

The early years of the Lao Revolution (1945–49)

Between history, myth and experience¹

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Abstract: This paper reviews a crucial period in Lao history, the early years of the revolution between 1945 and 1949, with a special focus on the hinterland areas of south-eastern Laos. Along with the professional historians' reconstituted past, two other analytically different approaches to the narration of this period are discussed: the myth-making narration as found in a recently published Lao history book, and the narrative as remembered by a war veteran who was directly involved in the events.

Keywords: historiography; narrative; memory; Laos

In the aftermath of the Second World War, as the French army returned to Indo-China, the political situation in Laos was extremely confusing and very precarious. In 1945, the country proclaimed its independence twice within the space of a few months and experienced the abdication of its king under the pressure of an emancipated Lao elite. In addition, it lived through the threat of a Vietnamese-led communist takeover in 1945–46, then witnessed the narrow escape under French fire of its

¹ The inspiration for this article's analytical structure is obviously drawn from the three approaches of 'event, experience, myth', which Paul Cohen applies illuminatingly in his study of the Boxer uprising in China: Paul A. Cohen (1997), *History in Three Keys. The Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth*, Columbia University Press, New York. Cohen explains his framework as follows: 'Experiencers of the past are *incapable* of knowing the past that historians know, and mythologizers of the past, although sharing with historians the advantage of afterknowledge, are *uninterested* in knowing the past as its makers experienced it. In other words, although the lines separating these three ways of knowing the past are not always clear (historians do, as we are well aware, engage in mythologization, and the makers of the past are entirely capable, after the fact, of turning their own experiences into history), as ways of knowing they are analytically distinct'. Paul Cohen (2003), 'Three ways of knowing the past', *China Unbound: Evolving Perspectives on the Chinese Past*, RoutledgeCurzon, London, p 205 (emphasis in the original).

newly independent government to Thailand in 1946, followed by the eventual return in 1949 of most Lao nationalist leaders to a country that was now a French protectorate. It seemed, therefore, that by the late 1940s the Lao polity had reverted to its pre-war status as a component of French Indo-China. Appearances were deeply misleading, though, and in 1949 the French army was caught up in a costly, prolonged counter-revolutionary war that only delayed the end of its colonial presence in the region. (The Royal Lao government finally gained its full sovereignty in October 1953.) It was also during the five years between 1945 and 1949 that an embryonic Lao communist movement emerged along the Vietnamese border under the sponsorship of the Vietnamese communists (Viet Minh).

There is little doubt that the events that took place in 1945–49 had a crucial formative influence on the history of Laos. These years witnessed the crystallization of the two forces – royalist-nationalist on the one hand and communist on the other – which would determine the fate of the country in years to come. The same period saw the establishment of revolutionary bases in highly strategic areas, which were to have a decisive influence on the course of the First (1945–54) and especially the Second Indo-China Wars (1964–75), when they spearheaded the communist presence on the future ‘Ho Chi Minh Trail’. However, important aspects of this period have remained in the shadows, in particular in the hinterland areas.

The significance of the Central Highlands to the Vietnamese revolutionaries – as much as to the French and later on the Americans – has been highlighted.² These mountainous areas of Vietnam were seen as being of crucial strategic importance for the control of Indo-China. Of equal importance to the communist strategy – both Vietnamese and Lao – was the region of southern Laos, adjacent to the Central Highlands and a Viet-Minh stronghold during the First Indo-China War.³ The history of the hinterlands of Indo-China straddling the Lao–

² See, for instance, Bernard B. Fall (1966), *Vietnam Witness 1953–1966*, Pall Mall Press, London; Gerald C. Hickey (1982), *Sons of the Mountains: Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese Central Highlands to 1954*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT; Mark McLeod (1999), ‘Indigenous people and the Vietnamese revolution, 1930–1975’, *Journal of World History*, Vol 10, No 2, pp 353–389; Clive J. Christie (2000), ‘Loyalism and “Special War”: the Montagnards in Vietnam’, *A Modern History of Southeast Asia. Decolonization, Nationalism and Separatism*, I. B. Tauris Publishers, London, pp 82–106; and Oscar Salemink (2003), *The Ethnography of Vietnam’s Central Highlanders. A Historical Contextualisation, 1850–1990*, RoutledgeCurzon, London.

³ Christie, *supra* note 2, at p 94.

Vietnamese border during that conflict is arguably the least studied aspect of this turbulent period. Paul Langer and Joseph Zasloff, two of the most prominent scholars on wartime Laos, readily admitted this gap in their 1970 study of the relationships between the Vietnamese and Lao communist movements. They noted, rather pessimistically, that 'the other side to the story of the Lao revolution, which was centered in the east, probably will never be fully documented. Actually, however, it was more important for the development of the Lao Communist movement than were the activities of Souphanouvong [the Lao prince famously known for joining the Vietnamese revolutionary side after 1945]'.⁴

This article seeks partially to unravel the period between 1945 and 1949 in those areas in south-eastern Laos. Its narrative, however, unfolds differently, depending on the narrator.⁵ My aim is not only to present the different sides of 'this story', that is, to expose the different points of view that different people have of events, depending on their position in relation to those events. I am equally, if not more, interested in analysing different 'ways of knowing the past'.⁶ 'The story', as narrated by historians, is a careful reconstruction of a chain of events based on a close and critical examination of documents. While their accounts may emphasize the role of certain individuals or the importance of certain events to varying degrees, they all share a commonality: they explain the past in retrospect. Historians know the outcome of events and moreover can place them within a wider temporal and spatial context.

A section of this study will focus on the historically reconstructed past of the revolution in south-eastern Laos in the aftermath of the Second World War, encompassing the persons and events – and the structure-narrative that links them together – which historians have deemed worth saving from oblivion. There exists another version of this 'story', which is less concerned with the past itself than with the use of it. By reinterpreting the past with little consideration for (non-

⁴ Paul F. Langer and Joseph J. Zasloff (1970), *North Vietnam and the Pathet Lao. Partners in the Struggle for Laos*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, p 37.

⁵ Two other versions of the events in the aftermath of the Second World War will not be discussed in this paper: the nationalist (ie non-communist) and revolutionary Lao historiographies. The differing versions of the events of 1945 are insightfully analysed in Bruce M. Lockhart (2003), 'Narrating 1945 in Lao historiography', in Christopher E. Goscha and Soren Ivarsson, eds, *Contesting Visions of the Lao Past. Lao Historiography at the Crossroads*, NIAS Press, Copenhagen, pp 129–155.

⁶ I borrow the phrase from Paul A. Cohen, *supra* note 1.

partisan) historians' reconstruction work or the experienced past, this narrative seeks to achieve political and historical legitimacy. The article explores a process of mythologization in official Lao-language historical studies, in particular the present-day regime's efforts to portray former President Khamtay Siphandone as the liberator of southern Laos.

Yet another different, and commonly overlooked, version of 'the story' is the one that is experienced by its most immediate participants, that is, the experience of the reality as narrated by those who lived it, which does not always take the form of a coherently designed narrative. I have constructed the final part of the article around the memories of a former Vietnamese war veteran who was among the first Viet Minh fighters to penetrate the highlands of southern Laos in 1948. It is an analytically distinct way of knowing the past, based on the study of original experience of events, at once both fixed, and – unconsciously or consciously – transmuted in the narrator's mind over the years. I will return to this paradox in the last section.

The Lao revolution: from independence to protectorate

On 9 March 1945, the Japanese interned what remained of the French colonial administration in Indo-China and incited the rulers of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam to proclaim their countries' independence under Japanese patronage. Laos was thus proclaimed independent on 8 April by King Sisavangvong. A few months later, the first return of French troops after the capitulation of the Japanese forces on 27 August led to an open conflict between the King and the Viceroy, Prince Phetsarath. The King, replying to the latter's demand to reaffirm the unity of Laos, informed him instead of the abrogation of the country's declaration of independence and its return under the French protectorate. Sisavangvong viewed the compromise as Laos's best protection against foreign threats, in particular from the Chinese nationalist occupation army in the north and the Viet Minh activities among the Vietnamese (*Việt Kiều*) communities in the country's urban areas.⁷

On 15 September, Prince Phetsarath nonetheless went ahead to proclaim the independence of Laos again, along with the integration of all the country's provinces (and thus the fusion of the separate regional

⁷ Grant Evans (2002), *A Short History of Laos. The Land in Between*, Allen & Unwin, Crow's Nest, NSW, p 84.

authorities of Luang Prabang, Vientiane and Champassak). However, the position of the Prince and his supporters soon became untenable with the reoccupation of the country by French troops, and the King dismissed him from his posts as Prime Minister and Viceroy on 10 October. In spite of this, Phetsarath set up a provisional government in Vientiane two days later on 12 October at the head of a motley coalition, the Lao Issara (Free Laos), which eventually embraced all the existing Lao anticolonial nationalist movements. Both of his brothers, Princes Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong, joined the new group along with other members of the Vientiane upper class and aristocracy.

On 21 March 1946, at Thakhek in central Laos, the Lao Issara forces were decisively defeated by the French, and the leaders of the Vientiane regime fled to Thailand. On 23 April, Sisavangvong was crowned King of Laos once more, having earlier been deposed by the Issara government; the following day, French forces entered Vientiane. A constitution was promulgated on 11 May, and Laos became a constitutional monarchy within the French Union. The Issara refugees in Bangkok carried on their activities as the Lao government-in-exile, but some members began to support a compromise solution, especially after 1947 when the right-wing Thai leader Phibun Songkhram returned to power following a coup, and imposed severe constraints on anticolonial activities on Thai soil. Fundamentally conservative and anti-revolutionary, those Lao Issara members regarded the French as their best option for safeguarding the stability and the independence of Laos against the communist threat.⁸ In consequence, a division of opinion gradually appeared within the movement's ranks over the issue of whether to cooperate with the French. Phetsarath and his brothers began to drift apart; he adopted a wait-and-see policy that led him to a 10-year exile. (He eventually returned home in 1957 to become Viceroy again, only to die a few months later.) Most Issara leaders, including Souvanna Phouma, returned to Vientiane when the government-in-exile officially declared itself dissolved on 25 October 1949.

By this point, Souphanouvong had already made clear his refusal to accept the new political direction in Vientiane by resigning from the movement in early 1949. Over the last two years, he had tried to persuade the Lao Issara to join the Viet Minh, whose fear of a Lao–French

⁸ Clive J. Christie (2001), *Ideology and Revolution in South-East Asia, 1900–1975*, RoutledgeCurzon, London, p 117; see also Lockhart, *supra* note 5, at p 154.

rapprochement had led them to throw their weight behind this particular Prince, widely publicizing his allegiance to the cause of anti-French struggle in Thailand and Vietnam.⁹ On 8 October 1945, the Lao Issara and the Viet Minh had even signed a military agreement aimed at building up a 'Lao liberation army' while also effectively granting the Vietnamese extensive rights to participate in Lao military and defence organizations. Phetsarath and other non-communist nationalist leaders very reluctantly accepted this military collaboration, given the absence of a strong Lao resistance army and because of the presence in their country of hundreds of *Việt Kiều* under Viet Minh command. Souphanouvong, by contrast, willingly declared that 'the independence of Laos [was] inseparable from that of the Vietnamese'.¹⁰ In September, he had travelled to Hanoi, where he had met Hồ Chí Minh and other Vietnamese leaders and, upon Hồ's suggestion, agreed to form a Lao–Vietnamese military force. This unwilling coalition between communist and non-communist nationalists was short-lived, though. Meanwhile, far from the cities with their power struggles and the atmosphere of confusion that marred Lao politics between 1945 and 1949, the evolution of the Lao communist movement marched on in the eastern regions along the Vietnamese border.

The early years of the Lao revolution in south-eastern Laos: historical reconstitution and myth-making narration

The Vietnamese policy of expanding revolutionary operations to Laos and Cambodia began as early as 1948. By late 1947, it became evident that the war between the French army and the Viet Minh was going to be a prolonged conflict. Furthermore, north-eastern Thailand was no longer a viable option as a base for their activities with Phibun's increasingly anti-communist policies, hence the new strategy of reopening an Indo-Chinese front – this time, however, in eastern Laos.¹¹ The Vietnam-

⁹ Jean Deuve (1999), *Le Laos 1945–1949. Contribution à l'histoire du mouvement Lao Issara*, Université Paul-Valéry, Montpellier, pp 246–247.

¹⁰ Christopher E. Goscha (1999), *Thailand and the Southeast Asian Networks of the Vietnamese Revolution, 1885–1954*, Curzon Press, Richmond, pp 148, 151 (quotation); see also MacAlister Brown and Joseph J. Zasloff (1986), *Apprentice Revolutionaries: The Communist Movement in Laos, 1930–1985*, Hoover Institution Press, Stanford, CA, pp 28–33.

¹¹ Goscha, *supra* note 10, at p 340. A coup d'état in November 1947 in Bangkok ousted the government of Pridi Phanomyong and his Seri Thai allies from power. The rise to power of Phibun Songkram, the new strongman of Thailand, heralded the beginning of the end for communist support networks outside Indo-China in South East

ese consequently began to organize clandestine resistance activities in the following year inside Cambodia and Laos, then under French control.¹² A study entitled 'History of the Revolution in Sekong Province, 1945–1975' gives further interesting details of the early Vietnamese incursions into south-eastern Laos in 1948. According to this document, in April 1948 Phạm Văn Đồng, the Indo-Chinese Communist Party (ICP) and Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) representative to *Nam Trung Bộ* (south-central Vietnam), formed an armed unit on the Lao–Vietnamese border. This unit, led by Hoàng Tang, was composed of Vietnamese volunteers and propaganda cadres. The group was based in Tà Ngo (Quảng Nam province), from where it was dispatched a month later to south-eastern Laos with the mission to build revolutionary bases from Tchavane, the district town of Dakchung, to Ban Phon in Laman (the westernmost district of present-day Saravane province).¹³

Another of the unit's tasks was to support the Lao Issara group led by Som Manovieng (a *Việt Kiều* from Pakse in Champassak), which had recently returned from Thailand and crossed through Laos to Interwar Zone V (*Liên Khu*), where it arrived in July 1948. Som was carrying a letter from Souphanouvong to Phạm Văn Đồng in which the Prince requested further Vietnamese assistance for the Issara in southern Laos. The main outcome was the creation by Interwar Zone V of a 'Special Zone' (*Khu Đặc Biệt*), with its headquarters in Quảng Nam. The Lao–Vietnamese armed forces in the 'Special Zone' appear to have

Asia, although it took two more major events before the Vietnamese reorientated their war operations eastwards, namely the rapidly increasing American involvement in Thailand and the Chinese communist victory of 1949. For more details on the Vietnamese communists' military strategy and operations at the regional level in Laos and Cambodia during that period, see the very informative Christopher E. Goscha (2003), 'La guerre pour l'Indochine? Le Laos et le Cambodge dans le conflit franco-vietnamien (1948–1954)', *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, No 211, pp 29–58.

¹² Motoo Furuta (1992), 'The Indochina Communist Party's division into three parties: Vietnamese Communist policy toward Cambodia and Laos, 1948–1951', in Takashi Shiraishi and Motoo Furuta, eds, *Indochina in the 1940s and 1950s*, Cornell Southeast Asia Program, Ithaca, NY, p 147.

¹³ 'Pavat khong kan pativat khong khwaeng Sekong, 1945–1975' [History of the revolution in Sekong province, 1945–1975] (1991), unpublished manuscript, p 21. Many thanks to Khambay Nyundalat for sharing his unpublished manuscript with me. The document was initially written by a Vietnamese scholar and completed in 1991. Khambay translated the entire manuscript from Vietnamese into Lao and rewrote parts of it (I do not know which ones, however) in 2000–02. Sekong used to be part of the Eastern province (*Khwaeng Tavaen-ok*) until it was detached in 1984 to form a province of its own.

been rather slim at that time, amounting to only three armed units: an Issara group under the command of Khamsen and Thavone, another comprised of *Việt Kiều* soldiers and the third led by Hoàng Tang, in addition to 19 communist cadres. Towards the end of 1948, these forces were increased with the creation of two Lao–Vietnamese armed units.¹⁴

Between late 1948 and early 1949, the organization of the revolutionary bases in southern Indo-China was stepped up. In February 1949, a Lao Issara delegation travelled to Vietnam formally to solicit more aid, including the creation of a unified resistance zone in southern Laos. Interwar Zone V authorities and the Lao leaders subsequently agreed on several other measures. First, in March 1949 a ‘Lower Lao Zone’ (*Khu Hạ Lào*) was created to replace the ‘Special Zone’, with Khamtay Siphandon as its president, Sithon Kommadan its military commander and Som Manovieng as the head of the administrative committee. Second, a resistance committee was formed in central Vietnam – the ‘Lower Lao Cadres Committee’ (*Ban Cán Sự Hạ Lào*), headed by Nguyễn Chính Cầu – to operate in close collaboration with the resistance zone in southern Laos. Finally a fully fledged joint Lao–Vietnamese armed force was established, with Sithon as its commander and Đoàn Huyên as his deputy.¹⁵

What is clearly evident in these events is the close Vietnamese supervision of their Lao allies’ activities, which was inseparable from their determination to strengthen their position on the western front. Several factors incited the Vietnamese to intensify their efforts in building up military forces and revolutionary bases in Laos (and Cambodia). First, in developing close military and political collaboration with the local communist movement in southern Laos, the Viet Minh were creating a buffer zone intended to protect their western flank from French attacks and to provide their troops for freely intervening in eastern Laos. The safety of, and access to, these retreat zones outside Vietnam remained a constant imperative throughout the war, a key to the Viet Minh’s military survival and final victory. Second, as in Cambodia, it was viewed as essential for the ICP to expand its membership in Laos and train local cadres so that they could lead the struggle side by side with the Vietnamese and carry out a genuine Indo-Chinese revolution.¹⁶ Finally,

¹⁴ *Ibid*, pp 22–23. See also Goscha, *supra* note 10, at p 343, and Goscha, *supra* note 11, at p 35. Interwar Zone Five coordinated activities in the Central Highlands (*Tây Nguyên*) and the lowland central region from Đà Nẵng to Nha Trang; Ang Cheng Guan (2002), *The Vietnam War from the Other Side. The Vietnamese Communists’ Perspective*, RoutledgeCurzon, London, p 165.

¹⁵ Goscha, *supra* note 11, at p 36; ‘Pavat khong kan pativat’, *supra* note 13, at pp 24–25.

the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in October 1949, followed shortly afterwards by the new Beijing regime's formal diplomatic recognition of the DRV in January 1950, removed Vietnamese security concerns on their northern frontier. As a result, they were able to concentrate their efforts seriously on building revolutionary bases, structures and cadres on their western front.

The past mythologized

The following section discusses another analytical approach to the narration of the Lao Revolution: the use of the past to accommodate the needs of the present, specifically the political and historical legitimation of Khamtay Siphandone, who recently retired as President of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR), and at a broader level, of the Lao leadership in the early years of the anticolonial struggle in the hinterlands of Indo-China. Official histories are known to change from time to time, and state-sponsored Lao historiography is no exception. Christopher Goscha has shown that Lao studies on the revolution written in the 1990s placed great emphasis on Vietnamese aid and the bilateral 'special relationship'. In addition, he argues that the 'making of a common [revolutionary] past' has also been the task of Vietnamese historians, who have sought to legitimate their Party's influence over the Lao revolution by emphasizing the idea of Indo-Chinese communist solidarity and 'proletariat internationalism'. This was particularly the case after Hanoi's overthrow of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979, which tore these concepts down in a dramatic fashion, at least as far as the relationship between the Vietnamese and Cambodian communist movements was concerned. However, Goscha also predicted (correctly) that the two countries' historiographies would not continue to advocate the same version of their countries' recent past indefinitely, contending that 'Vietnamese should not be shocked or hurt or bitter when Laos decides to take its own, more independent path towards writing the past'.¹⁷

¹⁶ However, 'Lao-cizing' or 'de-Vietnamizing' the core of Lao radicalism proved to be an uphill task; according to a report submitted to the Second Congress of the ICP in early 1951, of the 2,091 Party members in Laos, only 81 were Lao, the rest ethnic Vietnamese (Goscha, *supra* note 10, at p 344). See also Furuta, *supra* note 12, at pp 151–153.

¹⁷ Christopher E. Goscha (2003), 'Revolutionizing the Indochinese past: Communist Vietnam's "special" historiography on Laos', in Goscha and Ivarsson, eds, *Contesting Visions of the Lao Past. Lao Historiography at the Crossroads*, NIAS Press, Copenhagen, pp 289, 292 (quotation).

In this regard, the recent publication of *Pavat Khet Tai Lao (Narrative of the Southern Zone of Laos)* on the occasion of former President Khamtay's 80th birthday in 2004 is worth noting, for two reasons. First, the book contains a section on the activities of early anticolonial groups in southern Laos in the period from 1947–49, and second, it clearly diverges from the official historiography concerning the Lao–Vietnamese wartime relationship. While paying the conventional tributes and paeans to communist solidarity and brotherhood, it enhances the stature of the Lao revolutionary leaders, but also – and this is perhaps less orthodox – at times it describes their strategy and policies as being in disagreement with those of their Vietnamese counterparts. In other words, the Lao leadership, particularly Khamtay, is portrayed as having taken charge of the revolutionary struggle in southern Laos with greater autonomy *vis-à-vis* the ICP than one might expect.¹⁸ *Pavat Khet Tai Lao* thus differs to some extent from other officially-sanctioned narratives, such as the account published in 1993 of the three 'Iron Men of Thakhek' (Souphanouvong, Singkapo Sikhotchunnamali and a Vietnamese officer). This book not only stresses the prominent role of these two Lao revolutionaries in the anti-French struggle while ignoring the existence of non-Communist Issara leaders, it also greatly emphasizes the participation of the *Việt Kiều* leaders and communities in revolutionary activities in the southern towns of Savannakhet and Thakhek in 1945–46.¹⁹

The sudden change of political leadership in Thailand in 1947 forced the Lao Issara forces to go underground, and its members took odd jobs in order to earn a living and to escape from Phibun's anti-communist crackdown. According to the *Pavat Khet Tai Lao*, in the face of the deteriorating situation in north-eastern Thailand, Souphanouvong met Nguyễn Đức Quý, the DRV representative in Bangkok, to discuss the dispatch of an Issara vanguard armed unit to Interwar Zone V. Their mission was to meet the Vietnamese authorities there and request their assistance to build up resistance bases along the border in south-eastern Laos. As it turns out, this vanguard unit was the group led by Som Manovieng, who had delivered Souphanouvong's letter to Phạm Văn Đồng in July 1948. The book notes that the trip was prepared and decided

¹⁸ *Pavat Khet Tai Lao [Narrative of Southern Laos]* (2004), State Printing Press, Vientiane.

¹⁹ Lockhart, *supra* note 5, at p 144. The book is Duangsai Luangphasi (1993), *Sam Bulut Lek haeng Meuang Thakhaek [The Three Iron Men of Thakhek]*, Lao Committee for Peace, Solidarity and Friendship with the Nations, Vientiane.

in coordination with the *Việt Kiều* 'Association' (*Samakhom*) in the north-eastern Thai town of Ubon. The armed unit under Som's command, assisted by a Vietnamese cadre, departed in May 1948. It was composed of members of a unit called 'Sainyachakkapat' together with 'overseas Vietnamese brothers' from north-eastern Thailand.²⁰

Upon their arrival in Interwar Zone V, the Lao Issara members received political training in accordance with the ICP's plan to 'indigenize' the Lao communist movement. It was not until October 1948 that the Issara soldiers returned to Laos, where they joined with Vietnamese troops from Interwar Zone V to engage in propaganda and recruitment activities in Dakpam, Daklu and Dakchung on the borderlands between Laos and Vietnam. They soon expanded their field of action to the provinces of Attapeu (Muang Sansay, Kao and May) and Salavane (Muang Thateng). In early 1949, according to this account, Souphanouvong, concerned by anti-communist repression in north-eastern Thailand, decided to send Khamtay to Interwar Zone V in order to solicit more aid from the Vietnamese. Khamtay was accompanied by the rest of the Sainyachakkapat unit and 'foreign Vietnamese' under the command of Sithon Kommadam, who was himself assisted by a Vietnamese cadre.²¹

The overall chain of events as related in the *Pavat Khet Tai Lao* generally corroborates accounts found elsewhere.²² Of particular interest in this most recent historiography, however, are the missing – or more exactly, the silenced – elements. The political demise of Pridi

²⁰ Som Manovieng was a leader of the first unified anti-French resistance groups in southern Laos. Initially (in 1945) it included 50 'young Lao and foreign patriotic Vietnamese brothers', and carried out its activities in the southern province of Champassak along the Thai border. It expanded to over 100 members after the inclusion of 30 men from the 'Samsen Thai' unit sent by Phoun Sipaseuth from Savannakhet, and the remnants of the 'Sainyasetthathirath' group (including 'Isan people') led by Thao Bounkhon, which was disbanded in late 1946 due to its exactions against the local population. In May 1946, during a ceremony that took place in Ban Don, Muang Phimoun [or Phibun?] in Ubon province, the armed unit was named 'Sainyachakkapat' by Souphanouvong, then Defence Minister of the Issala government, and placed under the command of Sithon Kommadam (*Pavat Khet Tai Lao*, *supra* note 18, at pp 18–19). All three of these units bore the names of great kings from the early centuries of Lao history.

²¹ The narrative of these events is found in *Pavat Khet Tai Lao*, *supra* note 18, at pp 20–21. Strangely, the book dates these episodes a year earlier – ie May 1947 instead of May 1948, early 1948 instead of early 1949 – which is illogical, since the coup in Thailand that convinced the Lao resistance leaders to request help from the Vietnamese occurred in November 1947.

²² Langer and Zasloff, *supra* note 4; Goscha, *supra* note 10; Goscha, *supra* note 11.

Phanomyong and his Seri Thai allies, who played an essential (albeit indirect) role in the development and consolidation of Vietnamese communist networks in north-eastern Thailand, and Phibun's subsequent rise to power may have threatened the Lao Issara organization there, although it was not until late August 1948 that Thai authorities began enacting anti-communist policies.²³ Other (more) plausible reasons for Souphanouvong to seek Vietnamese aid (twice in a very short period of time) were the fragmentation of the Issara exile group in Bangkok and his own pro-Vietnamese proclivities. The 2004 publication is mute on that subject, though; nor is there any mention of the non-communist nationalist leaders, especially Phetsarath and Souvanna Phouma.

MacAlister Brown and Joseph Zasloff noted in 1986 that '[a]n official history of the Communist party of Laos treats the Lao Issara movement with condescension', quoting a 1976 *Bulletin* from the KLP (*Khaosan Pathet Lao*, the official news service) which effectively condemned the members of the Lao Issara for having been 'born from the petty-bourgeoisie who knew nothing about the laws of social development and the obsolescence of the bourgeoisie'.²⁴ In the aftermath of the communist takeover in 1975, those words were hardly surprising, yet 30 years later the distribution of the 'good' and 'bad' roles within the Lao nationalist movement remains. 'The true patriots [within the Lao Issara government-in-exile] under the leadership of Prince Souphanouvong returned to the country to join the resistance', writes a recent military history book, 'while the capitalists and a certain number of royals and leaders whose interests were linked with the French returned to Vientiane to surrender'.²⁵ There is no condemnation of the Lao Issara movement *per se*, only of those among its members who were not truly 'patriotic' – ie the non-communist nationalists.

Vietnam's own strategic interest in developing a revolutionary platform in eastern Laos is likewise completely omitted in the narrative. Quite the contrary, it is suggested that armed forces and bases were developed there primarily upon the initiative of the Lao leaders, and

²³ Goscha, *supra* note 10, at p 289.

²⁴ MacAlister Brown and Joseph Zasloff (1986), *Apprentice Revolutionaries: The Communist Movement in Laos, 1930–1985*, Hoover Institution, Stanford, CA, p 35, quoting Vientiane KLP, *Foreign Broadcast Information Service* (in English), 24 March 1976, pp 1–5.

²⁵ Ai Souliyaeng *et al* (2004), *Salub Songkham Pasason phaitai Kannampha khong Phak Pasason Pativat Lao 1945–1975 [Summary of the People's War Under the Leadership of the LPRP 1945–1975]*, Lao People's Revolutionary Party, Vientiane, pp 104–105.

that it was in the name of Indo-Chinese communist solidarity that they requested Vietnamese assistance to pursue their goals. The text therefore carefully avoids any reference to the overwhelming Vietnamese sponsorship of the Lao movement during that period. While the latter crucially depended on Vietnamese support for political and military training, logistics and materials, the booklet is also keen to show that the Lao leaders somehow remained in charge. The decision to create the south-eastern 'Special Zone' in early 1949, for instance, is said to have originated with the Lao Issara:

'Comrade Khamtay Siphandone informed his Vietnamese counterparts of the Lao Issara's decision to create a resistance zone in southern Laos, with Comrade Sithon Kommadam as its military commander and Comrade Som Manovieng its administrative chief, both under the overall command of [Khamtay], representative of the Lao Issara government.'²⁶

This version of events clearly contradicts some of the Vietnamese sources. General Võ Nguyên Giáp's memoirs recall that in 1948 Som, on behalf of the Lao Issara, and Phạm Văn Đồng 'entirely agreed to coordinate their activities in southern Laos [*vùng Hạ Lào*, "lower Lao zone"]' and that Đồng 'continued negotiations' with Khamtay and Sithon on 'how the Vietnamese would help strengthen joint resistance activities in lower Laos'.²⁷ It is reasonable to believe that at the very least, the Lao Issara leaders would not have taken their decision unilaterally without prior consultation with the Vietnamese.

The most remarkable example of this *post-war* 'Laocization' of the revolution is arguably the portrayal of Khamtay as having a leading role in the anti-French struggle in southern Laos. The booklet's introduction clearly depicts him as the liberator of that region, claiming for instance that 'under [his] intelligent and wise leadership, the southern resistance committee was created in early 1948, and under his command,

²⁶ *Pavat Khet Tai Lao*, *supra* note 18, at p 23.

²⁷ Võ Nguyên Giáp (1999), '*Chiến đấu trong Vòng* [Struggling while surrounded]', in Goscha, C. E., *Thailand and the Southeast Asian Networks of the Vietnamese Revolution, 1885–1954*, note 130, pp 343–365; see also Goscha, *supra* note 11, at pp 35–36. 'The *Khu Hạ Lào* consisted of Champassak, Salawan [sic] and Attapeu provinces... The Vietnamese involved in its creation were Phạm Văn Đồng, Nguyễn Đình Bình (special delegate from the "Western Laotian Cadres Committee") and Nguyễn Thế Lâm (Acting Commander of Interwar-Zone V)' (Goscha, *supra* note 10, at p 343, note 132).

the multi-ethnic southern population mounted resistance against the French colonialists'.²⁸ By contrast, one of the better known Lao-language texts – *Pavatsat Lao [History of Laos]*, published in 2000 – is far less expansive on Khamtay's anticolonial actions, which are subsumed among the heroic war deeds of other leading revolutionaries.²⁹

In this regard, one of Khamtay's military strategic decisions, developed at length in *Pavat Khet Tai Lao*, merits closer consideration. As discussed above, the Vietnamese move into eastern Laos from the late 1940s was to a significant extent induced by French attacks on their western borders. The development of revolutionary bases in the border regions was therefore seen as imperative for Vietnamese military commanders. According to the text, however, this priority was not shared by the Lao leaders, particularly Khamtay. As a matter of fact, during his discussions with the Vietnamese concerning the creation of a resistance zone in southern Laos, he is said to have expressed his 'firm opinion that the establishment of a resistance zone in the mountain areas along the Lao–Vietnamese borders was not achievable'. Khamtay is said to have believed that the plain areas were more suitable for building up revolutionary forces so as to 'rapidly defeat the aggressor enemy', since they were more populated and people and materials would thus be 'readily available'. Also, the resistance could 'not possibly be isolated, neither surrounded nor destroyed'. The history book notes the disagreement on this issue between the two groups, as 'our Lao brothers wanted to carry out their actions in the plains while our Vietnamese brothers wished to fight in other battlefields *in their own country*'. Confronted with this difference of views, Khamtay negotiated with the Vietnamese to reach a solution, for his concern was 'to intensify the struggle in southern Laos to the same level as in the other zones [which the Communists had penetrated] in the country and other battles in Indochina'.³⁰

It is worth reproducing Khamtay's explanation of his strategic standpoint, as reported in *Pavat Khet Tai Lao*:

'To the east of the provinces of Saravane and Attapeu was a mountain region difficult to reach, and although it was located behind the Vietnamese Interwar Zone V, it was sparsely inhabited and the

²⁸ *Pavat Khet Tai Lao*, *supra* note 18, at p 4.

²⁹ Souneth Phothisane and Nousai Phoummachan (2000), *Pavatsat Lao (Deukdamban–Pachuban) [Lao History (Ancient Times to the Present)]*, Ministry of Information and Culture, Vientiane, pp 742–744.

³⁰ *Pavat Khet Tai Lao*, *supra* note 18, at pp 24–25 (suitability of plains) and 27 (disagreement and negotiation with Vietnamese; emphasis added).

population lived far from one another and in great need. The conditions were lacking to build up bases and develop forces that could support our resistance movement. More importantly, if we did not hurry or move on, the enemy would have gained in strength and cut us off in these mountain areas. Besides, our armed forces, both Lao and Vietnamese, were still weak and our field of action vast. If we moved, we would leave our rear base and subsequently run the risk of having our line of communication and supply cut off by the enemy.'

As a result of Khamtay's analysis, he and the Vietnamese reached a 'unanimous' agreement that endorsed the move of the troops to the plains behind the enemy line. 'In spite of their own problems in various battlefields', the Interwar Zone V authorities subsequently increased the number of Vietnamese volunteers and cadres by 20 'to mobilize and build the political base', as well as providing two more armed units (Units 200 and 44), 'both trained to fight behind enemy lines'. In the meantime, Interwar Zone V pulled back its troops for them to rest and be re-supplied with weapons and food before launching operations behind French lines.³¹

The years between 1948 and 1950 arguably formed a crucial period during which the ICP and the Lao movement created and developed their strategic bases within the regions along the Lao–Vietnamese border from north to south. It is not implausible that Khamtay wanted to expand their military operations to the plains and asked for more forces in southern Laos, but this strategic move could not have gone ahead without prior Vietnamese approval. This historiography may also be explained by the authors' intention to show that anticolonial struggle in Laos was not limited to border zones, but in fact encompassed the whole country and thus involved a much larger share of the population, including those living in the plains. On the other hand, the Vietnamese motives appear nowhere in the picture, even though they played a much more prominent part than the text is willing to concede. This understatement of the Vietnamese role may represent not only a desire to preserve the façade of an Indo-Chinese communist brotherhood and dismiss the accusations of invasion or (forced) Vietnamese occupation of eastern Laos, but also, and perhaps more importantly, to retain some semblance of control over the Lao revolutionary movement's own destiny.

³¹ Both quotations are from *Pavat Khet Tai Lao*, *supra* note 18, at p 28.

Another, and arguably lesser known, side of the story of the First Indo-China War that is by and large silenced in *Pavat Khet Tai Lao* and has only recently emerged in historical studies on the conflict, continued to develop during those years. In the mountains and forests of Laos, the Vietnamese and a few Lao relentlessly pursued their campaign of recruiting and building up revolutionary bases among the local populations, making contacts and progressively adjusting themselves to an unfamiliar environment. It was often a thankless task; nonetheless, in Jean Deuve's words, 'the fate of Laos was shaped in that manner, along the rivers, during those Lao–Vietminh discussions and meetings, in those villages, forests and mountains in the hinterlands'.³² What follows next concerns this side of the revolution as experienced by its most immediate participants.

The experienced past

In an illuminating article, Christopher Goscha unravels the complex Vietnamese motivations in exporting communism to Laos and Cambodia in the aftermath of the Second World War. As we have seen in the sections above, in 1948 the Vietnamese-led ICP decided to launch a new policy of building up bases and military activities in these countries. While strategic factors played a crucial part in this decision, they were not its sole determinants; the Vietnamese were also – and perhaps even more decisively – driven by ideological and cultural impetus. Goscha argues that,

'[j]ust as the Chinese felt it was their "internationalist duty" to assist the Korean and the Vietnamese against the French and the Americans, so too did the Vietnamese consider it their international obligation to bring communism to Laos and to Cambodia and to fight for their "liberation" from French colonialism as part of a wider worldwide communist struggle against imperialism.'

Vietnamese communists felt a sense of belonging to a wider internationalist movement and believed they ought to play a role in spreading the revolution, hence their anxiety and determination to demonstrate and gain acceptance for their internationalist credentials, most import-

³² 'Le destin du Laos se forge ainsi, le long du fleuve, dans ces conciliabules and ces réunions lao–vietminh, dans ces villages, ces forêts et ces montagnes de l'intérieur' (Deuve, *supra* note 9, at p 248).

antly among the Soviets and Chinese. In truth, they 'saw themselves on the cutting edge of a superior revolutionary civilization running from Moscow to eastern South East Asia by way of China'.³³

It is with heightened interest that one reads Goscha's comments on the memoirs of Vietnamese war veterans who, armed with such a profound faith, carried out this 'internationalist mission' inside their neighbouring countries. The accounts of their political activities in southern Laos and north-eastern Cambodia in the late 1940s and 1950s forcefully reveal 'the degree to which these communists believed in their missions in Laos, the righteousness of the cause, its legitimacy and their duty to spread the revolutionary word there'.³⁴ The harsh living conditions and sometimes hostile environment in an unknown land were matched by the depth of their commitment and determination, as revealed in their published recollections. What is particularly fascinating is the highland population's encounter with these communist 'missionaries' who possessed their own version of the *mission civilisatrice* targeting the mountain areas of Indo-China. As Goscha notes,

'The Vietnamese admit today that their aim was to bring modernity to these backward peoples, to change their habits and customs in favour of what they saw as superior ones. The discourse of modernity was an important tool in the Vietnamese bid to win over converts and gain the trust of the Laotians (and Cambodians)'.³⁵

The account that follows, collected on the 'Laos side', complements and refines this analysis.

Until we were told his country of origin, it was hard to guess that the tanned old man who spoke fluent Lao with an occasional trace of an accent was a Vietnamese-born Lao citizen. Originally from Hội An, Quảng Nam province, Bouanyeung first came to Laos as a 'volunteer'

³³ Christopher E. Goscha (2004), 'Vietnam and the world outside: the case of Vietnamese communist advisers in Laos (1948–62)', *South East Asia Research*, Vol 12, No 2, p 152; the longer quotation is from p 151.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p 153. Particularly important are the memoirs by Nguyễn Chính Cầu and Đoàn Huyền, two long-time and high-ranking political and military advisers in Laos. Cầu was the head of the Resistance Committee in *Trung Bộ* (central Vietnam), the sister organization to the Resistance Committee in southern Laos, while Huyền served as Sithon Kommadam's deputy commander ('Pavat khong kan pativat', *supra* note 13, at pp 24–25).

³⁵ Goscha, *supra* note 33, at pp 156–157.

(*asasamak*) in 1948 and never left. He married a Lao woman and now lives in Sekong town, a few hundred metres away from the provincial government office. In his mid-seventies when we met him, he still vividly recalled his years of 'revolutionary struggle' in Laos.³⁶ My colleagues and I were seated in his recently-built concrete two-storey house, which was almost bare except for a few chairs and a low table. His wife was also present, seated quietly on the floor in the background; she said only a few words during the interview, and only when directly addressed.

Like many young people of his age, including his own friends, Bouanyeung joined the Vietnamese youth movement (*khabuankan saonum Vietnam*) in 1945 during the euphoric moments of the August Revolution. Then 17, he enlisted into an army unit that was soon engaged to defend the urban areas against the return of the French a year later. He candidly admitted that he merely followed his friends and was not very aware of the events that were going on at that time; he only knew that these were exciting times of which he wanted to be part. After his first experience of fighting, he had decided he would continue the revolution and subsequently bid farewell to his mother during his last visit to his village. In July 1948, his province/rural-based army unit (*kongphan tamkuat khwaeng*) received an order from Phạm Văn Đồng, the DRV representative in southern *Trung Bộ*. The latter had just received a letter from 'President Souphanouvong and Khamtay', who 'went and gave it to him directly by hand in the Inter-war Zone V'. Bouanyeung heard from his friends that apparently 'the Lao were asking the Vietnamese for aid'.

His unit was ordered to set up a section of armed soldiers and a propaganda unit; the latter had nine members including himself, constituting a 'special armed propaganda unit' (*noei khosana pakop avut phiset*), with the clear mission 'to move [their] activities from Vietnam to the Lao-Vietnamese border'. They did not immediately cross into Laos, however. Their first and foremost priority was to 'neutralize' (*kam*) the influence of a very important Katu leader (holding the Lao titles of *chao lam* or *chao khwaeng* under the colonial system) on the Vietnamese side, who was apparently in control of the whole region bordering

³⁶ I was then part of a team involved in a research project funded by the Toyota Foundation, which aimed at collecting the life stories of former revolutionaries noted for their 'heroic' actions during the Indo-China Wars. Sekong was one of the three provinces, together with Savannakhet and Saravane, which the team visited in 2003 and 2004. Our visit to Mr Bouanyeung took place in December 2003; all quotations are from this interview.

the district of Dakchung (in present-day Sekong) and whom the Vietnamese had been trying desperately and unsuccessfully to 'control'. Bouanyeung and his comrades began by offering the chief and his followers salt, sugar, rice, 'all sorts of stuff and gifts... whatever he asked for'. The highland leader remained unimpressed, however, and in fact manifested signs of great suspicion, if not hostility, towards them. Fiercely anti-French, he believed that these Vietnamese soldiers were working for the former rulers and therefore did not trust their anticolonial propaganda.

The highland population to whom the French later gave the name 'Katu'³⁷ were traditionally feared by the lowland Vietnamese, who used to set up armed groups to protect themselves against the highlanders' attacks on their settlements. These raids did not stop when the French began to 'penetrate' the interior of Quảng Nam, prompting the creation in 1904 of a military post at An Điem (inland from Hội An) to protect Vietnamese villages along the Bung River. It took nearly 10 years for the French authorities to 'pacify' the area, which finally quietened down in 1913 and remained so for a period of about 20 years.³⁸ A series of 'Katu' attacks erupted again in 1936, however, coinciding with the expansion of the French economic and physical presence in the Central Highlands through the construction of roads aimed at accelerating the occupation and control of the 'hinterlands'.³⁹ Another military post had been established the previous year at Bến Giang, as Route 14 was planned to reach the coastal towns of Hội An and Đà Nẵng (Tourane) by passing through 'Katu country'. In an effort to stabilize the region and to prevent the unrest from spreading, the post at An Điem was replaced by another one at Bến Hiểm (or Pi-Karum) in 1937, located further north-west in the interior on strategic high ground near the confluence of the Con and Se Kalum Rivers, at the crossroads of important

³⁷ Originally those people referred to today as 'Katu' were known among their highland neighbours as the 'people who live in the mountains'; J. Le Pichon (1938), 'Les chasseurs de sang', *Bulletin des Amis du Vieux Hué*, No 4, p 363.

³⁸ *Ibid*, p 360.

³⁹ This policy was defined as the 'oilspot-method' (*tâche d'huile*), which 'combined military repression of the rebellion with the political and social organization of the region... First a fort would be constructed in a strategic site in the fractious region, from which the surrounding population(s) would be militarily pacified. Then the infrastructure would be developed – roads, military posts and supervised markets constructed. When this area would be entirely controlled, a neighboring area would be pacified. Thus, this "structural pacification" would spread like an oil spot. The political leadership in the area would be more or less respected, if the local leaders would formally submit to French authority' (Saleminck, *supra* note 2, at p 63).

trade routes. At the same time, Poste 6, situated on a plateau commanding a view of the Giang, Cái and Bung River valleys, replaced the fort at Bến Giang.⁴⁰

The peace finally established in the area was fragile and hollow. J. Le Pichon, a commander with the local militia (*Garde Indigène de l'Annam*), who authored an influential study on the Katu published in 1938, himself expressed doubts over the long-term ability of the French to rule (for him, 'to protect') the 'Katu race' in the face of the immense task that the colonial rulers hoped to accomplish, namely to bring progress and 'civilization' to the mountain regions of Indo-China and their inhabitants.⁴¹ The campaigns of repression against the 'Katu' in the early twentieth century and again in 1936–38, in addition to the *corvée* and heavy colonial taxes, must have left bitter memories among the highlanders. It was therefore hardly surprising in this context that the Katu leader manifested hostile reactions against Bouanyeung and his comrades, who were probably perceived as yet another form of invasion.

After weeks of trying to persuade the village chief of their good intentions, the Vietnamese began to feel increasingly frustrated. They were at a loss as to what to do, and they could not afford a more forceful approach for fear of angering the chief and thus risking an attack on their unit. They had set up camp near the village and continued to exchange food and other items with its inhabitants, but despite these continuous interactions, they did not make any noticeable progress until they decided to change their strategy. The young son of the Katu leader was growing increasingly close to them and frequently came to their camp in spite of his father's disapproval; he eventually ended up sharing their daily meals. The Vietnamese volunteers consequently decided to get closer to the village, hoping that their friendship with the chief's son would help smooth the process; as the leader of Bouanyeung's unit put it, 'if we can't control the father, we at least have the son on our side'.

Their calculations proved correct: the son was allowed to spend more time with the Vietnamese soldiers, who willingly looked after him, and

⁴⁰ Le Pichon, *supra* note 37, at p 361. Le Pichon notes (p 359, note 1) that part of this region was inhabited by an ethnic group, which he refers to as 'Dié'; this would seem to be the Mon–Khmer-speaking minority now known as 'Gié', officially classified together with another group as 'Gié-Triêng'; Đặng Nghiêm Vạn, Chu Thái Sơn and Lữ Hùng (1986), *Les ethnies minoritaires du Vietnam*, Éditions en Langues Étrangères, Hanoi, p 121.

⁴¹ Le Pichon, *supra* note 37, at pp 402–403.

their relationship with the villagers subsequently grew warmer, particularly as they learnt some of the Katu language. They eventually succeeded in getting physical access to the village and more importantly, to the interiors of the houses. From then on, they helped the villagers in every task, such as carrying water, building houses and feeding animals. Bouanyeung and his fellows provided the villagers with water when they returned from the *hai* (dry-rice fields), for instance. By integrating themselves into the village's daily life, they eventually won the Katu chief's confidence; his support proved to be extremely valuable for their propaganda work. His undisputed authority over approximately 20 villages greatly eased their task; he had only to issue an order to the chiefs from the neighbouring villages for them to gather together.

During these meetings with Bouanyeung and his comrades, the 'solidarity and mutual support between the *Viet Loum* and the *Viet Theung*⁴² against the French' were emphasized, and the final victory of the Vietnamese revolution, which would 'bring about equality among every people [i.e., ethnic group] in Vietnam', promoted. It is uncertain whether the Katu villagers and their chiefs had heard of the Congress of the Southern National Minorities held under Party auspices in Pleiku two years earlier (in April 1946) – or if they had, whether they would have felt connected with it. It is more probable that the Vietnamese cadres had been made aware of Hồ Chí Minh's speech that was read during this meeting, which stressed the brotherly relationship between the 'Kinh majority people and minorities', 'all Viet-Nam's children'.⁴³ Vietnamese communist ethnic policy was not merely a by-product of their war strategy; the policy of 'national' equality and unity was to a great extent influenced by Lenin's own prescriptions. For example, in 1934, the External Bureau of the ICP warned the Laos section (which at that time would have been almost certainly composed exclusively of *Việt Kiều*) to remember Lenin's strategy of encouraging full liberation for ethnic minorities and of fighting against two dangers, one of which

⁴² The ethnic groups of Laos are often informally divided into three broad categories: *Lao Lum* (lowland Lao and some other Tai-speaking groups), *Lao Theung* (Mon-Khmer-speakers living at higher altitudes) and *Lao Sung* (minorities inhabiting the highest altitudes, mainly Hmong and Yao). Vietnamese, on the other hand, generally make a two-way distinction between *Kinh* (lowland ethnic Vietnamese) and *Thượng* (highlanders). Bouanyeung's terminology seems to reflect a fusion of the two sets of classifications.

⁴³ Ho Chi Minh, edited by Bernard B. Fall (1967), *On Revolution. Selected Writings, 1920–66*, Pall Mall Press, London, p 164.

was 'regional, patriotic, or chauvinist ideology, since Communism recognizes only the class struggle, not the struggle of races'.⁴⁴

There is little doubt that the cadres had been taught those principles before travelling to the highlands. However, like the conversions to Catholicism attributed to French missionaries in the nineteenth century among the peoples of the Central Highlands, the 'conversions' to (socialist) modernity were also carried out through concrete actions resulting in practical benefits.⁴⁵ In the 'History of Sekong', it is stressed that one of the first priorities of the Revolution was 'for the population to have enough food', which explained the participation of Lao and Vietnamese cadres and soldiers in agricultural work such as the clearing of fields and the protection of harvests by installing traps and chasing away elephants. An episode narrated in this manuscript highlights the Vietnamese communists' early economic support to the upland population. As a consequence of the blockade imposed by the Royal Lao government on the distribution and trade of staples into the zones deemed to be under communist control, their inhabitants began to face a serious shortage of salt by the early 1950s. To alleviate the situation, the communists decided to organize groups of hundreds of people led by district cadres and protected by soldiers supplied with food and medicine, to travel to Interwar Zone V in Vietnam and bring back salt that would be distributed to 'every household in the Eastern Zone of Laos'. According to the study, this action greatly contributed to the popularity of the Vietnamese revolutionaries among the highland population.⁴⁶

Such an operation also shows the impressive logistical capacity and political authority that the Vietnamese revolutionaries managed to achieve only a few years after their first incursions into the hinterlands of Laos. The communists, in their way, pacified the upland areas not

⁴⁴ Brown and Zasloff, *supra* note 24, at p 15.

⁴⁵ Oscar Saleminck notes that 'the attraction of the Catholic religion did not lie in its theological qualities, but rather in the practical advantages offered to new converts in economic and political fields. Already the former Governor-General De Lanessan noted in his *Les missions et leur protectorat* [written in 1907] that conversions were more often than not economically motivated, and tended to disjoin individuals from their family and community, resulting in great social tensions' (Saleminck, *supra* note 2, at p 57).

⁴⁶ 'Pavat khong kan pativat', *supra* note 13, at pp 38–39. The marketing of salt was a state monopoly in French Indo-China; during the Japanese occupation, its annual production reached almost 250,000 tonnes (249,128 tonnes in 1945) in order to meet the increasing needs of Japan's war efforts. Le Manh Hung (2004), *The Impact of World War II on the Economy of Vietnam 1939–45*, Eastern University Press, Singapore, pp 29, 166. My thanks to Tobias Rettig for pointing out this reference to me.

through sheer military force but by shifting the political authority of the highland societies. For instance, they played the role of mediator in conflicts between villages, mostly involving land and water usage. They would call representatives of the respective villages to a neutral location – usually the district town in Muang Dakchung – and oversee the discussions for several days until an agreement was reached. The ‘History of Sekong’ praises the Party’s promotion of mutual support among the highland population and with the ethnic Lao and Vietnamese revolutionary personnel.⁴⁷

The Vietnamese veterans’ accounts detailed in Goscha’s article share much in common with Bouanyeung’s own recollection. One of these cadres explains, for instance, that they targeted the families of headmen, considering them as ‘good, having the confidence of the village’; their support would thus be ‘advantageous to the work of winning over the support of the people’. Like Bouanyeung and his companions, those Vietnamese cadres immersed themselves in the life of the upland village. As Goscha explains it, ‘cadres sent westwards and into the highlands were expected to live with the villagers if need be, to work in the fields with them and even to marry into their families’. Their commitment was so deep that he readily compares the Vietnamese volunteers to Catholic missionaries: ‘Their capacity to live for years in remote areas of Laos and Cambodia, working laboriously and often fruitlessly for the international faith, also parallels the diffusion of Catholicism’.⁴⁸

It is difficult to tell whether Bouanyeung was consciously motivated by an equally intense mission of spreading the ‘new revolutionary civilization’. He pioneered the communist venture into the Lao–Vietnamese border areas in the late 1940s, and while his narration undoubtedly reveals sentiments of great enthusiasm (the old man repeated several times the word *sanuk*, which can be translated as ‘enjoy’), it also shows enduring memories of hardship and uncertainty. Overall it took Bouanyeung and his comrades approximately nine months to achieve their mission, which began in August 1948 and was not completed until April 1949. As he recalled, ‘it was far from easy in the beginning for Vietnam to establish itself in that frontier region on the Vietnamese side. We had to work our way hard. But we had the energy, we were enthusiastic’. In 1957, the American anthropologist Gerald Hickey travelled to the ‘Katu country’. An overnight stay in a Katu village,

⁴⁷ ‘Pavat khong kan pativat’, *supra* note 13, at pp 45–47.

⁴⁸ Quotations from Goscha, *supra* note 33, at p 156.

called A-To, was enough to inform him that the Vietnamese communists had ‘already’ been spreading their anticolonial propaganda, and had even rallied some of the villagers to their cause.⁴⁹

The next stage after turning the Vietnamese side of the border into a Viet Minh-friendly zone was to ‘spread over’ to Laos, starting from Dakchung and Tariuy, now the easternmost district of Sekong. The cadres’ task was made easier by their newly acquired experience among highland villagers and, more importantly, their knowledge of the Katu language, since the local population on both sides of the border belonged to the same ethnic group. On the Lao side, they faced another type of obstacle, however: the French anti-Vietnamese propaganda that had been spread among the highland population (suggesting that the French were aware as early as 1947–48 of the Viet Minh incursions into the Lao borderlands). The ‘*Keo*’ (a derogatory term for ethnic Vietnamese) had been portrayed as ruthless killers and demonized – ‘they were told that the *Keo* had long teeth [and] the villagers believed that!’ The beginnings were therefore difficult and the population unreceptive. In many cases, only the elderly were present in the villages, as most of the young people had left. Bouanyeung and his comrades applied the same strategy of sharing the villagers’ life that they had used on the Vietnamese side. According to him, they gradually managed to project another image to the local population that was different from the one described by the French. The villagers subsequently began to change their minds and to believe that ‘these people were not as the French told them after all!’

After successfully ‘recruiting’ the local population in that area, Bouanyeung and his comrades continued their route downwards to the plains and the Sekong River. Their mission accomplished on both sides of the border, they were on their way back home to Vietnam. Their problems were not over, though; one of the men fell ill and died a week later. They could not find their way back to the border and wandered in the forests for several weeks, losing one more companion in unclear circumstances during a return journey that turned into an ordeal. They rapidly ran out of water and survived on forest fruits. Not wanting to

⁴⁹ A somewhat unsettled Hickey wrote that ‘talking through Mr. Phuong, the chief expressed dissatisfaction at having “Frenchmen” in the village, saying the “Viet Minh” would not like it. He noted there were Viet Minh in the forest, adding that his brother, who “had gone north” [presumably North Vietnam] was now with them’; Gerald C. Hickey (2002), *Window on a War: An Anthropologist in the Vietnam Conflict*, Texas Tech University Press, Lubbock, TX, pp 73, 75.

steal from the villagers, they left money behind every time they took some food. When they finally reached Tà Ngo in Vietnam, they had lost three of their comrades.

At times the encounters between upland villagers and the Vietnamese communists could be rough and tense. Some 'volunteers' were reported to have been aggressive, behaving violently towards the population and forcing them to comply with their orders. Some instances of excessive control and supervision over the harvests were also noted by the Party leadership, with some villagers even coerced into giving their paddy fields to Vietnamese cadres. The religious beliefs and practices of the local population were sometimes violated, while cases of theft were denounced and subsequently punished by the communist authorities.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, those instances of incorrect behaviour are presented in the manuscript as 'bad apples' – a few isolated cases that had been successfully rectified. In the early years of communist penetration into the highlands of Laos and Vietnam, it seems that the communist cadres were careful, or at least tried not to violate the villages' taboos. As Bouanyeung recalls, in the villages of the Taliang and Triuy 'brothers' where he lived, it was strictly forbidden to sweep the interiors of the houses, as it was believed that any cleaning would chase away the house's protecting spirits. 'It was very hard; whatever you did, it was wrong (*phit*)!' They nonetheless managed to teach some notions of hygiene to the villagers, especially to the young people who were the most receptive, but they would often clash with the elderly, who disliked this intrusion into their traditional lifestyle and would vehemently express their opposition.

Like the Catholic missionaries, these Vietnamese volunteers began by observing their new environment and gathering knowledge of the local culture based on direct contacts with the villagers – using the classical anthropological method of 'participant observation' – before attempting to interfere with those customs, religious beliefs and practices. They would adopt a gradual approach; for instance, in one case, they convinced the villagers to inflict a lighter punishment in the form of a smaller fine for those who violated a custom; instead of a buffalo, the offender would give only a piglet or any 'smaller animal with four legs'. The young people were the primary group targeted, as they were often more willing to listen to the cadres' suggestions. In another instance, the latter encouraged some young people to eat venison during the season

⁵⁰ 'Pavat khong kan pativat', *supra* note 13, at pp 47–48.

of field clearing, despite a strict taboo inscribed in their local culture. In the absence of any of the deadly nightmares that such a violation was believed to provoke, the young people decided to abandon this custom.

Eventually, as noted in the 'History of Sekong', 'the young people no longer cut their teeth or pierced their ears or wore silver or brass rings around their necks or wrists; the women/girls were now wearing [Lao?] skirts and shirts. And families were eating and drinking in good hygienic conditions'. The 'civilizing' campaigns became more systematic and even institutionalized. From 1954 onwards, each time a village 'decided' to abandon its 'absurd beliefs', a finely-tuned ceremony was set up in the presence of communist representatives at the district and provincial levels and under the supervision of a master of ceremonies whose task was to register the event officially. Most interestingly, a picture of Prince Souphanouvong was displayed during the ceremony, which seemed to endorse the transfer of political and spiritual allegiances from a local system of belief to a secular and national political authority.⁵¹

The experience in the mountain areas was no less radical for Bouanyeung who, as he put it, was 'from the city'. The process of immersion was indeed total: 'We had to do everything like the people. We had to become the people'. They tanned their skin 'from white to dark', pierced their ears and grew their hair longer, whenever necessary; otherwise, 'you were not able to be part of the people (*khao pasason*)'. It was the Party's instruction to 'live with the people, like the people'. The biggest problem for him, and many others, was the food. He still kept vivid mental pictures of it: 'the dried meat was swarming with maggots. I could not eat. But our superiors (?) were keeping an eye on us. We had to comply with the Party's instructions. We had to eat with the villagers. Several of my friends got discouraged (*sia kamlangchai*) as a consequence and were sent back'. The incorporation of alien food may be analysed as the ultimate test of integration, that is, the penetration of one's body by foreign elements, which helped the Vietnamese volunteers to grow closer to the local inhabitants when they were finally able to overcome their gastronomic repulsion. After that, Bouanyeung recalls, 'I got pretty much used to the life in the village'. He had passed the test by accepting the highland 'forest' food

⁵¹ The account of these developments is from 'Pavat khong kan pativat', *supra* note 13, at pp 41–44.

into his Kinh lowland body. The transformation was complete on both the outside (dark skin, long hair, etc) and the inside.

Bouanyeung, in his interview, stopped short of calling these people 'backward'; the only mildly derogative word he used to define them, after some hesitation, was 'rural', as opposed to himself as 'urban' (which is not quite true since his parents were farmers). Years of ideological correctness certainly guided his careful vocabulary, probably as well as the presence of ranking officials of ethnic minority origins (one was Katu, another one Makong) in the room during the interview. There was another, deeper reason, however: Bouanyeung fell in love with a Taliang woman in one of the upland villages where he stayed, and exceptionally, asked to stay on despite an order for him to return to Vietnam. In consequence, he went 'native' more than he ever probably expected to when he first crossed the border into Laos in 1949 at the age of 21, eventually becoming 'one of them'. The account of his life in Laos – over 20 years of it in highland villages (Triu and Taliang) in Dakchung – offers a fascinating picture of a man 'going native', struggling along the way and ultimately being transformed by his extraordinary experience.

Concluding remarks

The existing historiographical narrative of the period that follows the end of the Second World War in Laos is very clearly oriented westwards, being mainly focused on the urban areas of Laos and the Lao–Thai border region. Except for the studies by Langer and Zasloff, Deuve and Goscha and the state-sponsored Vietnamese and Lao historiographies, the events that occurred in eastern Laos have been little studied. The past experienced by Bouanyeung, shared with us during that evening by drawing on his reservoir of memories, is one way of knowing the past in these areas. The war veteran remembers the past as something that happened to him; the narrative of a reality experienced is analytically different from a historically reconstituted past. Bouanyeung was not back-reading the past; he lived again his intimate experience of the war through his story-telling.

Certainly, a human experience is already being processed and analysed in the person's mind as soon as it has occurred. An original experience rarely keeps its 'pristine' form. Yet Bouanyeung's narrative and the testimonies found in Goscha's article allow us to understand better what went on in these people's minds, opening a window on to

their feelings, thoughts and motivations, which often go unnoticed in historically reconstituted works. The historian Catherine Merridale, in her fascinating and at times quasi-ethnographic study of Soviet soldiers' experiences during the Second World War, points out that '[i]f the interviews convey a largely uncritical and patriotic, Soviet, view, it is because that is how most survivors see this war even today. That...too, is part of the story I must tell'.⁵² *Pavat Khet Tai Lao* is an extreme example of historiographers' common indifference towards experienced past. The booklet has one specific and openly declared agenda: the legitimization of Khamtay Siphandone's status as the liberator of southern Laos. The myth-in-construction has a degree of plausibility, though: as we have repeatedly seen throughout this paper, the history of the First Indo-China War in the border regions remains relatively obscure, and even more so to the general public. The main concern, however, is not whether the myth is believable; rather, those involved in this historiographical project should ask whether today's Lao people actually care about it.

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⁵² Catherine Merridale (2005), *Ivan's War: The Red Army 1939–1945*, Faber and Faber, London, p 342.