding the bottle pours a drink directly into the guitarist's mouth.

Singing and pouring, the student with the bottle refilled and passed the glass moving seat to seat from the front of the bus to the back. Khamlah, sitting in the very front seat, was rather hesitant about accepting the glass. Each of the students before her (three male students) had a glass. The students after her were waiting for their turn. She took a small sip before offering the rest of her glass to the guitarist. While all students were offered a drink, Khamlah's infinitesimal sip constituted the only imbibing by a female aboard the bus.

Drinking while engaged in song aboard the bus was a male dominated activity. The men refilled the glass, passed the glass, and consumed its contents. Multiple male students took over the role of bus sommelier. While the glass was passed all the way to the rear bench of the bus, the male students circulated it primarily at the front of the bus, passing it around the male social nexus of aspiring lyricists and Mr. Soubanh.



Figure 8.36 to 8.39: As the ride and singing continue toward Vientiane, the single glass is refilled, passed, and its contents consumed multiple times by multiple males aboard the bus.

The introduction of alcohol contributed to and reflected the social divide between male lyricists and female aspiring writers. During the course of the Sinxay Pen’s Camp men and women appeared to participate as equals in both poetry and short story writing. Male and female students both submitted works of poetry and short story writing, and stood to share their work for others. Although women contributed to the collective group song production, no female students stood as a soloist to publicly perform a song they had written themselves. In Vang Vieng no female student performed a song for the individual song writing competition.

During the entire Sinxay Pen’s Camp program Khamlah was the only female student I saw share lyrics with Mr. Soubanh. This occurred during the “practice camping” outing at Mr. Paengan’s property. As students worked on group songs she quietly asked Mr. Soubanh if he would listen to something she had written. She sat on the ground beside him and in a whisper sang him her lyrics. Mr. Soubanh strained to hear her soft voice, and distractedly looked around at the other groups as she sang. As soon as she was done performing her work for him he was off to listen to other groups. Her foray into song writing appeared tentative, as tentative as her sip of the shared glass being passed around the bus.

Prior to the trip to Vang Vieng I had probed the question of why no female students were writing and performing songs. I had queried staff and the students. Mr. Paengan expressed perplexity at the situation, and suggested I ask the students

themselves. The female students however, more often than not, returned my question with a silent smirk and disbelieving raise of the eyebrows, as if to say, “it is rather obvious, can’t you see the answer yourself?”

Instructing while inebriated in Vang Vieng Mr. Soubanh’s lowered inhibitions for social norms and lack of respect for the desired personal space of female students were apparent. His attempts at a hands-on approach to interacting with female students were clearly one factor that caused young women to place a considerable distance between themselves and Mr. Soubanh. These interactions contributed to young women grouping themselves in such a way as to shield the women who were the targets of his attention.

By plying Mr. Soubanh with alcohol the male students lubricated and positively influenced their interactions with Mr. Soubanh while simultaneously contributing to the fueling of Mr. Soubanh’s inhibitions. The social behavior of the inebriated old boys lyricist nexus with Mr. Soubanh at the helm, fostered a social body antagonistic to, and not conducive for, equal participation of females as peers. Though united on a journey heading towards the same direction, longstanding social practices of the members of the older generation perpetuated inequalities in practice and socialization that would ensure some males would make it to their desired the end point successfully, while simultaneously helping to insure that females would remain peripheral to some of the social practices central to forms of production among the male members of the community of practice.

### **Conclusion:**

The practices of “writing” for the Lao Ministry of Information and Culture must be understood broadly. Writing for the Party and its institutions involves social practices far beyond the act of simply inscribing words on paper. The administrators of Vannasin convened the camping trip to Vang Vieng in order to convey an understanding of this to the young aspiring writers coming to the Ministry from outside the kinship relations of those already engaged in propaganda production.

The camping trip to Vang Vieng was specifically designed by the Vannasin administrators to engage students in “practice being together;” practice being together with aspiring writers, and practice being together with those already actively involved in the practices of writing for the Ministry. By the conclusion of the camping excursion, the students had experienced multiple opportunities to engage in problem solving, developing through the process an awareness of the fact that even at the conclusion of the training camp they would continue to be viewed by members of the older generation of writers, as students, students laboring at the periphery of the social body of the older generation of writers. Mr. Dee’s concluding remarks to the students at the closing ceremony of the camp highlighted the fact that the hierarchical instructor-student relationship would be little altered at the completion of the training camp. The concluding remarks also made it clear that the products of student labor would not be considered to be writing unless those products were deemed to be beneficial to readers and society. It was left unsaid, but clearly understood, that the right to evaluate the students’ works, that is to determine whether the works were considered to be beneficial and thus constituted writing, would remain an aspect of the decision making authority of the older generation of writers.

“Practice being together” on the camping trip to Vang Vieng produced the revelation that the practices of “being together” for Lao writers are replete with elements of hierarchical social stratification and gendered disparities. Through planned and unplanned aspects of the camp the students gained first-hand experience regarding the fact that being a writer for the Party and the Ministry involves developing ones abilities to collectively join with others to problem-solve and navigate through the existing social practices of the hierarchical social body of practitioners.

The trip was designed to intentionally provide young people opportunities to observe and experience important aspects of the social body of Ministry approved Lao writers, understandings of which would otherwise be difficult to impart. The camp administrators orchestrated opportunities for the students to experience forms of alterity; experience themselves as being outside of the privileges and perks afforded to those who are members of the social body of the Ministry’s writers. For example, placed on the public bus, the students were fully aware of the disparity between their mode of transit and the instructors’ mode of transit, likewise the stark contrast in accommodations, and access to leisure activities in Vang Vieng, highlighted for the students aspects of rewards available to those who gain membership in the social body of Lao writers. The trip to Vang Vieng enabled the Vannasin Unit’s administrators the opportunity to simultaneously reward their staff and instructors for their labor in producing the camp, and display this reward to the students as an example of the types of privileges afforded to those who successfully adapt their social practices in order to contribute to the labor of the institution.

In light of observations from the camping excursion to Vang Vieng we see that adaptive perpetuation must also be understood as a hegemonic process through which those aspiring to be writers in the Lao context must also be engaged in adaptation of their own social behaviors (collectively) in order to be accepted as practitioners by the members of the existing social body of Lao writers. We see here that adaptive perpetuation involves exchange dynamics, in which young writers labor to adapt their own products to the expectations of conformity of the instructors in order to have their work considered “writing,” but we also see that in exchange for doing this the young people create social spaces in which they are able to share work that does not conform (i.e. the young people create social spaces outside of the view of the camp instructors for work that falls outside of the purview of what the instructors consider to be “writing”).

The camping trip also opened our abilities to see that negative information does not flow upwards in the hierarchy of the existing community of practice, but this should not be misconstrued as a fact that prevents all instigation of change at the bottom of the social hierarchy. The female students, when faced with the appalling conditions of the dorms, and the inebriated behavior of one of the instructors, organize a collective move to insure their own comfort and security. In this instance the collective action of students altered the plans of the camp administrators. The administrators, recognizing the deplorable conditions, of the dorms (though not informed of the inebriated behavior of one of the instructors) did not prevent the move.

However, the camping trip did not present opportunities for students to make collective moves that would alter more deeply engrained patterns of relations higher in the hierarchy of decision making, for example, the female students did not appear to be in

a position during camp that would enable them to disrupt the behaviors of Mr. Soubanh in order to participate as equals in song writing.

I concluded the chapter with a brief look at the social practice roots of the gender disparity in the song writing. Each preceding element of the chapter is essential to understanding the social production of disparate practice. We cannot say that the problem was caused simply by Mr. Soubanh, but rather we must look deep into how his behaviors could be understood as nothing out of the norm. A number of factors must be understood as contributing to Mr. Soubanh's drunken behavior being routinely ignored by the Vannasin employees, just a sampling of these are: 1) the downward hierarchical flow of communication (for the young girls subject to his unwanted attention, there was no viable established pathway for negative communication to flow upwards to the administrators who would have been in a position to implement a change), 2) the dialectics of labor leisure (i.e. his behaviors were largely excused as drinking was an expected part of the Vang Vieng trip as a component of rewards afforded the low wage camp staff), 3) the fact that there existed a mutual dependency between Mr. Paengan and Mr. Soubanh as members of the social body of Ministry propagandists (retrospectively knowing of Mr. Paengan's dependence upon Mr. Soubanh's participation in his plans for the future formation of the Sinxay Stars, one would have to question whether Mr. Paengan would have been in a position to intervene had he been aware of Mr. Soubanh's behavior), and 4) the students produced their own paths around the problems they experienced with his behavior (thus circumventing the need for the older generation to intervene on their behalf). Through deeply entrenched social practices of the community propagandists, social practices that have developed over time in the context of the "centrally planned system," the members of the older generation produce themselves as one of the most significant threats to the adaptive-perpetuation of the practice of writing for the single-Party State.

---

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> (See Ollman 1976 p. 56)

<sup>2</sup> This is aligned with Engels conception of 'mutual penetration of polar opposites' as described by Ollman (Ollman 1976 p. 55).

<sup>3</sup> For example definitions of "the tourist" which one might find predominant in western anthropological writing on tourism such as the work of Smith (Smith 1989 p.1).

## Chapter 9

### Conclusion

#### **Introduction:**

Using the context of a propaganda production unit for a single-Party State I've illustrated how the concept of adaptive-perpetuation contributes an understanding that practices of change within a political-economy must be understood as people engaged in the production of change in practice for the purpose of maintaining some form of continuity (in social relations and/or social practices) while they are simultaneously laboring to produce larger-scale changes in social practices in which they are participants, and the resulting larger-scale changes entail a threat of producing displacement. Displacement here must be understood not only as the potential to displace their own or others positions in social relations, but also the potential of displacing aspects of the social practice that existed prior to the initial engagement in change.

Many communities of practice, like the Vannasin literature and arts propaganda production unit of the Lao Ministry of Information and Culture, must be understood as a community of practice composed of multiple sub-communities of practice, each organized around specific aspects of the division of labor essential to the overall production of the larger community. In the example of Vannasin we see that each sub-unit of the division of labor was engaged in labor that entailed producing adaptations necessary for perpetuating the social practices of not only the Vannasin unit, but also adaptations necessary for perpetuating each of the larger communities of practice within which the Vannasin unit itself was a part. Mutual dependencies existed both within the divisions of labor in the Vannasin unit, and between the Vannasin unit and the larger communities of practice of which it was a part (e.g. the Publishing and Libraries Department, the Culture wing of the Ministry, the Ministry of Information and Culture, the Institutions of the single-Party State . . . ).

As a propaganda unit of the single-Party State, those employed in the Vannasin unit were essentially involved in producing the ideology to legitimize not only the single-Party rule, but also, fundamentally, the ideology of the transforming practices of the political economy (i.e. the transition from ideologies that legitimate practices of single-Party rule over a "centrally planned system" to ideologies that legitimate practices of single-Party rule over a "market-based economy.") The very concept of what social practices constitute a "market-based economy" were (and are) under constant production as the members of the Party and the population under their rule simultaneously produce and adapt their social practices to changing practices of social relations. The employees of the Vannasin unit were charge with this production while simultaneously struggling with the transitions of social practices themselves.

In multiple respects the members of the community of practice of Vannasin Magazine were faced with having to produce new forms of producing their own existence within the Lao political-economy. It is within this context that the Vannasin administrators produced the ideology of a dependence upon the labor of youth. Here, through the Vannasin example, we are able to observe how an ideology of the dependence on youth is produced within practices of adaptive-perpetuation. Further, the division of labor within Vannasin afforded the opportunity to observe that both the

dependence upon youth, and the practices of incorporating the youth as peripheral participants in the sub-communities of practice of the larger unit may be multiple and diverse. Intergenerational tensions of continuity and displacement exist in each of the division-of-labor-specific practices of legitimate peripheral participation. Therefore in each mode of incorporation we find different practices of mediating intergenerational tension.

The intergenerational tensions come to the fore in significant ways in practices of core productive incorporation of youth from outside the social relations of the members of the older generation of practitioners. The example of the older generation of propagandists attempts to produce worthy inheritors (and inheritors capable of producing the adaptive-perpetuation of the practice of writing propaganda for the single-Party State) revealed that the old-timer/newcomer tensions came to a head around practices of conformity. Through their practices of conformity (intentional or otherwise) the older generation produce themselves as threats on not only to the adaptive perpetuation of one community of practice, but threats to the adaptive-perpetuation of all the mutually dependent communities of practice in which their labor is a part.

To wind up our look at the Sinxay Pen's Camp I present a brief description below of how some young people from eventually did participate in the arts and literature propaganda production for the Vannasin unit.

#### **Certification ceremony:**

The Sinxay Pen's Camp was drawn to a close with a certification ceremony and party, hosted by the Vannasin uni in the Ministry of Information and Culture's large meeting hall. The students came dressed in their best clothes, some of the young women came with garlands of fragrant flowers in their hair ready to perform a dance and songs for the group. Mr. Paengan, on this occasion, was not the highest-ranking Ministry employee in the room on this occasion; rather Mr. Khamsing, the senior print censor of the Ministry and Information and Culture, held that distinction.

Mr. Khamsing's presence and participation in the ceremony was an important symbolic act. His importance in the hierarchy of the Ministry and the practices of writing for the single-Party State was highlighted by his seating placement in the room for the event. Up through to the actual distribution of certificates he sat on a stage, front and center in the large meeting hall, flanked on either side by Mr. Dee and Mr. Paengan.



Figure 9. 1: Mr. Paengan at the podium addressing the seated students during the certification ceremony of the Sinxay Pen's Camp. Seated on stage are Mr. Dee (behind the left hand side of the table), and Mr. Khamsing, the Ministry's senior print censor (behind the center of the table). Mr. Paengan's chair is the empty chair behind the on stage table to the right of Mr. Khamsing. The camp instructors and sit behind the table to the left of the podium, and behind a table parallel with this across the room the corner of which is peeking into the photo at the top right of the image.

After Mr. Paengan's opening remarks it was Mr. Khamsing who honored the students by serving as the Ministry official bestowing the certificates of completion to each of the aspiring young writers who took part in the course. In this act of distributing the certificates we have the man who oversees the approval of all print material for the Lao Ministry of Information and Culture personally handing to each participant a laminated certificate attesting to their completion of the Ministry's training course for young writers. The certificates, however, like those distributed to Sinxay Culture Club students at the completion of Ajaan Phoumjai's model training, were no guarantees of employment, rather they simply signified that the student had participated in the camp.



Figure 9.2: The Ministry of Information and Culture's senior print censor, Mr. Khamsing (right) assisted by Mr. Paengan's daughter in the role of an apprentice administrator (center) distribute laminated certificates of completion to students (left) during the culminating certification ceremony of the Sinxay Pen's Camp.

Unlike the Culture Club training certificates which held little value beyond the context of the Culture Club, these personalized laminated certificates of Sinxay Pen's Camp completion, signed by Mr. Paengan, would likely help to ease entry into interviews for any writing positions that might open in other branches of the Publishing and Libraries Department. This is an important aspect to note, as, while the Vannasin unit did not have funds to directly hire any of the students full-time, completion of the training program could prove useful for those interested in applying for work within other divisions of the larger community of practice of which the Vannasin unit was a part.

Puey, a talkative and outgoing graduate of the camp provides an example of this. During the camp Puey was a student at the National University of Laos studying in a degree program in English. Her talents in writing, combined with her eagerness to share her work aloud, spurred enough jealousy among some female students during the course of the camp. Months after the camp and after her graduation from NUOL I ran into Puey at a media event. Seeing me the first time after the conclusion of the camp she simultaneously flashed a smile and her press credentials. She explained that the camp training helped her land a job as a reporter for one of the Ministry's papers. With another smile she said that even though her degree from the university was in English her work now was writing only in Lao.

Beyond the bestowing of certificates, another important element of the closing ceremony was the awarding of honors for a number of competitions. Three of the competitions involved students judging each other's written products. Students had submitted written entries for poetry, short story, and songwriting for peer review. Students anonymously placed paper ballots reflecting their vote into sealed ballot boxes

posted outside the Vannasin offices during the final week of the camp. After the votes were tallied the camp instructors of each subject stood to present the competition winners a ribbon bound prize. These prizes were small stacks of back issues of Vannasin publications that the unit was struggling to sell.

Even in the closing ceremony intergenerational tensions were apparent; in the areas of short story and poetry, the instructors, publicly expressed their disagreement with the students' peer evaluations by choosing to award their own prizes to those student writers who submitted work that the members of the older generation felt had merit and should have received honors. The act of the elders, diluting the students' vote, was a public demonstration that the older generation would retain decision making authority, awarding what they deemed to be worthy or recognition, despite being outnumbered in votes by the decision-making of the youth. Songwriting was the only student product category where the student vote was not overshadowed with alternative awards distributed by members of the older generation.



Figure 9.3: Mr. Soubanh hands a ribbon bound stack of Vannasin publications to the student winner of the song writing contest.

After the student product votes the results of two other widely anticipated popularity votes were revealed. The first was the vote for Miss. Sinxay Pen's Camp. When I asked Mr. Paengan why the older male instructors of the camp felt we needed to vote and elect a Miss. Sinxay he smiled a wry smile and said that it was because we simply needed to have a Miss. Sinxay. There was no reason to have a Miss. Sinxy beyond the fact that we needed to have a Miss Sinxay. When I asked, in mock sincerity, if there would be a vote for a "Mr. Sinxay" Mr. Paengan laughed. I found that I could ask that question of almost anyone on staff and induce laughter.

Miss. Sinxay was to *serve* as the feminized face of the camp. Upon her election, Miss. Sinxay's first duty as Miss. Sinxay was to present the award for the most popular

instructor. Mr. Dee, who would soon be promoted to the position of Director and Editor-in-Chief of Vannasin, won the student vote in this category by a landslide. Following this Miss. Sinxay was expected to dance with and pour drinks for the honored guests who had come to the event. The following month her picture graced the cover of Vannasin Magazine – serving as a visual enticement to draw readers into the pages to read about the camp. The election of Miss. Sinxay, and the duties she was expected to perform, punctuated the fact that old-boys network of the male members of the older generation was still in the decision-making seat for the community of practice of Ministry propagandists, and that women were expected to serve the interests of these men.



Figure 9.4: With the ballot boxes and the ballots strewn on the stage behind them (on the right) the newly elected “Miss Sinxay” presents Mr. Dee with his prize for being voted the outstanding instructor of Sinxay Pen’s Camp. (Note: behind the pixels both Mr. Dee and Miss. Sinxay have broad smiles.)



Figure 9.5: Miss Sinxay gracing the cover of Vannasin Magazine.

**Post camp youth participation in propaganda production:**

Two questions that I believe we (the students, the Vannasin Staff, and I) were all thinking about in one form or another were: Just exactly how would these young people be integrated into the ongoing labor of the Vannasin unit after the completion of the camp? And, how peripheral was their participation going to be? It wasn't long after the trip to Vang Vieng that Mr. Paengan revealed some of his plans for the students. The first order of business would be a revival of the Vannasin unit's *Sinxay Weekly*. The *Sinxay Weekly* was a newspaper aimed at high school students. It had been dormant and out of production for quite some time, but with the influx of eager aspiring young writers Mr. Paengan figured the time was ripe for its rebirth.

The copies of the *Sinxay Weekly* that were still piled in the Vannasin storeroom were an indication that the paper never was a particularly popular product. The issues I saw were all from the year 2000, when the Party and its institutions were marking the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the March 22, 1955 founding of the Lao People's Party (the name was changed in 1972 to what it is today: the Lao People's Revolutionary Party). The unit splurged and used two colors of ink, printing a red Party flag on the top banner line.



Figure 9.6: The March 22, 2000 issue of the Vannasin Magazine’s youth newspaper *Sinxay Weekly* celebrating the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Party. The red banner above the photo reads: “Long live the People’s Revolutionary Party!” From left to right the photo depicts the Lao revolutionary leaders, founders of the Lao Resistance Government in the May of 1950: Nouhak Phoumsavan (Minister of Economy), Kaysone Phomvihane (Minister of National Defense), Prince Souphanouvong (Prime Minister), Chao Souk Vongsak (Minister of National Education), Phoumi Vongvichit (Minister of the Interior).

To get an idea of how the product of the older generation of writers compares with the product produced by young writers under their guidance, let us look first at the issue presented to the students as a sample from which they could draw ideas. Reading the text of the March 22, 2000 issue of the *Sinxay Weekly* it is clear that older propagandists, not young people, produced the paper – the text has a heavy authoritarian tone. Banner slogans are sprinkled across the top of a number of pages within: “Young children of today will be the adults of tomorrow” “Children who are good and smart love the country, and love the culture and arts of Lao” “The family is happy and society is good” “Read literature to inspire your ideas and improve your knowledge” “Education is equivalent to a candlelight illuminating your future contributing bright light to your life.” These are not peers talking to peers statements, but rather the proverbial words of an older generation lecturing to the young.

Inside on page number two one finds a photo of Prince Souphanouvong meeting over tea with Ho Chi Min in a woven bamboo walled structure. The title of the article is “This land has people who are brave.” The majority of the articles in the issue, however, are not directly about the history of the Party and the revolutionary leaders, rather they are about society under the Party. The facing page hosts a story about ethnic minority

drumming traditions and a drumming competition. Pages four and five are focused on an audience of young child care givers or young parents (or soon to be parents) – page four hosts an article titled “The book with pictures will motivate children to read.” Page five is titled “Building Society” with an article titled “How to protect” – about protecting one’s families from deleterious influences. A large half page condom advertisement from Population Services International fills the bottom half of page four. While not the hard-hitting glory-of-the-Party messages, these pages read as lectures to youth about what constitutes an ideal family in the single-Party State – conveying that planning for one’s family is important – and conveying that once one has a family one must focus on raising one’s children in a manner that will insure the children can make positive contributions to Lao society.

Page six is largely devoted to drawings contributed primarily by young elementary school children, which seems oddly out of place with the apparent target audience of the rest of the text. The type indicates that students were free to draw subjects of their choosing. There seems to be no theme linking the images. Page seven is devoted to poems. On page eight we find a section titled “Supporting the literature of writers” which includes a five-paragraph passage apparently pulled at random from Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* presented in two side-by-side columns, one Lao, and the other English. The Vannasin administrators would later explain to me that bilingual Lao/English texts were extremely popular among young people, and these were included to draw young readers into the publication – the intent was to draw them in with English so they would engage with the rest of the messages on the other pages of the publication. Page nine holds a section from the story of Sinxay and a poem describing how “Love is better than hate.”

The Vannasin staff brought multiple copies of this 2000 issue from the storage shed and placed them on the editorial department’s meeting table so the young recent graduates of the camp would have some objects to inspire their work on the new version of the youth newspaper. Only a small fraction of the total number of students showed up to be part of the team producing the revival. A disproportionate number of them were the young people who generally sat in the first two rows during camp lectures. Gone were the high school students, as the school term had begun and they were back in class. Gone too were the male aspiring songwriters who huddled around Mr. Soubanh. While others did submit contributions, the students who came to the Vannasin offices during the work week to type (not an easy task when one has had limited exposure to a computer), and design the contents were primarily students from the National University of Laos. A number of these students would share the cost of transportation into town on days they all had free from lectures on campus.

Though closely patterned off the 2000 issue of *Sinxay Weekly* the revival was decidedly different. First, struck from the name was “Weekly” replaced with the word “Newspaper.” As students were producing this in conjunction with competing requirements for their time, it was guaranteed that the paper would not be able to appear each week. The 2000 edition from which they modeled the new version listed the date of publication, rather than listing an exact day on the cover the newspaper the administration decided to simply list the month it was produced, with the hope of prolonging the inevitable expiration of student interest in a dated the publication.



Figure 9.7: The first issue of the short lived revival of the Sinxay student newspaper, produced by Sinxay Pen’s Camp staff and student graduates under the editorial supervision of Mr. Paengan and Mr. Dee.

For budgetary reasons the paper had to be printed with just one color ink. To the left of the paper’s title a new logo for the Sinxay Young Writer’s Club replaced the old image of Sinxay the archer. The bright red hammer and sickle flag of the Party was not present in the banner line of the Club produced issues, however, in the first issue a black and white image of the flag was noticeably present above the fold in the background of a photo accompanying the headline article.

The photos above the fold were to illustrate an article about a meeting held for the opening of the new school year. Two of the images featured the common didactic arrangement of meeting halls with rows upon rows of seated audience members (exhibiting very little expression of interest) facing a speaker positioned before them. Though the images did look quite a bit like the types of images one would find on the front page of the nation’s newspapers, they did not strike me as the type of images that would encourage young people to purchase the product.

The most notable differences between the 2000 and Club produced issues, however, are what one finds on the inside pages. Aside from one article titled “Knowing the vocabulary to create a poem” under the page heading “Sinxay School” one does not find the lecture-like articles that peppered the 2000 edition the students used as a sample. Also absent are the hierarchically voiced banners (that expressed statements like ‘education is the candle that will illuminate one’s future’). What we find in place of all of this are articles written by young people in the voice of young people.

This is not to say that similar messages are not conveyed, they are, the difference is in how the messages are conveyed. First and foremost, in the *Sinxay Newspaper*

revival, the messages are presented as young people writing for peers. One young person writes about people who continue their education being exposed to the beautiful sight of students bringing bouquets of flowers to the University. Another presents a poem about reading a sign at the market asking that people not sell wild animals during the Buddhist lent.

Two full pages are devoted to four student drawings – and unlike the 2000 edition, relatively older students aged eleven and twelve drew each of these images. Further, each picture was drawn for the purpose of conveying a message about how one should behave in society. Children are depicted helping with household chores, scrubbing the floor, raking the yard, feeding the pigs and chickens, washing the laundry, collecting water for the house. Young women are shown giving alms to a monk, a boy is depicted as helping the monk on his alms rounds, while another boy provides food to a fish in a pond. A final image shows a young girl in a high school uniform helping an elderly woman with a cane cross a street.

Though it must be recognized that the newspaper was produced under the hierarchical authority and editorial guidance of the Vannasin administrators, the *Sinxay Newspaper* presents propaganda for youth produced by youth – and in this respect constitutes a fairly radical departure from the past practices of propaganda production of the Vannasin Magazine unit. These are the situations of young people speaking to their peers that Mr. Paengan aspired to produce through the camp.

A team of young men (not *Sinxay* students) were contracted to sell the newspapers directly at local high schools in and around Vientiane. The deal made with these young distributors was that they would be able to keep a small percentage of the price for each copy of the paper they sold. The price of the publication was kept fairly low through a combination of using very inexpensive paper and recruiting advertisements from those eager to 1) market their products to young people, and/or 2) establish or reinforce good relations with Mr. Paengan and the Ministry of Information and Culture.

The print run of the *Sinxay Newspaper* did not extend beyond a handful of issues. The newspaper was not a marketing failure; from the accounts that made it back to the Vannasin office, the team selling the paper at high schools had a fairly easy job selling it to eager high school readers with rather limited reading options. The fatal blow to this first revival of the paper was one of the same essential problems facing Vannasin Magazine – a dwindling lack of content marketable to urban Lao youth. The pool of young people, then back in school and attending classes at the University were not able to devote time to producing enough material to fill the pages of the paper. For a period of time Vannasin staff members (such as myself) were asked to produce content (my contribution was an English language vocabulary corner which Mr. Dee and I translated to form a bilingual feature). The administration soon realized that our energies would be better devoted to keeping Vannasin Magazine afloat, and the newspaper was allowed to fade from production.

Although the revival of *Sinxay Newspaper* was short lived the experience working on its production produced some dedicated young contributors to the labor of the Vannasin unit. It is inevitable that the magazine will be revived repeatedly in future years as a training ground for young aspiring propagandists. The Vannasin unit, now under the direction of Mr. Dee, continues to host *Sinxay Pen's Camps*, recruiting more young aspiring writers into the ranks of the *Sinxay Young Writers Club*. Though these

camps aren't held each year, the number of students enrolling with each incarnation of the camp continues to grow as does the body of potential contributors to the adaptive-perpetuation of the Vannasin unit.

### **A sampling of other student paths:**

Clearly not all students followed either the path of Puey or the path of those who contributed to the revival of the *Sinxay Newspaper*. Somsavath, the soldier, had no interest in print, his focus was entirely on songwriting and performing the songs he wrote. However, he was a fairly reliable presence at the Ministry after the camp as he returned to the Vannasin offices repeatedly to get feedback and advice on lyrics he was composing. Mr. Soubanh met him in the editorial department on more than one occasion to review his work. The day the censor finally approved his draft of the lyrics he came to me beaming proudly announcing his receipt of approval. I believe it was through Mr. Soubanh that he found a small recording company to produce his first CD. After recording the CD he contacted me numerous times to ask if he could borrow my camera to produce his first music video.

A number of the students who attended the camp while on break from the National University of Laos graduated and returned home to distant provinces. Keochinda, whose work was the students' pick for best poet, moved back down south to Pakse after graduation. Though she was a relatively prolific writer, the distance between her and the Vannasin offices reduced the likelihood that she would be a regular contributor to the magazine's content.

Khamlah, who was a member of the fairly large cohort of students who attended the camp from NUOL's Faculty of Education, returned to Xieng Khwang province. She had returned ostensibly to help her parents with the rice cultivation (when she was a student she brought large bags of rice with her on the bus back down to Vientiane to serve as her primary food source during her studies). At the beginning of the Pen's Camp she had expressed interests in songwriting and short story writing. She was the only female student I witnessed sharing one of her compositions (albeit very timidly) with Mr. Souban during the 'practice camping' excursion. Mr. Bounpheng had rewarded her his choice for outstanding student short story. Her family opened a gas station and she found a job teaching English to teachers at a local teachers training school. She was still writing, she told me over the phone in 2008, but hadn't submitted anything to publish.

Although a large number of students passed through the camp and received certificates of completion, only a small percentage of these would eventually submit materials for publication. But this was one of the expectations at the outset, and one of the reasons for the efforts at a mass incorporation of a large number of young people. The members of the older generation recognized from the start that a large pool of youth would yield some, though not all of the materials Vannasin needed to fill its monthly issues.

### **Intergenerational tensions and the incremental, slow and ongoing change in practice:**

The changes in production were not rapid. Rather they must be understood as incremental, slow and ongoing. Even if the members of the older generation continue to

hold fairly tight reigns over the print content, the influence of the younger generation contributing their labor to Vannasin Magazine are slowly becoming apparent in the Magazine’s visual presentation of Lao culture. The March 2010 issue of Vannasin Magazine graphically illustrates the changes that have taken place.

The cover itself is a relatively contemporary representation of urban youth modeling hand woven Lao textiles. The back cover, however, is what I find particularly striking. Standing in skintight animal print tights is the very kind of influence Mr. Soubanh struggled to expunge from the work of students during the course of the camp. This is the photographic image of the talented Thanida Thamwimon, lead singer and the “Da” in the Thai rock band Da Endorphine. Her pants, jacket, hairstyle and legs-apart stance are exactly the sorts of things purposefully styled out of Vannasin cover art. Beside Da are the members of the Thai rock band Hangman, and slightly above the image of Hangman is the Thai singer Boy Peacemaker.



Figure 9.10: Draft layout of the back (left) and front (right) cover of the March 2010 issue of Vannasin Magazine. The back cover is a full-page advertisement for two Tigo (mobile telephone service company) sponsored pop concerts of Thai rock bands in Vientiane (Image provided by Vannasin Magazine).

During the course of the camp Mr. Soubanh decried the influence of Thai music in Phonpaseuth’s composition. Further, Mr. Soubanh routinely ignored the multitude of student compositions about mobile phones, young love, and the combination of the two. It is significant that only a few years after the camp the magazine would have a large portion of one month’s production costs covered by this advertisement. Not only is it a Thai rock concert aimed at Vientiane’s urban youth, featuring Da and Boy Peacemaker (both perform songs focused largely on subjects of young love), the concert was sponsored by Tigo, a mobile phone company. Through the magazine unit’s dire need to generate funds for Lao cultural propaganda the magazine advertises a concert for urban

youth, promoting the very aspects of foreign culture that the members of the older generation have labor so hard to expunge from cultural productions of the next generation of Party propagandists.

In light of what we have learned through the exploration of the Vannasin Magazine unit, the presence of this ad represents another incremental aspect of adaptive-perpetuation and reflects the playing out of ongoing intergenerational tensions at the roots of political-economic transformation in the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

### **Adaptive-perpetuation applicability and potential directions for further theoretical development:**

Adaptive-perpetuation provides a theoretical framing that opens opportunities to study and explore diverse practices entailed in the perpetuation of social practices where elements of adaptation and change disrupt the applicability of a theoretical framing of 'social reproduction.' While I've developed the theory through fieldwork focused on transformations of a political-economy of a single-Party State, the concept will prove applicable to illuminating social practices entailed in the production of change across a range of settings and communities of practice.

Fundamentally the study of adaptive-perpetuation requires a focus on the intergenerational tension that exist at the roots of changing social practice. This focus on intergenerational tensions enables us to understand how the struggles related to the transformation of a political-economy of a single-Party State is worked out through such things as the interactions surrounding who can determine where a high school student places the chorus of a pop-song. In this respect adaptive-perpetuation constitutes a theoretical framing applicable to exploring such instances of intergenerational tensions in order to perceive the significance of intergenerational interactions that might otherwise pass by unnoticed or be written off as seemingly benign.

As the case study of the writers for the Vannasin Magazine unit, of the Publishing and Libraries Department, of the Culture wing, of the Ministry of Information and Culture, of a single-Party State illustrates, one must be attuned to the fact that practices of adaptive-perpetuation may exist simultaneously (and inextricably entailed within) multiple mutually dependent communities of practice. With this understanding research into one community of practice should be understood as having the potential for producing a multitude of trajectories for further research that will include, and expand upon understandings developed in an initial community under exploration.

Because change in practice produced through practices of adaptive-perpetuation may be inherently slow (e.g. slowly worked out through intergenerational struggles around concepts of conformity) and incremental, the exploration of adaptive-perpetuation is best suited for those willing and able to devote an extended period of time to a longitudinal study of a community of practice. I could not have developed my understanding of adaptive-perpetuation had I not started my exploration years in advance of writing this dissertation. The work that I present here is just the start of a long-term engagement I plan with those laboring for the Vannasin Magazine unit.

Just as I have developed my understandings through an extension of the work of Lave and Wenger, I hope others will take what I have developed here and extend it in further directions through ethnographic fieldwork in diverse communities of practice. While the concept of adaptive-perpetuation has practical applicability for historical

research (e.g. a. exploring how members of refugee communities labored to maintain social organizations while settling in a new land and raising children within a very different dominant culture, or b. examining how engineers working to develop a certain technology incorporated young people into their social organization while struggling to adapt their practices to technological developments that eclipsed the need for what they were originally laboring to produce) it is my hope that the concept will inspire ethnography focused on the production of contemporary social transformations. The potential sites of such ethnographic research abound.

Of course communities where members produce themselves as the ruling elite, and social settings where the reigns of political rule are held relatively tight, will present ample sub-communities with a high potential for exciting research into practices of adaptive-perpetuation. While I developed my understanding through participation in propaganda production in a single-Party State I can imagine much more accessible communities of practice that are ripe for such explorations. One of the prime areas may be in communities of practice with longstanding and fairly deeply entrenched forms of production that are facing the need to adapt their products to rapid transformations in larger social practices related to technology. Contemporary examples of this would include: communities involved in production of newspapers; communities involved in the publishing and or distribution of print-on-paper books; communities involved in music production/distribution. Similarly one would likely find ample opportunities to extend theories of adaptive-perpetuation by conducting ethnographic fieldwork within communities struggling to produce themselves as viable in the face of a diminishing consumer base for their products – an example of this might be the communities that produce a metropolitan opera.

It must be remembered that adaptations for the perpetuation of a community of practice may be produced across multiple generations. Reiterating a point I made just a few paragraphs above, practices of adaptive-perpetuation will likely require long-term engagements on the part of researchers. I realize, however, that many researchers must operate under quite limiting time constraints, and therefore might only have time to explore small aspects of larger social changes. I hope my contribution here will prove informative and helpful to both a) those who do not have the time to immerse themselves in such long term engagements but need a means of understanding aspects of what they observe in a particular context, and b) those who will embark upon their own long-term ethnographic studies of the production of change in communities of practice.

## Bibliography:

- Adams, N. S. 1970. Patrons, Clients, and Revolutionaries: The Lao Search for Independence 1945-1954. In *Laos: War and Revolution*, edited by N. S. Adams and A. W. McCoy. New York: Harper & Row, 100-120.
- Adams, N. S., and A. W. McCoy, eds. 1970. *Laos: War and Revolution*. 1st ed. New York: Harper & Row.
- Anderson, B. R. O. G. 1972. The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture. In *Culture and Politics in Indonesia*, edited by C. Holt. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1-69.
- . 1991. *Imagined communities : reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Rev. and extended ed. New York: Verso.
- Asoka, N. A. Nikam, and R. P. McKeon. 1978. *The Edicts of Asoka*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bourdet, Y. 1994. Fiscal Policy under Transition: The Case of Laos. *Europe-Asia Studies* 46 (6):1039-1056.
- . 1996. Laos in 1995: Reform Policy, Out of Breath? *Asian Survey* 36 (1):89-94.
- . 2000. *The economics of transition in Laos : from socialism to ASEAN integration*. Cheltenham, UK ; Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar.
- Bourdieu, P. 1977. Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction. In *Power and ideology in education*, edited by J. Karabel and A. H. Halsey. New York: Oxford University Press, 487-511.
- Branfman, F. 1970. Presidential War in Laos, 1964-1970. In *Laos: War and revolution*, edited by N. S. Adams and A. W. McCoy. New York: Harper & Row, 213- 280.
- . 1972. *Voices from the Plain of Jars; life under an air war*. [1st ] ed. New York,: Harper & Row.
- Brown, M., and J. J. Zasloff. 1977. Laos 1976: Faltering First Steps towards Socialism. *Asian Survey* 17 (2):107-115.
- . 1986. *Apprentice revolutionaries : the Communist movement in Laos, 1930-1985*. Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press.
- Burawoy, M. 2009. *The extended case method: four countries, four decades, four great transformations, and one theoretical tradition*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Carroll, C. 2009. 'My mother's best friend's sister-in-law is coming with us!': Domestic and international travels with a group of Lao tourists. In *Asia on Tour: Exploring the rise of Asian tourism*, edited by T. Winter, P. Teo and T. C. Chang. New York: Routledge, 277-290.
- Cheesman, P. 2004. *Lao-Tai Textiles: The Textiles of Xam Nuea and Muang Phuan*. Chiang Mai: Studio Naenna Co. Ltd.
- Christie, C. J. 2001. *Ideology and revolution in Southeast Asia, 1900-1980: political ideas of the anti-colonial era*. Richmond,: Curzon.
- Constitution of the Lao PDR. 2005. *Vientiane Times*, August 17, 13.
- Decoux. 1949. *A la barre de l'Indochine; histoire de mon gouvernement général, 1940-1945*. Paris: Plon.

- Department of Public Administration and Civil Service. 1996. *Organization of the Government of the Lao P.D.R.* Vientiane: Department of Public Administration and Civil Service, Office of the Prime Minister,.
- Dommen, A. J. 2001. *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Duangsavanh, T. 2002. The Impact of Economic Transition on the Media in Laos. In *Media Fortunes, Changing Times: ASEAN States in Transition*, edited by H.-K. Heng. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 107-117.
- Enfield, N. J. 1999. Lao as a National Language. In *Laos: Culture and Society*, edited by G. Evans. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 258-290.
- Evans, G. 1995. *Lao peasants under socialism and post-socialism.* Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books.
- . 1998. *The politics of ritual remembrance: Laos since 1975.* Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.
- . 2002. *A short history of Laos: the land in between.* Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.
- . 2009. *The last century of Lao royalty: a documentary history.* Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books.
- Fall, B. B. 1965. The Pathet Lao: A "Liberation" Party. In *The Communist revolution in Asia; tactics, goals, and achievements*, edited by R. A. Scalapino. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 173-197.
- Ferguson, J., and A. Gupta. 2002. Spatializing States: towards an ethnography of neoliberal governmentality. *American Ethnologist* 29 (4):981-1002.
- Feuer, C. 2005. Perceptions of Corruption in Foreign Aid Projects. *Juth Pakai* (4):38-49.
- Goffman, E. 1959. *The presentation of self in everyday life.* New York: Doubleday.
- Government calls for correct understanding of Valentine's Day. 2009. *Vientiane Times*, February 13, 1.
- Gunn, G. C. 1988. *Political struggles in Laos (1930-1954): Vietnamese communist power and the Lao struggle for national independence.* 1st ed. Bangkok, Thailand: Editions Duang Kamol.
- . 1998. *Theravadins, colonialists, and commissars in Laos.* Bangkok, Thailand: White Lotus Press.
- . 2003. *Rebellion in Laos: Peasants and Politics in a Colonial Backwater.* Bangkok: White Lotus Press.
- Hobsbawm, E. J. 1992. *Nations and nationalism since 1780 : programme, myth, reality.* 2nd ed ed. Cambridge England ; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Inspectors want civil servants to declare their wealth. 2010. *Vientiane Times*, June 8.
- Ivarsson, S. 1999. Towards a new Laos: Lao Nhay and the campaign for a national "reawakening" in Laos 1941-45. In *Laos: Culture and Society*, edited by G. Evans. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 61-78.
- Ivarsson, S., and C. E. Goscha. 2007. Prince Phetsarath (1890-1959): Nationalism and Royalty in the Making of Modern Laos. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 38 (1):55-81.
- Juntanamalaga, P. 1988. Thai or Siam? Names: *Journal of the American Name Society* 36 (1 & 2):69-84.

- Karlström, A. 2009. *Preserving Impermanence: The Creation of Heritage in Vientiane, Laos*. Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet.
- Keyes, C. F. 1989. Buddhist Politics and Their Revolutionary Origins in Thailand. *International Political Science Review* 10 (2):121-142.
- Koret, P. 1999. Books of Search: convention and creativity in traditional Lao literature. In *Laos: Culture and Society*, edited by G. Evans. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 210-233.
- Lao National Statistics Center. 2010. *Area and average mid-year population by provinces 1976-2005*. Lao National Statistics Center, May 6, 2010 2010 [cited May 20, 2010 2010]. Available from <http://www.nsc.gov.la/Statistics/Selected%20Statistics/Population.htm>.
- Lao News Agency. 2010. Political System of the Lao PDR. Vientiane: Lao News Agency.
- Lave, J., and E. Wenger. 1991. *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- MacCannell, D. 1999. *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Marking the 50th anniversary of the LPRP. 2005. *Vientiane Times*, March 23, 1, 8, 9.
- Marx, K., F. Engels, and C. J. Arthur. 1970. *The German ideology*. New York: International Publishers.
- McCoy, A. W. 1970. French Colonialism in Laos, 1983-1945. In *Laos: War and Revolution*, edited by N. S. Adams and A. W. McCoy. New York: Harper & Row, 67-99.
- Ministry of Education Department of Non-formal Education. 2004. *Lao National Literacy Survey 2001: Final Report*. Bangkok: UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education.
- Murdoch, J. B. 1978. Translator's introduction. In *Iron man of Laos, Prince Phetsarath Ratanavongsa*, edited by D. K. Wyatt. Ithaca, New York: Southeast Asia Program Dept. of Asian Studies Cornell University, xi-xxi.
- Ngaosyvathn, M. 1995. *Lao Women: Yesterday and Today*. Vientiane: ພິມທີ່  
ໂຮງພິລິດວິສາຫະກິດແຫ່ງ ສ ປ ປ ລາວ.
- Ollman, B. 1976. *Alienation : Marx's conception of man in capitalist society*. 2d ed. Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Phengphachan, V. 2006a. Sinxay club to hit the catwalk in China. *Vientiane Times*, July 27, 4.
- . 2006b. Vietnam helps preserve Lao films. *Vientiane Times*, September 19, 1.
- Pholsena, V. 2004. The Changing Historiographies of Laos: A Focus on the Early Period. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 35 (2):235-259.
- . 2006. *Post-war Laos: the politics of culture, history and identity*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.
- Phongkhao, S. 2002. 33 teeth: A changing history. *Vientiane Times*, December 17, 16.
- . 2004. Historians meet to clarify the facts. *Vientiane Times*, December 9, 2.
- Phouthonesy, E. 2010. Laos reviews 25 years of economic reform. *Vientiane Times*, March 17, 1.
- Reynolds, C. J. 1976. Buddhist Cosmography in Thai History, with Special Reference to 19th-Century Culture Change. *Journal of Asian Studies* 35 (2):203-220.

- . 2002. *National identity and its defenders : Thailand today*. Rev. ed. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.
- Rosaldo, R. 1989. Imperialist Nostalgia. *Representations* (26):107-122.
- Roth, A., and Institute of Pacific Relations. American Council. 1941. *Japan strikes south: the story of French Indo-China passing under Japanese domination*. New York, San Francisco etc.: American council Institute of Pacific relations.
- Saignasith, C. 1997. Lao-Style New Economic Mechanism. In *Laos' Dilemmas and Options: The Challenge of Economics Transition in the 1990s*, edited by M. Than and J. L. H. Tan, 23-47.
- Sangsomboun, P. 2010. Teachers keener to stick with the job. *Vientiane Times*, May 19, 1.
- Smith, V. L., ed. 1989. *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism*. 2nd ed. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Sonesourinh, T. 2002. Buddhism, the key to a new cultural 'golden age': Lecture on religion and civilization helps us learn from the past. *Vientiane Times*, January 4, 16.
- Stuart-Fox, M. 1995. The French in Laos, 1887-1945. *Modern Asian Studies* 29 (1):111-139.
- . 1996. *Buddhist Kingdom, Marxist State: The Making of Modern Laos*. 1st ed. Bangkok: White Lotus.
- . 1997. *A History of Laos*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2001. *Historical Dictionary of Laos*. 2nd ed. Lanham: Scarecrow Press.
- . 2005a. The paradox of Laos. *Financial Review*, March 18.
- . 2005b. Politics and Reform in the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Perth: Asia Research Center: Murdoch University.
- . 2006. The Political Culture of Corruption in the Lao PDR. *Asian Studies Review* 30:59-75.
- . 2008. *Historical dictionary of Laos*. 3rd ed. Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press.
- Tambiah, S. J. 1970. *Buddhism and the spirit cults in north-east Thailand*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Terwiel, B. J. 1980. *Field Marshal Plaek Phibun Songkhram*. St. Lucia Australia: University of Queensland Press.
- . 2002. Thai nationalism and identity: popular themes of the 1930s. In *National identity and its defenders : Thailand today*, edited by C. J. Reynolds. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 108-125.
- Than, M., and J. L. H. Tan, eds. 1997. *Laos' Dilemmas and Options: The Challenge of Economic Transition in the 1990s*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Thant, M., and R. Vokes. 1997. Education in Laos: Progress and Challenges. In *Laos' Dilemmas and Options: The Challenge of Economic Transition in the 1990s*, edited by M. Than and J. L. H. Tan. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 154-195.
- U.S. may resume aid to Laos. 1962. *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 13.
- Senate. 1969. Subcommittee on U.S. Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad, Committee on Foreign Relations. Senate. *U.S. Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad. Part 2: Kingdom of Laos*. 91-1 (1969). October 20-22, 28.

- UNDP. 2010. UNDP Working for the Lao PDR. Vientiane: UNDP Public Information Unit.
- Vongphachan, S. 2006. ສາເຫດທີ່ ຄົນລາວ ບໍ່ມັກອ່ານ The reasons why Lao people dislike reading. ອັບເດດ *Update Magazine*, 34-36.
- Vongvichit, P. 1969. *Laos and the victorious struggle of the Lao people against U.S. neo-colonialism*. Hanoi (?): Neo Lao Haksat Publications.
- Vorakoun, P. 2004. History lessons show new generation the meaning of patriotism. *Vientiane Times*, January 19, 7.
- Willis, P. E. 1981. *Learning to labor: how working class kids get working class jobs*. Morningside ed. New York: Columbia University Press.
- . 2001. "Tekin' the Piss". In *History in Person: Enduring Struggles, Contentious Practice, Intimate Identities*, edited by D. Holland and J. Lave. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 171-216.
- Winichakul, T. 1994. *Siam mapped : a history of the geo-body of a nation*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- . 1996. Maps and the Formation of the Geo-Body of Siam. In *Asian forms of the nation*, edited by S. Tønnesson and H. Antlöv. Richmond: Curzon, 67-91.
- . 2003. Writing at the Intersects: Southeast Asian Historians and Postnational Histories in Southeast Asia. In *New terrains in Southeast Asian History*, edited by A. Abu Talib and L. E. Tan. Athens: Center for International Studies Ohio University Press : Singapore University Press National University of Singapore, 3-29.
- Wolcott, H. F. 1995. *The Art of Fieldwork*. Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press.
- Wong, D. A. 2001. *Sounding the Center: History and Aesthetics in Thai Buddhist Performance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wyatt, D. K. 1984. *Thailand: A Short History*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Xayxana, L. 2006. Young writer's club opens. *Vientiane Times*, 3.
- Yang, M. M.-h. 1994. *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets: The Art of Social Relationships in China*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- ພິຈິດ, ບ. ນ. າ. ພ. ຈ. ດ., ວ. ທ. ນ. ສຸນດາຣາ, and ວ. ງ. ດ. ພິມມະຈັກ. 2006. ລືມຕົວ. Lao People's Democratic Republic: Ministry of Information and Culture.
- ສິມມະນິ, ຜ. ວ. ນ. 2006. ໂສກມາດຕະກຳຖ້າປິວ. Lao People's Democratic Republic: Ministry of Information and Culture.