COLD WAR FUTURES:
IDEAL VISIONS OF VERNACULAR CAPITALISM AND SOCIALISM IN LAOS (1954–1975)

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"Cold War Futures" intervenes in the studies of the global Cold War by exploring its Asian frontier as a laboratory of Cold War modernity. The dissertation theorizes the Cold War in Asia as a conflict of futurities—capitalist and socialist modernizing ideals for a decolonizing nation—on the example of Laos. It argues that Asian socialism, exemplified by the Pathet Lao, sought to imagine an alternative potentiality to Western capitalist developmentalism in the Third World through cultural work.

The dissertation explores an Asian frontier as a cosmopolitan nexus of global ideological and cultural flows and militant Cold War intervention. It contrasts the modernizing program of the Royal Lao Government, supported by the US and the United Nations development project, and the Communist Pathet Lao, backed by international socialist aid. It traces the transnational history of Western and non-Western socialist cultural exchanges, theoretical debates in Asian Marxism, and the temporality of Asian socialist ideals. It illustrates that the Lao socialist movement deployed cultural work and media technology as a driving force for social transformation, which it saw as a prerequisite for building socialism in historical actuality. The Pathet Lao envisioned a radical, egalitarian, and multiethnic futurity of

socialist abundance, which was not meant to be literally attainable but rather indicative of desired social and economic changes. Its temporal ambiguity gave it political power in the condition of optimistic underdevelopment on an Asian frontier.

"Cold War Futures" explores the modes of representation and media as technologies of popularizing futural visions, from architectural charts of hydroelectric dams and the revival of Buddhist landscapes to socialist cinema, literature, physical culture, and radio broadcasting in vernacular languages. It builds on archival materials in Lao, French, and English, Soviet sources, and photographic and cinematic collections. Its integral part is a never-before-accessed archive of the Pathet Lao in the communist caves, its underground capital during the Vietnam War and American bombing of Laos. The pioneering nature of this archival excavation underlies new insights into the clandestine history of Asian socialism and its cosmopolitan character. It shows that Asian socialist movements relied on cultural work to harness decolonial Cold War desires for alternative futures.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

In the early hours of April 15, 1986, the United States bombed Libya. The raid targeted the residence of Muammar Gaddafi, leader of the Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, in the military barracks in Tripoli.[1] A few miles away was the second target, Mitiga Airport, vital for Libyan defense and security. Two hours' drive from Tripoli and Mitiga Airport, on the outskirts of Bani Walid, was another industrial object, but this one the US wanted to keep untouched. Here, the Soviets were building a Kalashnikov machinegun factory—a socialist friendship project and an infrastructural gift to comrade Gaddafi. Engineers supervising this construction came from the two Soviet cities: Tula—a birthplace of Russian armament production—and Izhevsk—the biggest post-World War II producer of machine guns and the workplace of Mikhail Kalashnikov.

Reagan's administration wanted to assassinate Gaddafi, yet did not want to provoke the Soviet Union with a high-profile international accident. The US embassy in Moscow took necessary precautions and informed the Soviets about the imminent bombing. To avoid potential casualties at the strategic site, Soviet engineers were ordered to evacuate to the desert. The engineers, some still single bachelors, others with wives and small children, boarded a few buses and drove off. After a while, buses stopped in the middle of the desert, far enough from the potential bombing. The spring night in the desert was full of life. The mating season for nocturnal snakes and scorpions was at its height. Excited Soviet engineers hunted scorpions and submerged them in water to later put the arachnids in glass hemispheres and cover them with sap, making

[1] *Britannica Academic*, s.v. "Libya bombings of 1986," accessed April 7, 2026, https://academic-eb-com.proxy.library.cornell.edu/levels/collegiate/article/Libya-bombings-of-1986/606295.

keepsakes of their adventures in Libya. The wives were less excited. Some were shaken, some sobbed quietly. Among the champions in catching scorpions was a 27-year-old engineer from Izhevsk, Igor Koshcheev, my father. My mother, Nadezhda Koshcheeva, and I stayed on the bus.

A few years later, the Cold War was over, my father passed away, the Soviet Union collapsed, and its failed socialist experiment came to be deemed as a shameful historical aberration imposed upon the Soviet Union itself and its neighbors. In the aftermath, I spent my teenage years studying economic theory and the global economy from freshly translated American textbooks and working in the after-hours to support my mother and younger sister. By the time I finished my graduate studies, I wanted none of the wild Russian post-socialism and left for abroad. The next five years found me living in Krakow, Vienna, and Prague. But it was utterly uncool to be a Russian in Europe. I moved to Singapore and spent another six years running international research projects in Asia for multinational corporations. It would have been a perfect expat life, with a well-paid job and full of travel, if not for my mother being diagnosed with cancer. She died in Singapore in 2015. After her passing, I was compelled to change my life and do something I had always been interested in—study art history. Searching for a subject for my master's thesis on Asian art, I arrived in one of the very few countries I had not yet been to in Asia—Laos. I landed late in the evening, and the next morning, I went to see the main tourist site in the city, the That Luang Stupa.

But another monument caught me off guard. To me, it was an impossible monument. It stands quietly on the That Luang grounds. Its shape also resembles a Lao stupa, a funerary mound, as does its square floor plan. Lotus petals, a ubiquitous motif

in Lao Buddhist decorative art, run at the monument base and its platform. The communist star crowns the monument. The flight of steps cuts through the platform, with another star and an eternal flame at its center. This is *The Monument of the Unknown Soldier*. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson states that these monuments are quintessential emblems of nationalism the world over.[2] Indeed, *The Monument of the Unknown Soldier* in Vientiane, the capital of Laos, commemorates the fallen heroes of the nation. Yet, as I stood perplexed in front of it, a different set of associations ran through my mind. It was the oxymoron of a communist stupa.



Figure i.1. The Monument of the Unknown Soldier, Vientiane. 2019. Image: Anna Koshcheeva.

[2] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 1983), 9.

The monument spoke to me of a shared iconography of global communism and the specter of the global Cold War on this Asian frontier. Yet as I, born and bred in the Soviet Union, knew too well, the communist star *could not* be placed on a religious object, let alone on the pinnacle of an architectural structure that represents a Buddhist universe. Any Marxist would decry it as anathema, I thought, and perhaps Buddhists should feel offended as well. But then I asked myself, what if I am misplacing *my* communist dogmas, my Soviet interpretation of an orthodox Western Marxism, onto Laos? What if Lao Marxism is different, and this impossible monument makes sense? What if the friendship projects of Soviet infrastructure did not carry Soviet Marxist theory and a modernizing model wholesale to places like Libya and Laos? And if they did not, and the superpowers' ideologies and quests for global dominance were subverted in local terrains, then what made the Cold War global?

With these questions and many others related to them, I arrived at Cornell University for my doctoral studies. I wanted to understand the Cold War beyond the superpowers, to decolonize it from the assumptions that the US and the USSR held the mandate on what capitalism and communism mean. I also wanted to make sense of that night in the Libyan desert. Why were we there? What belief made the Soviets and Americans spend so many resources and lives in Laos, Libya, and across the Global South? And most importantly, what beliefs motivated the leaders, artists, and people in the Third World to join the global Cold War? Put differently, what visions of ideal futures did they have to fight the Cold War at home, on a global frontier?

To the last generation of Cold War survivors

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In 2017, I decided to go back to school for a master's degree that reflected my life-long passion—art history. My return to academia was warmly supported by Jeffrey Say and Clare Veal, and Roger Nelson brilliantly advised on my thesis on contemporary art in Laos. Studying in Singapore, I enjoyed the company of scholars and curators so much that I decided to continue my research. It was a pleasure to converse and collaborate with Priya Jaradi, Pat Chirapravati, Kathleen Ditzig, Simon Soon, Phoebe Scott, Adele Tan, Seng Yu Jin, Adam Knee, June Yap, Iola Lenzi, Ivy Lam, David Teh, Lourdes Samson, and Albert Lim. Simon Creak and visiting professors at the National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University organized the impromptu reading group on Indochina, and I cherish our conversations with Erik Harms, the late Gerard Sasges, David Biggs, Miles Kenney-Lazar, and Jamie Gillen.

During my master's fieldwork in Laos, I met my fieldwork angel to whom I owe first and foremost thanks. Misouda Heuangsoukkhoun welcomed me to Vientiane, connected me with the community of artists, filmmakers, and cultural practitioners, helped with logistics, and thought to navigate the tricky terrain of Lao research bureaucracy. Together, we attended numerous exhibitions and film festivals, organized screenings and lectures, and she came to Cornell to show her films at *Sabaidee Cornell: the Festival of Films from Laos* that I organized in 2024.

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Gregory Green, Tamara Loos, and James Nagy. Chairat became my partner in crime in organizing events in Lao cultural studies in the following years. I returned to Cornell to commence my PhD degree under the supervision of brilliant Arnika Fuhrmann. Tamara Loos enthusiastically invited me to her writing class, where we debated the history of the Cold War in Southeast Asia. Cornell Southeast Asia Program was my intellectual home, and Thamora Fishel, Thak Chaloemtiarana, Thomas Pepinsky, Chiara Formichi, Marina Welker, Andrew Willford, Magnus Fiskesjo, Juno Parrenas, as well as graduate students Sirithorn Siriwan, Brian Sengdala, Tinakrit Sireerat, Erik Goh, Bruno Shirley, Astara Light, Emi Donald, and Kara Guse shared their knowledge and company with me. At the Asian Studies Department, I enjoyed learning and teaching together with Daniel Boucher, Anne Blackburn, Suyoung Son, Andrew Campana, Keith Taylor, Amy Wei, Tsuguta Yamashita, Xiaoyue Lou, Shiqi Lin, Yuanyuan Duan, Saumya Sethia, and Ruiying Zhang.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ADB	Asian Development Bank
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
Comintern	Communist International
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam, North Vietnam
ECAFE	Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East
EFEO	École française d'Extrême-Orient
GDR	German Democratic Republic
JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency
KPL	Khaosan Pathet Lao (Pathet Lao News Agency)
LPDR	Lao People's Democratic Republic
NLHX	Neo Lao Hak Xat (Lao Patriotic Front)
PLA	Pathet Lao Army
RLA	Royal Lao Army
RLG	Royal Lao Government
RPC	People's Republic of China
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization
TAA	Technical Assistance Administration (of the UN)
UK	United Kingdom (of Great Britain and Northern Ireland)
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization
US	United States (of America)
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USIS	United States Information Services
USOM	United States Operations Mission
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Soviet Union
IBRD	International Bank of Reconstruction and Development

INTRODUCTION

> The original task of a genuine revolution is never merely to 'change the world', but also—and above all—to 'change time.'
>
> —Giorgio Agamben

Bikini Atoll nuclear test site. Sputnik. The Moon landing. Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin in Yalta. Checkpoint Charlie. Red Square parades. These iconic photographs shape the canon of Cold War documentary imagery. Hollywood cinema, popular culture, and fiction add to this collage of Western visual associations with the Cold War an army of spies led by womanizing James Bond, cartoons of Uncle Sam arm-wrestling the Russian bear, and graphic phallic renditions of missiles of all sizes. Occasionally, a photo of a naked body of the Napalm Girl, a reminder of Vietnam War brutality, and a stylized portrait of Che Guevara, a Latin communist co-opted by American counterculture, appear on the margins of Cold War visuality, hinting that the war was "cold" only in the West, but "hot" elsewhere. Still, in the popular imagination, the Cold War emerges as a grim, Western masculine conflict between the two superpowers negotiating Armageddon.

Western academic study of the Cold War dovetails with this popular imagination. Conceived by government departments and the history of foreign affairs, the field has always had a propensity to view the Cold War from a Western vantage point: as a stand-off between the US and the USSR; an intertwined history of American military operations, domestic election campaigns, and clandestine Central Intelligence Agency

(CIA) interventions.[3] The subfields of Sovietology and Kremlinology engendered the revisionist wave when former communist archives briefly opened, providing insights on decision-making in Moscow.[4] As Cold War studies matured, the field experienced a global turn, with Odd Arne Westad championing transnational history with a focus on the Third World.[5] Scholars such as Jian Chen, Heonik Kwon, Hajimu Masuda, Gregg Brazinsky, and Greg Grandin explored the relations between the US and East Asia, particularly China, and Latin America, adding a nuance to the global Cold War history[6] Yet, Sourest Asia revived little attention to-date, with volumes edited by Christopher Goscha and Christian Osterman, Malcolm Murfett, and Albert Lau, and a monograph by Ang Cheng Guang providing an indispensable but cursory overview.[7] The cultural turn accompanied the transnational, and Cold War cultural studies generated an exciting body of literature, most notably on East Asia. Rana Mitter and Patrick Major, Zheng Yangwen, Hong Liu, and Michael Szonyi, Tuong Vu and Wasana Wongsurawat, Tony

[3] See Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-2006* (McGraw-Hill, 2008); Joshua Kurlantzick, *A Great Place to Have a War: America in Laos and the Birth of a Military CIA* (Simon & Schuster, 2017).

[4] For an authoritative study of the Soviet Union, see Vladislav Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (University of North Carolina Press, 2007); for the revisionist trend after opening the Soviet archives, see John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking the Cold War History* (Oxford University Press, 1997), and Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *Khrushchev's Cold War: The Inside Story of an American Adversary* (Norton, 2006).

[5] For global turn in Cold War studies, see Odd Arne Westad, *The Cold War: A World History* (Basic Books, 2017) and *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of our Times* (Cambridge University Press, 2005); Prasenjit Duara, "The Cold War as a Historical Period: An Interpretive Essay," *Journal of Global History* 6, no. 3 (November 1, 2011): 457–80.

[6] Jian Chen, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Heonik Kwon, *The Other Cold War* (Columbia University Press, 2010); Hajimu Masuda, *Cold War Crucible: The Korean Conflict and the Postwar World* (Harvard University Press, 2015); Gregg Brazinsky, *Winning the Third World: Sino-American Rivalry during the Cold War* (University of North Carolina Press, 2017); Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America and the Cold War* (University of Chicago Press, 2011).

[7] Christopher Goscha and Christian Osterman, eds., *Connecting Histories: Decolonization and the Cold War in Southeast Asia, 1945–1962* (Stanford University Press, 2009); Malcolm Murfett, ed., *Cold War Southeast Asia* (Marshall Cavendish, 2012); Albert Lau, ed., *Southeast Asia and the Cold War* (Routledge, 2012); Ang Cheng Guan, *Southeast Asia's Cold War: An Interpretive History* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2018);

Day and Maya Liem invited cultural historians to investigate cinema, literature, architecture, and other forms of cultural production against the Cold War dynamics in Asia.[8] Yet, the core belief that the Cold War was dominated by the superpowers withstood the scholarly field's evolution. Even historians who offered unconventional interpretations, like Eric Hobsbawm, who stated that the Cold War helped to stabilize the world, still agree with this postulate.[9] It went largely unchallenged that the Cold War was a battle of ideologies—capitalism and communism—with the US and the USSR being its presumed intellectual, cultural, and political centers and global crusaders in this bipolar world.

To me, this narrative is problematic for its neo-colonial character that overdetermines the role of the superpowers in global events. The decolonial intervention in this dissertation illustrates that the conceptions of capitalism and socialism—their modernizing models, social technologies, and cultural practices—were not determined by the metropoles of Moscow and Washington. These concepts were always temporally and locally specific, contingent on a myriad of local factors—religious, economic, historical, etc. In short, there is no singular "capitalism" or "communism." Both are families of relative strains or plural aggregates of vernacular variations. Thus, the interplay of vernacularity and cosmopolitanism preoccupies me in "Cold War Futures," as I explore the transnational history of global socialist cooperation, intellectual

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[8] For cultural Cold War in East Asia see, Rana Mitter and Patrick Major, *Across the blocs: Cold War cultural and social history* (Routledge, 2004); Zheng Yangwen, Hong Liu, and Michael Szonyi, eds., *The Cold War in Asia: The Battle for Hearts and Minds* (Brill, 2010); for Southeast Asia, see Tuong Vu and Wasana Wongsurawat, eds., *Dynamics of the Cold War in Asia: Ideology, Identity, and Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Tony Day and Maya Liem, eds., *Cultures at War: The Cold War and Cultural Expression in Southeast Asia* (Cornell University Press, 2010); for Latin America, see Partick Iber, *Neither Peace nor Freedom: The Cultural Cold War in Latin America* (Harvard University Press, 2015);

[9] Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991* (Vintage Books, 1996), 226.

exchanges among Asian communist movements, vernacular Lao socialism, and its cultural work. The comparative part of my study is dedicated to the Western theory of Cold War developmentalism, local Lao programs of capitalist modernization, and their modes of representation.

My attention to vernacularity in Laos, or what I call an Asian frontier, draws on the proposition that, much the same as with high European colonialism, frontiers were a key laboratory of Cold War modernity. Ann Stoler and Frederick Cooper demonstrate that colonial modernity was pioneered in the Third World rather than emanating from the metropoles. Investigating the tensions of empire and production of coloniality in Southeast Asia, Stoler uncovers how the intimate sphere, rather than top-down governmentality alone, defined the specificity of power operations and biopolitics between the colonizer and the colonized.[10] Similarly, Timothy Mitchell and Helen Tilley illustrate how Stoler's analysis extends to colonial spaces in Africa.[11] Stoler's scholarship contributes to postcolonial theory, rethinking the hierarchy between the colony and the metropole. Yet Cold War studies resisted such a reversal and precluded the field's invigoration by postcolonial thought. In the footsteps of Stoler, I approach the global Cold War as a neo-colonial formation and explore the Lao frontier as a locus of vernacular ideation of Cold War modernity.

Three key premises shape my analysis in "Cold War Futures." First, Asia was a key theater of the global Cold War, and Laos was its overlooked yet exemplary frontier. The former is evident from the sequence of conflicts that unfolded on the continent: the

[10] Frederick Cooper and Ann Stoler, eds., *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in the Bourgeois World* (University of California Press, 1997).
[11] Timothy Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt* (University of California Press, 1991); Helen Tilley, *Africa as a Living Laboratory* (University of Chicago Press, 2011).

Chinese Civil War (1927–1949), the Korean War (1950–1953), the First Indochina War (1945–1954), the Second Indochina War, or the Vietnam War (1955–1975), and the Third Indochina War (1978–1991). All of them involved at least one communist party, and as a rule, were initiated by the communists. These wars became proxies for multiple foreign powers, with the US participating in all of them until 1975. The Korean War and the Second Indochina War, especially, brought the Asian Cold War home to the American public, making them American wars rather than distant Asian conflicts. Other Asian hot spots critical for the US were the Arab-Israeli Wars and Afghanistan, while operations in Pakistan and Tibet were more covert. Activities of the communist parties did not result in open armed conflicts everywhere either. In Japan, they manifested in mass protests and occasional acts of local terrorism. Nonetheless, what I am suggesting here is that the communist movements existed and were a formidable player in *every* Asian country, from the Middle East to Japan and from Mongolia to Indonesia. And everywhere in Asia they faced Western-inflicted resistance.

In Southeast Asia, the Cold War began with colonial powers seeking to restore control after Imperial Japan's brief occupation of the region during WWII. By the end of the WWII interlude of colonial suspension, the tide of anti-colonial nationalists was irreversible, and in all countries but Thailand, communist movements were at its forefront. Thus, the Cold War conflict in Southeast Asia formed along the lines of colonial and, later, the pro-Western regimes' suppression of local communists and leftist sympathizers. The Malayan Emergency (1948–1960), the Hukbalahap rebellion in the Philippines (1946–1954), and the Indonesian massacre (1965–66), to name a few, resulted in the violent extermination of millions of lives. Even then, before 1975,

Indochina was arguably the hottest spot in the conflict. Here, I underscore Indochina as a reminder that it comprised not only Vietnams but Cambodia and Laos as its integral parts.

My second premise is that Asian Marxism consisted of a family of heterogeneous schools. Undeniably, socialist movements in the region shared similar socio-historical conditions, including impoverished agrarian economies, and anti-imperialist, anticolonial, and nationalist goals that stimulated intellectual exchanges among them and with other movements in the Global South. At the same time, they prioritized their local political objectives and developed indigenous theoretical approaches.[12] These diverse approaches underline the plurality of Asian Marxism and rejection of the universality of the Soviet modernizing model tested in Central Asia, or of Maoist theory as applicable to any underdeveloped nation. Conversely, local Asian Marxist thought was oriented towards flexible borrowing from the repository of Western and non-Western socialist experiences gathered along a historical arc, from early Leninism to the present moment. It was inherently experimental and innovative.

My third and final premise is that Asian socialist movements were future-oriented. The claim about futurity embedded in Asian socialist motivation may sound obvious on the surface. After all, a revolution is by definition about bringing new times; Marxism postulates that the arrival of global communism is historically predetermined; and decoloniality per se strives to undo the previous structures of colonial oppression for a

[12] Asian socialist movements participated in the Moscow-led Communist International before the Second World War, but their agendas were ignored; see Robert Longmire, *Soviet relations with South-East Asia: A Historical Survey* (Kegan Paul International, 1989), 12–28; Fedor Mediansky and Dianne Court, *The Soviet Union in Southeast Asia* (Australian National University, 1984), 129–10. In the first decade of the Cold War, Southeast Asian communist movements acted independently from Moscow; see Guan, *Southeast Asia's Cold War*, 12.

better future of a post-independent nation. Yet, to think about the power the futural orientation gave to the motivations and representations of Asian socialism, it is important to contextualize the temporal structures of both capitalism and socialism as well as to carefully differentiate the temporality of classical Marxism from that of historical projects of socialism in the USSR and Asia. Two interrelated aspects guide my comparative reading of temporality: the relationship between the perception of time and the mode of production, and the evolution of the velocity of time in capitalism, socialism, and Asian socialism.

The modern perception of time, in its linear form, emerged alongside the formation of modernity itself. Marshall Berman and Gerhard Dohrn-van Rossum locate the ascent of modernity and the shift in temporal perception in Medieval Europe. Dohrn-van Rossum historizes the changes that took place in monasteries, trading ports, and financial hubs of 16th-century Europe that made it necessary to "socially structure the everyday time." He writes, "the struggle over the normal working day, and the spreading notion of working time as a factor of production that was scarce and therefore had to be put in effective use, turned many old problems of justice, distribution and money into problems of time."[13] Berman further suggests that great discoveries in science, geography, and astronomy; industrialization and urbanization; and technological innovations in production engendered these changes.[14] Both scholars claim that gradually, modernity took shape with an accelerating pace of production, greater division of labor and capital, and professions and classes. With modern social structures,

[13] Gerhard Dohrn-van Rossum, *History of the Hour: Clocks and Modern Temporal Orders* (University of Chicago Press, 1996), 2.
[14] Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (NY: Penguin Books, 1988), 16–17.

new subjectivities emerged, calling for self-reflexivity and rationality. Horizons of the past and the future expand, and history separates from myth, narrating the chronologies of living societies.

The germination of modern time's linearity is often explicated through the shift away from cyclical pre-modern time. Giorgio Agamben compares it with the living rhythms of antiquity guided by celestial circular motions. Daily and seasonal changes, as well as rain and wind patterns, informed agricultural and maritime trade calendars. The motion of the sun, moon, and stars reflected natural time within which people lived and worked. Labor was measured by the necessary tasks, and time moved elastically between work and leisure.[15] Similarly, visual expressions of time in antiquity flexibly blended disparate periods in human history in a single pictorial plane.[16]

Christianity introduced a new concept of time, indexed by Christ's birth and the day of the Last Judgment. Time began to unroll from circular motion to a linear vector and be structured by social laws rather than those of nature. The growing artisan industry demanded a regulated working day, mechanization increased the speed of production, and international trade necessitated synchronization in processes. Towers' bells began ringing to wake up workers and send them to shops. Factory owners started to count labor in production output. Time lost elasticity and broke into working and private time. E.P. Thompson provides a fascinating study of time, work-discipline, and industrial capitalism in England in his eponymous essay. He illustrates a tedious, few-century-long process in which factory owners and clocks progressively imposed stricter

[15] Giorgio Agamben, "Time and History: Critique of the Instant and the Continuum," In *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience* (London: Verso, 1993).
[16] Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time (*New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 9–10.

labor discipline on workers despite workers' resistance to losing their temporal autonomy.[17] The introduction of a revolutionary concept—waged labor—decided the outcome in favor of capitalists. This concept turned time into value, labor into commodity, and alienation into the condition of industrial modernity.

Thompson's study focuses on industrializing England, while continental Europe and North America were undergoing similar processes. In equally engaging work, Michael O'Malley follows the evolution of time-keeping technologies, Puritan labor ethics, and the disciplining of working bodies in America. In his account, productive labor became naturalized as a virtue in American society, watches emerged as a self-disciplining device, and the unified timetable of the railway system temporally standardized the natural geography of the US. In 1884, with the adoption of Greenwich as the Prime Meridian, Euroamerican capitalist time solidified and became a global standard.[18] Greenwich temporal hegemony unleashed violence on native calendars in the colonies. In India, where various ethnic and religious communities practiced vernacular timekeeping, the Euroamerican calendar became the official government time, banning native alternatives.[19] A bricolage of calendars would survive for decades but eventually vanish under the pressure of now global mature capitalism. By then, time was desacralized, losing its Christian axis. It became an empty, homogeneous time of historical progress, linear and infinite.[20] The disenchantment of capitalist time, the

[17] E.P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," *Past and Present* 38, no. 1 (1967): 56–97.
[18] Michael O'Malley, *Keeping Watch: A History of American Time* (Penguin Books, 1991), 109.
[19] Partha Mitter, "Colonial Modern: A Clash of Colonial and Indigenous Chronologies: The Case from India" in *Time in the History of Art: Temporality, Chronology and Anachrony*, ed. by Dan Karlholm and Keith Moxey (Routledge, 2018), 68–69.
[20] As coined by Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," In *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections,* ed. Hannah Arendt (Boston: Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019), 205.

expulsion of the divine and the super-human from regulating living rhythms, would trouble thinkers and cultural practitioners across the Global South, as Dipesh Chakrabarty illustrates for India and Arnika Fuhrmann for Cold War Thailand.[21] They felt there was a need for something more than a rationality of capitalist efficiency to explicate the shapes of social time in Asia.

A year before the Greenwich triumph of Euroamerican time, a thinker deeply preoccupied with time, capitalism, and alternative futures died—Karl Marx. He did not live to see the acceleration of time in industrial America, but prophesied that "economy of time, to this all economy ultimately reduces itself."[22] While not explicitly articulated in his works, capitalist temporality was central to Marx's philosophy on two fundamental levels. Firstly, his conception of history—historical materialism—announced the evolution of the modes of production as the key force in driving history. According to historical materialism, class structure, ownership of capital and labor, and production methods informed the trajectory of a society from an agrarian community to advanced (industrial) capitalism. Then, reaching the final point of maturity and a peak in tension between capitalists and the proletariat, the capitalist system would undergo a qualitative transformation, a revolution into communism.

There are several important implications of such thinking for my analysis. Historical time in the Marxian sense is linear and evolutionary in logic; in it, the mode of production, or a state of the economic base, is primary to the superstructure, and

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[21] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Time of History and the Times of Gods," In *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital,* ed. Lisa Lowe, David Lloyd (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997, January 1, 1997), 35–60; Arnika Fuhrmann, Chapter 3, "History," in *Teardrops of Time: Buddhist Aesthetics in the Poetry of Angkarn Kallayanapong* (State University of New York, 2020).
[22] Cited in Cesare Casarino, "Time Matters: Marx, Negri, Agamben, and the Corporeal," in *In Praise of the Common: A Conversation on Philosophy and Politics*, ed. Cesare Casarino and Antonio Negri (University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 219.

hence dictates the position of a national economy on a predetermined temporal coordinate of evolution. Put somewhat crudely, only by progressing through stages of industrial economic development can a society of a particular nation move towards communism. I will later return to these points as the major contention for Asian Marxists.

On the second level, Marx explored the temporality of labor as a lynchpin of the accumulation of capital and the proletariat's exploitation. This temporality of labor is a cyclical motion within the factory's operation that each day extracts the surplus value of workers' labor towards the capitalist's profit. It is precisely that surplus value that the proletarian revolution aims to reappropriate, to reverse the "time of alienation" to "fully human time."[23] The surplus value is a function of two variables—productivity and hourly wage. The hourly wage received much attention in Marxist theory and later became central to labor unions' struggle. Yet it is productivity and scientific time management that gave *cruel acceleration to capitalist time* in the US at the beginning of the 20th century.

In 1913, Henry Ford launched the first assembly line in his Motor Company. The factory's productivity rocketed almost tenfold compared to its competitors'. With a set pace, the motion of the assembly line dictated productivity and broke down the labor into simple, repetitive tasks. Ford's economic ingenuity was undeniable and immediately celebrated across the US, making him one of the most recognized public figures.[24] Yet, the cost of productivity increase was the inverted hierarchy between a machine and a worker on the factory floor. It turned workers into a mere extension of an

[23] Peter Osborne, "Marx and the Philosophy of Time," *Radical Philosophy*, no. 147 (January 2008), 18.
[24] Steven Watts, *The People's Tycoon: Henry Ford and the American Century* (Alfred Knopf, 2005).

apparatus, an assembly line's appendage, with no creativity or control left in their actions. Simplified labor tasks were unbearably monotonous, dehumanizing, and pushing alienation to a new level. Ford Motor Company employees started to quit in scores. Ford responded with higher wages and other incentives but never achieved a low labor attrition rate.

What Ford invented was not just an assembly line. The mechanization of his factories and the dehumanization of labor are at the micro-economic level of Fordism. Its macroeconomic and societal impact was much larger. With identical, cheap, and efficiently produced consumer goods, the US industry was ready for mass production. To absorb these goods back into the perpetually accelerating time of capitalism, American society had to naturalize the desire for mass consumption. In Fordism, ideal time was divided into the time of efficient production and the time of individual consumption, both of which were maximized by reducing other human activities.

Fredrick Taylor suspected that the efficiency of labor as an engine of capitalist acceleration could be increased even further with scientific time management. When Ford was designing his assembly line, Taylor performed studies of work tasks using stopwatch measurements. His goal was to perfect workers' efficiency by reducing unnecessary motions and idle time.[25] Workers would perform only optimized tasks and nothing beyond them; their time would be used to perfection. Taylor's practical attempt to implement these studies ended in a fiasco, as factory workers revolted against stopwatch monitoring. But the idea of labor time management was too attractive to be abandoned. Cinema and photography, as techniques that manipulate image and time,

[25] O'Malley, *Keeping Watch*, 164–172.

came to the service of scientific time management, providing visual evidence of how optimized labor tasks reduced redundancies and improved outputs. Scientific regulation of workers' bodies to extract maximum surplus value came of age. David Macey termed the cruel acceleration of time in Taylorism "a rational madness," and Katherin Verdery concluded that "capitalism exists only as a function of time—and of a specific conception of it. Efforts to increase profits by increasing the velocity of capitalist circulation are at its very heart."[26]

Euroamerica looms large as an object of inquiry in the theory of temporality, and its historical experience informs the texture of categories and periodization. I am cognizant of this epistemological Eurocentricity, yet do not subscribe to the assumption that modernity originated in Europe. Rather, I take the existing body of studies of time perception in the West as a basis for my comparative thinking about non-capitalist and non-Western temporalities. This scholarship allows me to trace how the historical evolution of modes of production and domination in Euroamerican capitalism eventually inspired Western Marxian thinking about alternative potentialities and how it later informed the temporal imagination in historical socialism in the USSR and Asia.

According to Marx, communism was an escape from alienating capitalist time and the *future* of capitalism, a fully human time. The superiority of the communist system, in fact, was not in overcoming alienation by collective ownership of capital but in the production of social goods, deprioritized in capitalism. Communist movements across the globe took this promise of human betterment through social goods as their motivation and anticipated free education, healthcare, and public services as the fruits of

[26] David Macey, *From Fordism to Taylorism: A Rational Madness* (Free Assn Books, 1990); Katherine Verdery, *What was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* (Princeton University Press, 1996), 35.

building socialism. The question, however, was how to match capitalist efficiency in consumer goods production and exceed it in social goods. This is where historical experiments, theoretical debates, and modes of representation splintered in different directions to achieve anticipatory visions of socialist futurity.

Vladimir Lenin was fascinated by Taylorism as something to borrow from the US to introduce, albeit in a modified version, to the early Soviet economy. To that end, he requested an increase in the Soviet cinema screening capacity to visually introduce scientific management to the proletariat. Yet, cinema alone could not close the temporal gap between industrial America and the largely agrarian early Soviet Union. Lenin's successor, Joseph Stalin, launched state industrialization to fast-forward economic development along Marxist evolutionary stages. This move was a temporary detour, suspending the development of light industries and the public sector until Soviet heavy industry built enough capacity for a delayed leap forward. Soviet socialist time aimed to "catch up and overtake the West," with uneven velocity of preparatory delay and then double acceleration. Stalin's socialist project, before the Cold War became isolationist, focused on "socialism in one country," and abandoned Marxist concern with the emancipation of the global proletariat.

Asian Marxists, well familiar with the historical Soviet experience of industrialization and its side effects, including the Holodomor famine, pondered adaptations and alternatives for socialist acceleration. Mao's Great Leap Forward resembled Stalin's project in logic and, arguably, resulted in even worse famine. It appeared that repeating Soviet experiments in Asia was not an optimal option. To transform an agrarian peasant society to a socialist one, other methods rather than

changing modes of production were necessary. The revolution in China switched from the Great Leap Forward to the Cultural Revolution and to the Permanent Revolution, gradually leaving the realm of the material and economic. This temporality of supercharged acceleration was to be created in the domain of subjectivity and fantasy first, to find its way to actualize in the future.

For the communist movement in Laos, literally based in the Stone Age of the communist caves, as I will illustrate in the following chapters, industrialization was not an option from the beginning. The communist caves, a liminal space where the Pathet Lao resided for a decade before the revolution, had few resources—time, human capital, and visionary capacity. The best use of the pre-revolutionary time of suspension was to produce a detailed template for an ideal socialist future, to be ready for the temporal and spatial leap from the caves to socialism. Thus, the cultural work of the Pathet Lao, its modes of futural representation, was a key pillar of theorizing vernacular Lao socialism.

The compound of ideal futurity and its modes of textual and visual representation is not a novel locus of scholarly attention. It guided Maurice Meisner's comparison of European socialism, Marxism, and Maoism.[27] Susan Buck-Morss proposed that the Cold War itself was a conflict of the "dreamworlds"—popular utopian fantasies of capitalism and socialism—that collapsed at the end of the 20th century. In *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, she discusses the visual culture and mass media as essential elements of producing these dreamworlds.[28] Where I depart from Meisner and Buck-Morss in thinking about capitalist and socialist futures, however, is their use of the words

[27] Maurice Meisner, *Marxism, Maoism, and Utopianism* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), Chapter 1.
[28] Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (MIT Press, 2002).

"utopia" and "catastrophe." Instead, I advocate for "legacies" and "inheritances." Ideal visions of socialist futures might have been unattainable everywhere. But the communist regimes that sought their practical realization collapsed only in the West. Thus, post-socialism is another term that underscores a Western-biased perspective on the Cold War and its end. In *Requiem for Communism*, Charity Scribner already located the dissolution of the workers' "welfare state" and "the left's defeat in industrial modernity" in Eastern *and* Western Europe.[29] Asian experience of the Cold War's dystopian end was yet again different. As Lao artists Kongphat Luangrath put it in his interview with me, the poverty and hunger persisted in the Global South, and so, too, did the allure of a socialist ideal of egalitarian welfare.[30] Only now this ideal had been abandoned in the West as a collapsed utopia. Asian communist regimes, unlike their Western counterparts, survived the catastrophe and adjusted their economic models to accommodate global capitalism (in China since Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms of1978 and in Vietnam and Laos since reforms of the 1985), or refused to do so in North Korea.[31] Norihiko Yamada argues that in Laos, socialist credentials remain to anchor the party's political legitimacy.[32] Continuing Yamada's thought, I posit that the socialist ideals that brought communist regimes to power in Asia are not entirely discredited. Their formative visions of socialist futures have certainly evolved. Nonetheless, they should not be dismissed as mere relics of the Cold War with no purchase on the Asian political and cultural present. These ideal futures were the forces that shaped historical

[29] Charity Scribner, *Requiem for Communism* (MIT Press, 2003), 4–14.
[30] Kongphat Lunagrath, interview by Anna Koshcheeva, Jan 2018.
[31] The *Doi Moi* (renovation) reform in Vietnam and *kanpianpeangmai* (new economic mechanism) in Laos.
[32] Norihiko Yamada, "Legitimation of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party: Socialism, Chintanakan Mai (New Thinking) and Reform," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 48 (2018), 718, 730.

experiences, which, in turn, inform present solidarities, alliances, and public sentiments. Understanding them helps us comprehend not only the global Cold War but also its aftermath.

Now, let me return to my earlier claim that Laos is an exemplary Cold War frontier. Its role in the Second Indochina War, or what is singularized in the US as the Vietnam War, is largely ignored. Yet it does not mean that the history of Cold War Laos is unremarkable. On the contrary, it is one marked by superlatives.

The little that caught American historians' attention about Laos, unsurprisingly, pertains to US involvement in the country and offers only a partial narrative. Laos entered Washington's political consciousness in the mid-1950s. The 1954 Geneva Conference on settling the First Indochina War, between France and Viet Minh, was pivotal for shaping the US strategy in the region. However, the communist party of Laos, the Pathet Lao, which had been formed just four years prior to the Conference, was not yet taken seriously, and its delegation did not receive a seat at the table.[33] The same year, the US brokered an anti-communist security treaty, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), and invited the Royal Lao Government (RLG) to join, but the latter declined, abiding by the Geneva Accords.[34] Instead, the RLG attended the Bandung Conference in 1955 to promote its policy of neutrality. Meanwhile, President Eisenhower had formulated his domino theory, with Laos featuring in its design as a part of Southeast Asian "arc of defense" against communism. The United States Overseas Mission (USOM) was set up in Laos, with an agenda to steer Lao politics in a

[33] Martin Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 85; Guan, *Southeast Asia's Cold War*, 72.
[34] Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, 90; "À propos du futur pacte de défense du Sud-Est asiatique," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 16.08.1954.

direction favorable to the US. In 1958, the Pathet Lao, led by charismatic Prince Souphanouvong, entered the Coalition Government in Laos, and Washington became alarmed, contemplating that the Lao communist party cold play a coup card, repeating the history of the communist take-over in Czechoslovakia. American involvement in Laos snowballed. By 1959, the US fully funded the Royal Lao Army's (RLA) and disproportionately increased its size. [35] It provided the highest per capita foreign aid in Southeast Asia, which thrice exceeded all other annual revenues of the RLG, locking it in financial dependency and overwhelming the Lao economy.[36] The CIA launched the "Secret War," training and arming thousands of Hmong ethnic minority guerrillas to fight the Pathet Lao, an operation of such scale that it transformed the CIA itself from an intelligence-gathering agency to a paramilitary organization of foreign subversion.[37] By the early 1960s, numerous coups and counter-coups, encouraged by the US embassy in Vientiane to shape a desired RLG cabinet, destabilized Lao politics and, from 1964, Washington started bombing communist territories in Laos. Within the following decade, the US Air Force dropped an estimated two million tons of bombs, an equivalent of two tons per inhabitant, making Laos the most bombed country in the history of aerial warfare.[38]

American actions in Laos were not the only efforts to maintain the country's pre-

[35] U.S. Congress, Committee on Government Operations, *U.S. Aid Operations in Laos, Seventh Report*, 86th Cong., 1st sess., no. 546 (1959), 2; Seth Jacobs, *The Universe Unraveling: American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos* (Cornell University Press, 2012), 4.
[36] United States Agency for International Development, *American Aid to Laos* (ca. 1965), 22; *Plan de Développement Économique et Social: Période de 5 Ans du 1 juillet 1959 au 30 juin 1964,* (Royaume du Laos, 1959), 24; Viliam Phraxayavong, *History of Aid to Laos* (Mekong Press, 2009), 85, 103–104; Ilya Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam: Soviet Policy toward the Indochina Conflict, 1954–1963* (Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2003), 122.
[37] Kurlantzick*, A Great Place to Have a War*, 14–15.
[38] Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, 144.

Western profile. The United Nations (UN) pursued its own anti-communist agenda, yet through developmentalism rather than militant or political subversions. UN development programs were underpinned by the belief that an improvement of impoverished Asian economies would weaken the positions of local communist movements.[39] These programs were as ambitious in Southeast Asia as they were naïve in terms of technical expertise. In 1957, the UN embarked on its then-largest development program—the multi-million-dollar, multi-country Mekong Project. It sought to alter a riparian economy for over 17 million people in Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and South Vietnam by constructing eight mega-hydroelectric dams on the mainstream Mekong and the Tonle Sap Lake. That is despite no topographic and demographic data being available for the region, let alone experience in constructing such dams. [40]

The UN's anti-communist utopian developmentalism and the US's fierce interventions did not prevent the Pathet Lao from growing in strength and territorial control, finally achieving the socialist revolution in 1975 after two decades of struggle. To a large degree, the Pathet Lao succeeded thanks to support from the socialist bloc. This support spanned continents, provided by Cuba, the German Democratic Republic (GDR), Poland, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Hungary, the Soviet Union, Mongolia, China, North Korea, and North Vietnam, among others. When the US started the bombing campaign, the Pathet Lao retreated to a cave complex near the North Vietnamese border, to what is now named as *Vieng Xay*, the Victory City, or what I call

[39] Antonin Basch, "The Colombo Plan: A Case of Regional Economic Cooperation," *International Organization* 9, no. 1 (1955); Frederic Benham, *The Colombo Plan and Other Essays* (Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1956).
[40] *ECAFE: A Short Introduction (*Commonwealth of Australia, Department of External Affairs, 1968), 9–10.

in this dissertation the *communist caves*. Over a decade of bombing, from 1964 to 1973, Vieng Xay grew into the Pathet Lao underground capital with 20,000 people, military and civilian infrastructure, and international communication facilities. All its supplies, from food and military ammunition to printing paper and media equipment, were provided by socialist countries—every day, for ten years.

The scale of foreign involvement is one reason why Laos became the Cold War hot spot. But it is not the only one. Foreign interventions alone were not decisive for which side prevailed in the conflict. It is the strategies of the local actors, the RLG and the Pathet Lao leaders, cultural practitioners, and audiences they mobilized, that determined the outcome of the struggle. These actions are central to my analysis. I unpack what the ideals of capitalism and socialism meant in a historically and geographically specific context: Laos in the two decades from its independence to the socialist revolution. And, as the vision of the Pathet Lao brought it to power in 1975, I ponder how the vernacular socialist ideal was popularized. How did a Lao socialist future look in terms of imagery, texts, and aesthetics; through what media was it delivered for mass consumption in the liberated zone; and why was it politically effective in the conditions of an Asian frontier?

My focus on the technologies of representing the future is informed by cultural objects I discovered in the archives and the kind of future they envision, revealing the link between the ideological and aesthetic. Future, as a field of "fantasy," eclectically combines multiple forms of imagination that best reflect its content. Lauren Berlant deploys fantasy as a register in which "images, narratives, monuments, and sites" produce a shared space of identification. Referring to Walter's Benjamin's "dialectical

image", Berlant writes about an image "that functions like a montage in which objects are made part-objects by their relation to a larger simulacrum of wholeness."[41] In *The Mood for Texture*, Arnika Fuhrmann explores the connection between texture, text, cinema, and temporality in the work of particular types of fantasies that produce aesthetics of Chinese colonial modernity in Bangkok, virtually and materially.[42]Berlant's and Fuhrmann's methodologies of theorizing the links between fantasy, disparate cultural objects, and the National Symbolic or transposed modern informs my perspective on modes of representation employed in Laos. I allow the techniques preferred by the RLG and the Pathet Lao to form their own interdisciplinary and unruly fields. Shaoling Ma's attention to the historicity of media further challenges me to think why particular media were chosen in Laos at the moment of optimistic underdevelopment and how those media relate to temporality and to the ideological.[43] I start from the archive I was given, delineated not by the boundaries of scholarly discipline but by its ability to represent a future, and allow it to my method—exploring how its cultural objects worked as futural technologies of representing an ideal.

The RLG modernizing program combined the techno-infrastructural futurism of the United Nations' Mekong Project and the Buddhist visuality of karmic abundance. The Mekong Project was represented in maps, riparian diagrams, and schematic drawings of future dam locations. The charts and graphs conjured an aura of scientific knowledge and technocratic expertise characteristic of the rhetoric of Western Cold War

[41] Lauren Berlant, *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life* (The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 5, 24.
[42] Arnika Fuhrmann, *In the Mood for Texture: The Revival of Bangkok as a Chinese City* (Duke University Press, 2026).
[43] Shaoling Ma, *The Stone and the Wireless, Mediating China, 1861–1906* (Duke University Press, 2021).

developmentalism. The techno-scientific mode of representation gave credibility to programs of capitalist development in the Third World, assuring the RLG in its decision to embark on this initiative, and masking its improvisational nature and anti-communist agenda. A few decades later, when empirical data substituted the imaginary, it appeared that most of the dams would be unfeasible or detrimental for local communities. The same techno-scientific visuality would now be used to combat hydropower dams' development on the Mekong. Nonetheless, with confidence in Western-funded capitalist infrastructural development in Laos, the RLG turned to another, complementary mode of representing its futural aspiration. To project investment in national karma, the RLG financed Buddhist performances of merit-making: restoration and celebration. Embedded in the everyday material fabric of the nation, embellished temples and ritual processions were visible to all citizens of Laos, including them in the generation of a positive future and national identity. Lastly, cinema helped the RLG to represent its aspirations in moving image. With presumed objectivity of documentary footage and interpretive narration about future progress, RLG's films delivered documentary futurology to their audiences. The RLG's filmmaking reflected the government's capitalist desire for skilled labor and modern bureaucracy developing within an urban and symbolic space of the national capital. Combined, technocratic charts, shiny temples, ministerial skyscrapers, and cheerful technical college students connoted the progress of a modern Buddhist nation moving along the linear time of capitalist modernity. Yet, the thinness of data in technocratic charts, the absence of common folk and working neighborhoods in the future Vientiane cine-city exposed the gaps in this fantasy, betraying utopianism of Western Cold War developmentalism in Asia and the

RLG alike.

Jungles, mountains, and bombing imposed constraints and demands on the technologies of representation that the Pathet Lao used. The vernacular socialist ideal defined the content of that representation. Together, the prolonged deprivation and danger in the communist caves and the necessity to sustain the struggle in such conditions demanded that a bright socialist future would be worth fighting for and sacrificing for. Only an inspiring representation of a radically better future could suffice. Communist caves were a temporal liminal space, a temporary hideout, where nothing could be permanent—a place beyond time and edges on modernity. Yet, this liminality also had its duration—a decade. Mass participation in prolonged everyday "cruel optimism," borrowing Berlant's term, permeates the biographies of the people who lived and worked in the communist caves, narrated in *The Voices of Vieng Xay* and *The Path of Life*.[44] The genre of socialist realism in Pathet Lao literature supports cruel optimism by popular inclusion, trivializing hardship, and romanticizing patriotic love. Lao literary socialist realism, together with radio and performance, operated in the present tense, connecting the liberated zone as a shared space geographically and temporally. Pathet Lao writers produced short stories in a journalistic accounts genre, recorded in a straightforward style, and situated in familiar settings. Radio shared news—a content marketed by immediacy—and musical pieces, which, similar to performances, are a time-based medium. The choice of print, radio, and performance was also informed by their mobility and resilience to bombing. The human body, Soviet trucks, and radio waves were the best available options to the Pathet Lao in this sense. The cave dwelling

[44] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011).

of the Pathet Lao was rather similar to the historical experience of non-Western communist parties, which often had their strongholds in mountainous outbacks. Media technologies of pre-revolutionary Lao socialism thus drew on the collected experience of the clandestine movements on global frontiers, privileging light, mobile forms and human infrastructure.[45]

Yet true tenses of socialist realism are "present future" and "future perfect." As Boris Gois argues, socialist realism is animated by a motivation to realistically represent an ideal socialist future as already unfolding in the present—present future. The subject of pre-revolutionary socialist realism of the Pathet Lao was perfect future. The media that speaks in this temporal register is cinema. With captured footage, cinematic moving image is undeniable present; its content, however, is malleable. Pathet Lao cinema, or, more specifically, a film that I analyze in the dissertation, focused on activities that would convert a liminal time in the communist caves into a preparatory time for future socialist acceleration. It featured constant education, professional training, and cultural performances of ideal subjectivity. Other parts of the film showcased ideal future—scientific agriculture, industry, public health sector, etc. I unpack the components of ideal Lao vernacular socialist future in detail in the following chapters.

The archive for this dissertation, then, is more than a repository of primary materials; it is its departure point. My project would never have been possible without access to the collection in the communist caves. When I started my fieldwork, I had little hope that it existed, let alone getting permission to research it. No Western scholar had worked with these materials before. Yet, a combination of fortuitous circumstances

[45] Jie Li, *Cinematic Guerrillas: Propaganda, Projectionists, and Audiences in Socialist China* (Columbia University Press, 2023), 8.

gave me access to the thousands of files preserved in the Museum of Kayson Phomvihan Cave—the caretaker of the cave complex and of the documents from the period when it served as the headquarters. Still, these documents needed historical contextualization, and little scholarship exists on the work and life of the Pathet Lao in Vieng Xay. My second stroke of luck was stumbling upon a collection of travelogues published by Soviet journalists, who visited the Pathet Lao capital in that momentous decade. Complemented by other journalist accounts in German, French, and English, Soviet diaries foregrounded the second chapter of the dissertation. My study of the RLG programs in the first chapter is based on a different, much more diverse set of archives. Among them, the most laborious to research was *Lao Presse*, a French-language daily newspaper that I read for the period from 1954 to 1962. *Lao Presse* gave me a sense of what was important in the public life of the RLG zone. I paired *Lao Presse* with official documents, *Bulletin Officiels du Royaume du Laos*, and the RLG's plans of socio-economic development, *Plans de Développement Économique et Social*, kept at the National Archives of Laos. My analysis of American, French, and UN development programs draws on sources from the American and French embassies in Vientiane, the Congressional hearing on American aid to Laos, and reports from the UN, its Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE), and the Colombo Plan. The archives for the third chapter are visual and ethnographic. The Lao National Film Archive generously provided the footage of the RLG and the Pathet Lao films, historical photos came from the Lao News Agency (*Khaosan Pathet Lao*, KPL), and the details about the cinema industry in Laos were gathered from interviews with directors, actors, cameramen, and cinema hall caretakers in Laos.

The order of the chapters in the dissertation is loosely chronological. The first chapter, "Illusory Currents: Transfer of Capitalism, Architecture of Hydropower, and National Karma," explores the intersections of Western Cold War developmentalism in Asia with the RLG's vision of national modernization and investment in national karma. Its first part examines the UN's Mekong Project and American efforts to incorporate Laos into the "arc of defense" as a dual anti-communist involvement of hydroelectric dams' development and militarization of the RLG zone. It explores the theory of Western Cold War developmentalism as a utopian ideal of a technocratic transfer of Western capitalism to an Asian frontier. Then, it provides a historical account of the Mekong Project's promises and failures in Laos. In parallel, this part critiques American foreign aid to Laos as a veneer of capitalist economic development, leading to RLG's dependency and destabilization. The second part moves to the RLG's modernizing program, which assigned national infrastructure development to Western foreign aid and focused on boosting national karma. Analyzing the celebration of 2500 years of Buddhism, it argues that the RLG's spending on the event revived a Lao traditional Buddhist architectural landscape and promoted links between national identity, cultural traditions, and decolonial optimism expressed in the vocabulary of karmic improvement. International events around the celebration of the 2500 years of the Buddhist era also helped the RLG foster alternative networks of Asian cultural diplomacy, bypassing the Cold War dichotomy.

The second chapter, "Communist Caves: Futural Technologies of Imagining a Socialist Ideal," begins with a brief history of the communist caves. After that, it discusses the Pathet Lao's modes of representing and media popularizing its

modernizing ideal. I argue that the Lao Hax Sat Publishing House was the backbone of *print socialism* in the liberated zone, enabling linguistic and ideological literacy and affiliation with the Pathet Lao. The Pathet Lao Radio supported mass communication across the liberated zone and integrated the communist caves in the acoustic space of international socialism. Its main function, however, was domestic—what I call sonic social(ist) Darwinism—an ingenious method of introducing the basics of socialism to the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual minorities deemed to be at lower stages of social development. Then I turn to performance as a form of socialist corporeal education. More conventional forms of performance in Laos by professional and amateur song-and-dance collectives provided much-needed entertainment in the hard living conditions of the Pathet Lao territory, lubricating traditional sociality between genders and offering hospitality to international guests. A new form of performance encouraged by the Pathet Lao Army in the communist caves was more socialist in its function—acrobatics, or, in the Lao language, physical body art (*kanyasin*). Bodies of trained acrobats provided an entertaining spectacle but also embodied an ideological message. They illustrated how a disciplined individual body transcends physical limitations to achieve almost superhuman abilities in strength and flexibility. Taking this education message further, acrobatics connoted that the cultural work of the Pathet Lao overall had a similar transformative effect—it cultivated the bodies as well as the minds and the souls of adherents to socialism.

In the next part of this chapter, I trace the provenance of socialist aid to the Pathet Lao and ponder the reasons for transnational socialist solidarity with an Asian frontier. I suggest that the global socialist cosmopolis did not represent a united front under

Moscow's command. Rather, it was a fractured space in which national communist parties pursued their realpolitik objectives and practiced infighting. Nevertheless, their actions sought to project the superiority of a socialist model over capitalism for Asian conditions. Their cooperation on global frontiers created a space of cosmopolitan encounter and intellectual cross-fertilization, enabling smaller players to leverage their cultural forces in ideating socialist modernity.

The final section of this chapter deals with the role of technologies for popularizing socialist ideas in Lao socialist theory. Browsing through the library of the Pathet Lao's President, Prince Souphanouvong, I observe that he was preoccupied with the practical matters of socialist development and political debates in the Second World, rather than questions of high Marxism. At the same time, the Pathet Lao's emphasis on representing ideal futurity rather than textual production of theory elucidates that the former was the field in which the model and method of vernacular Lao socialism were worked out. Bearing similarities with other non-Western socialisms, that is, young radical socialisms in the 1950s-60s, representing an ideal vernacular socialist future—the focus on cultural work and media—was essential for the revolutionary process to engage masses in the struggle and launch their self-aware social transformation. This approach was diametrically opposite to the principles of orthodox Western Marxism that located a transformative potential in the mode of production.[46] Yet, since Marx had little concern for Asian economies in his analysis of the primitive accumulation and global circulation of capital, Asian Marxists felt the liberty and the urge to adjust his theories to non-Western conditions and inverted the hierarchy of modes of production and

[46] Meisner, *Marxism, Maoism, and Utopianism*, 60–61.

representation.[47] In the Lao socialist theory, the "revolution in culture and thought," ignited by the vision of a better future, preceded economic modernization.[48]

The third chapter outlines the history of the RLG and Pathet Lao cinema industries and offers a comparative analysis of two films produced by each side. Titled "Warring Paradises: Documentaries of Ideal Vernacular Futures," it begins with RLG's filmmaking and the urban-rural divide in film distribution. It argues that urban cinema in Laos was a cosmopolitan mode of entertainment and postcolonial belonging for the nation's elites. Rural film screenings and local film production, on the contrary, were politicized enterprises, incorporated into military strictures. In the RLG part of the country, chief filmmakers were the Royal Lao Army's Department of Psychological Warfare and the United States Information Services (USIS). They produced content that conveyed the messages of a foreign communist threat and promoted patriotic feelings for the nation, the government, and the army. The film that I analyze in this part of the chapter is *The Modern Capital of Vientiane in the Future*. Approaching this film as a characteristic, albeit not comprehensive, cinematic expression of the RLG's modernizing vision, I assert that it focused on urban technocratic development expressed

[47] For the theoretical critique of Marx's model of capital accumulation and circulation, see, for e.g., Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*, trans. Agnes Schwarschild (Routledge, 2003); for cultural critique that orthodox Marxism temporalizes the Third World as belated, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton University Press, 2000), and his "The Time of History and the Time of Gods" for a suggestion of how to rethink Marxism within subaltern discourse. Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Time of History and the Time of Gods," in *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*, ed. Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd (Duke University Press, 1997).

[48] This perspective was confirmed in the speeches of Kaysone Phomvihane, the Prime Minister of the Lao People's Democratic Republic, shortly after the revolution. In 1977, he stated that the Party's strategy in building socialism comprises three revolutions: a revolution in ideology and culture, a revolution in the economic mode of production, and a revolution in science and technology. However, the revolution in culture and ideology, especially in education, should be one step ahead of the other two revolutions. Cited in Y. Ya. Mikheev, ed., *LNDR na puti stroitel'stva socializma* [LPDR en Route of Building Socialism] (Nauka, 1986), 118.

in the allegory of architectural contraction. The logic of RLG's programs complied with the teleological capitalist view of modernization, linear and gradual. These programs would bring progress and integrate Laos into the global capitalist system, as the RLG would absorb the transfer of technology and capital from the West. Yet, the linearity of this progress would also maintain a relative positionality of Laos as a Third World periphery, now coupled with compromised sovereignty and the burden of being a buffer against Asian communism on its hottest fault line.

The Pathet Lao cinema operated as part of the party's cultural and media apparatus and produced content aligned with its ideological objectives. It made short, black-and-white documentaries that decried the atrocities of US air bombardment in Laos, glorified the liberation struggle against imperialism, and celebrated the beauty of the multi-ethnic Lao nation. The film I chose to analyze in this chapter is unusual for Pathet Lao cinema: it is longer than average and presents additional themes absent in other documentaries. Titled *The Land of Freedom*, it offers a rare glimpse into life in the communist caves, yet not as a truthful representation of hardship and struggle but a vision of an ideal life in the liberated zone after the revolution. It features scientific agronomy and agricultural abundance, as well as the development of public infrastructure and social services in health and education. It shows the Pathet Lao leaders at work and leisure, always in close bodily contact with the people. It illustrates what socialist culture looks like, celebrating multi-ethnic traditions, embracing the aesthetics of socialist realism, and rendering them in modern media. *The Land of Freedom* differs from *The Capital of Vientiane in the Future* in its egalitarianism and orientation toward the countryside. It is more detailed and elaborate as a manual of building vernacular socialism than the cine-

architectural allegory of *The Modern Capital* in its treatment of the RLG's programs. It is simultaneously a documentary of an ideal future and a textbook on the building blocks of Lao socialism. Both films are warring Cold War futurologies, but *The Land of Freedom* is more radical not only in its social address but also in its temporality. It is an unhinged dream of a vernacular socialist ideal, seemingly comprehensive and scientific, yet unrestricted and bold. However, an ideal future in *The Land of Freedom* lacks temporal coordinates: it shows the destination and offers guidance on how to get there. It is suspended for after the revolution, and the motion towards it might be indefinite. It is too great of a temporal leap from the communist caves that even Asian socialist "supercharged temporality" would fail to achieve it in predictable time. Yet, as Meisner argued before me, utopia, not its achievement, is the driving force of history.

"Cold War Futures" is not ignorant of the conundrums that both futures in "Warring Paradises" presented. But my task is not to decide which future was "better," but to show their conundrums as exemplary of the Cold War on an Asian frontier. To be fair, the critique of the linear time of capitalist modernity that slowly devours the globe and turns the cultural difference on its frontiers into economic belatedness and tourist exotica is an old and tired trope.[49] Ironically, Marx's future after capitalism falls into the same trap of thinking about time as linear. In his historically determined processes, Asia

[49] For milestone works in this critique, see, respectively, Benjamin's description of "homogeneous, empty time" of modernity in 1940; analysis of linear temporality in the European Enlightenment by Dohrn-van Rossum; time-discipline in capitalist economy by E.P. Thompson; dehumanized time in industrial modernity of efficiency by O'Malley; temporalizing otherness as belatedness by Fabian, and translating temporality in cinematography by Lim. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in Illuminations (Schocken Books, 1969); Gerhard Dohrn-van Rossum, *History of the Hour: Clocks and Modern Temporal Orders* (University of Chicago Press, 1996; E.P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," *Past and Present* 38 (1967): 56–97; Michael O'Malley, *Keeping Watch: A History of American Time* (Penguin Books, 1991); Johannes Fabian. *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (Columbia University Press, 1983); Bliss Cua Lim, *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique* (Duke University Press, 2009).

would have to sit "in the waiting room of history" for a few centuries before it would get any chance at socialism.[50] Nonetheless, Marx offered a dream of a socialist future to his Asian readers—an egalitarian time-space in which humans flourish collectively by realizing their creative potentialities.[51] In 1991, the West pronounced that this dream was deceased and the post-Cold War future was bankrupt, and performed the requiem for communism.[52] Indeed, an ideal socialist future was unachievable, but should not be discarded for that reason. After all, Western Cold War developmentalism was also utopian, treating an Asian frontier as a capitalist Cold War laboratory, with leeway for error and collateral damage. The socialist bloc, in turn, contrary to popular Western belief, did not aspire to promote a global communist revolution and was caught in realpolitik and factionalism. Amidst this messy global Cold War, an Asian frontier became its proxy, amplifying the efforts of local players. Their dreams and energies, centered on the vernacular and futural, determined the outcome of the Cold War in a specific place. The RLG wanted to modernize Laos while securing its privileged position as the national elite. It adopted the idea of a Buddhist palladium to project its karmic potency and to bestow hydroelectric prosperity on the nation, with Western capitalist aid footing the bill. The Pathet Lao's vision of the future was an egalitarian dream of economic, social, and cultural abundance achieved by the multi-ethnic peoples liberated from colonial and neo-colonial oppression. An imagined motion in time, from

[50] Borrowing Chakrabarty's expression. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 8.
[51] Peter Osborne, "Marx and the Philosophy of Time," *Radical Philosophy*, no. 147 (2008): 15–22; Cesare Casarino, "Time Matters: Marx, Negri, Agamben, and the Corporeal," in *In Praise of the Common: A Conversation on Philosophy and Politics*, ed. Antonio Negri and Cesare Casarino (University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
[52] On bankruptcy of post-Cold War future, see Harry Harootunian, "Remembering the Historical Present," Critical Inquiry 33, no. 3 (2007): 472–73; "Requiem for communism" is my reference to Charity Scribner's book, *Requiem for Communism*.

communist caves to utopian future from inception, was slowed by the Cold War. What happened to that future after the Pathet Lao won the revolution is the next chapter in the history of Cold War Laos. That chapter would need to valorize the post-revolutionary practice of socialism on an Asian frontier—another lacuna in Cold War studies. But that chapter is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

CHAPTER 1: Illusory Currents: Transfer of Capitalism, the Architecture of Hydropower, and National Karma

> If this project succeeds, then […] it will stand as a monument, as a model for all regions to emulate.
> —U Nu, General Secretary of the United Nations

Introduction: Two Celebrations

Blue leatherette folders with hand-marked years bind annual volumes of *Lao Presse*, a French-language daily. Shelves of these folders, covered in thick dust, are tucked away in the *Patrimoine Indochine* room on the second floor of the National Library of Laos. Brittle yellow pages slightly crack whenever I open an old issue, and small chips of paper fall off. The more I read *Lao Presse*, the more my fingers get stained with frass. No visitors disturb the termites' feast on aged newspapers, and the collection is becoming a little less intelligible each day. So, let me recount what a usual print of *Lao Presse* looks like. It opens with a column of local news and an occasional opinion piece on domestic politics, a weekly radio program or weather forecast, a section with international news, and, lastly, commercials and announcements. From these pages, a reader learns what was debated at the last session of the National Assembly, what is happening in the Cold War world, what movies are screening in town, and which cocktails are served at the trendiest nightclub this week.

Accounts of two celebrations dominate the pages of the *Lao Presse* in the late 1950s, in the first years after Laos's independence from France. One of them commemorates the admission of Laos to the United Nations in 1955; the second is the

Buddha Jayanti, the 2500 years of (Theravada) Buddhism in 1957.[53] Certainly, these celebrations were important for the new nation, but not in the obvious way for the Cold War history of Laos.

Laos's membership in the UN led the Mekong Project, the study of which serves as my entry point to the analysis of the Royal Lao Government's vision of nation-building in early postcolonial Laos and Cold War developmentalism in Asia. The celebration of 2500 years of Buddhism adds a nuance to my understanding of the RLG's vision and its vernacular character. It places Buddhism at the center of the RLG's debate about national identity, Asian capitalist ethics, and, above all, the karmic capital for the nation's bright future.

These two celebrations in Laos frame my investigation into the interrelated processes of national modernization, decolonization, and Cold War positionality negotiated by the RLG with its Western donors. I triangulate my inquiry by reading the RLG's *Five-Year Plan for Social and Economic Development*.[54] The *Plan* stated that the government's prerogative was education and healthcare as well as the "semi-public sector": transportation, water supplies, public works, telecommunications, and artisanship. The rest of the national economy, meaning its industry, was left to self-regulate under free-market principles. In other words, Lao industrial modernization was outsourced to Western development aid, largely counting on the success of the Mekong Project.

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[53] The Buddha Jayanti–the Victory of the Buddha.
[54] *Plan de Développement Économique et Social: Période de 5 Ans du 1er juillet 1959 au 30 juin 1964,* (Royaume du Laos, 1959).

The five years from 1954 to 1959 were formative for postcolonial Laos and Cold War Southeast Asia. Decolonization outlined the contours of the new nation-states and the region as a whole, reshaping the previous colonial geography of control.[55] All countries in mainland Southeast Asia (apart from Thailand) and Indonesia gained independence shortly before or during these years. The region, and especially Laos, became crucial to the US strategy of containing communism, as Eisenhower articulated in the "domino theory." Three events exemplified these processes: the Geneva Accords on the settlement of the First Indochina War and the formation of SEATO in 1954, and the Bandung Conference in 1955. The Geneva Accords ratified the independence of Laos and Cambodia, and split Vietnam in two, with the cabinet of Ho Chi Minh becoming the first communist government in Southeast Asia. SEATO announced the US Cold War foreign policy design for the region. The Bandung Conference provided the platform for twenty-nine Asian and African nations to voice their preference for peaceful coexistence and economic cooperation across the decolonizing world.[56]

Laos was at the center of these events. The Geneva Accords stipulated its neutrality and territorial unity, a plan for a coalition government with royalist and communist factions, withdrawal of foreign armed forces, which at that time were French and Viet Minh troops remaining after the First Indochina War, and non-participation in military organizations. Following its letter, the RLG declined the US invitation to join SEATO, and the Lao delegation at Bandung expressed aspirations for neutrality.[57] The

[55] On Southeast Asia as a region defined during and after WWII, see Donald Emmerson, "Southeast Asia": What's in a Name," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 15, no. 1 (1984): 1–21.
[56] See the analysis of this period in Ang Cheng Guan, Chapter 3, *Southeast Asia's Cold War: An Interpretive History* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2018).
[57] "À propos du futur pacte de défense du Sud-Est asiatique," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 16.08.1954, and "Allocution de S.E. Katay D. Sasorith," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 29.04.1955.

priority for the country was to find a way for modernization that would align with Lao Buddhist values, stated Katai Don Sasorith, the PLG's Prime Minister from 1954 till 1956.[58] He asserted that economic development could not be a sole goal; it was the happiness of the people. Katai did not explicitly term the RLG's vision as vernacular Lao capitalism, yet he summarized that Lao modernization had to accommodate Western technocratic developmentalism and vernacular culture for prosperity and social harmony in Laos.

Even before formal independence from France, the RLG began seeking new political allies and potential economic partners, initiating cooperation with the UN. Concomitantly, following the mass destruction of WWII, American economic recovery plans were piloted in Western Europe and Japan, and the new approach to international development started to take shape. Inevitably, it became folded into the logic of Cold War competition. American and overall Western Cold War developmentalism grew out of modernization theory, which was in vogue in US academia in the 1950s. It encompassed a quasi-economic theory of the transfer of capitalism to the underdeveloped world *and* communist containment, with a new body of agencies established to realize these agendas: the UN's Economic Commission for Asia and the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE), the British Colombo Plan, the United States International Cooperation Administration (a precursor of the United States Agency for International Development, USAID), and Japan's Official Development Assistance (ODA, later JICA). These agencies devoted their energies to executing large-scale, multinational infrastructure development projects. It was hoped

[58] "Allocution de S.E. Katay D. Sasorith, Premier ministre du Laos, chef de la délégation lao à la Conférence Asiatique-Africaine de Bandung," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 29.04.1955.

that these development projects would engender robust modernization across new Asian nations, delivering Western technology and foreign investments. River valleys' development plans with irrigation dams, hydroelectric power stations, and new pest-resistant and faster-growing crop varieties became a focal point of Cold War developmentalist planning, based on the idea that a transfer of engineering and scientific expertise in these areas would rapidly uplift agricultural outputs, stimulate small industries, and eventually increase the income of local communities. Cold War developmentalism aimed at no less than an accelerated transfer of Western capitalist modernity to the Third World. It sought to propel subsistence Asian economies into global Cold War capitalist contemporaneity. Ideally, Asian economic time travel from agrarian pre-modernity to the Cold War present should be accomplished in a couple of decades.[59]

The urgency to increase economic efficiency and living standards in decolonizing Asia was seen through the Cold War prism—as the need to prevent large, poor populations, guided by inexperienced and unstable governments, from sliding into socialist revolutions. As Southeast Asian countries were decoupling from colonial political and trade networks, each was searching for approaches and financial resources for modernization. Chances were, they could be inspired by the industrial achievements of the USSR, the rhetoric of the new communist Asian power, the People's Republic of China, or simply opportunistically align with a communist side for foreign aid. The task

[59] For more on Cold War developmentalism see, for e.g., David Webster, "Development Advisors in a Time of Cold War and Decolonization: the United Nations Technical Assistance Administration, 1950–1959," *Journal of Global History* 6, (2012): 249–260; Frederic Benham, *The Colombo Plan and other essays* (Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1956); and *Helping Economic Development in Asia and the Far East: the Work of ECAFE* (United Nations Office of Public Information, 1960).

of Cold War developmentalism was to win decolonizing Cold War Asia over to the "free world" with a promise of imminent growth.

For all the scientific grounding in modernizing theory, Cold War developmentalism was a product of competition with the socialist bloc, wishful thinking conjured out of fear of global communism, and, ultimately, a Western utopian experiment in the Global South. My analysis of Cold War developmentalism in Laos illustrates how this thinking played out on an Asian frontier and how the actions of Western developmentalist warriors were contextualized in local terrain by pro-Western and communist actors.

The Western Cold War developmentalist plans resonated with the RLG. The newly independent Kingdom of Laos, a former colonial backwater of French Indochina, desperately needed to modernize. Its economy was overwhelmingly agrarian, infrastructure and social services were inadequate to the population's needs, and the national fiscal system was in constant deficit. The RLG embraced the UN's draft for the Mekong Project, a proposal to construct eight hydroelectric dams, seven of them on the mainstream Mekong, and six on the territory of Laos.[60] The ECAFE executive board proclaimed that these dams would "tame the virgin Mekong" and deliver hydroelectric power, irrigation, navigation, and flood control.[61] They would increase rice and fisheries production, generate electricity to domestic enterprises and for export, and improve water transport connectivity within Laos and with other Lower Mekong countries. In short, the dams would transform the Mekong geography, the Lao national economy, and mainland Southeast Asia's future.

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[60] *ECAFE: A Short Introduction,* (Commonwealth of Australia, Department of External Affairs, 1968), 10.
[61] *Helping Economic Development*, 44.

The RLG's modernizing vision was not confined to economic development alone. The lavish celebration of 2500 years of Buddhism, concomitant with the RLG's effort to attract Cold War development aid, aimed to make the nation materially and karmically rich. The budget for the three-year-long preparations and the celebration amounted to a multi-million-dollar bill. In all Lao provinces, temples and stupas were renovated. In Vientiane, the main national stupa, That Luang, was gilded. The RLG sponsored academic research on the history of Lao Buddhism and sent delegates from the Lao Sangha on official visits or pilgrimage tours to several Asian countries.[62] Considering the state of government finances, these expenses might seem extravagant. Of course, the commemoration of 2500 years of Buddhism was tremendously auspicious for all Theravada countries. In Laos, the event's chronological proximity to independence was also seen as a good omen for the nation. According to Buddhist doctrine, sponsoring and partaking in a Buddhist celebration generate good merit for donors, participants, and the whole community. In this light, spending on the Buddha Jayanti was an investment in national karma, enthusiastically shared by laypeople, the RLG officials, and the Royal Lao Army generals alike. Yet, besides ensuring good national karma, the celebration had other, more tangible connections to the RLG's strategies, notably in cultural nationalism and regional diplomacy.

Cold War Aid Politics

On December 15, 1955, a telegram arrived at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the RLG. The General Secretary of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjold, congratulated

[62] Sangha—Buddhist monastic order.

the Kingdom of Laos on its admission to the UN.[63] The *Lao Presse* published the news, and the celebration was promptly scheduled for December 24.[64] On that day, the streets of Vientiane were decorated with the colors of the national and UN flags. At 7 am, cannon shots were fired, and the public procession, accompanied by sirens and a brass orchestra, moved from the National Stadium towards the Presidential Palace. At 10 am, a military parade welcomed foreign diplomats, government officials, army generals, and the Crown Prince, Savang Vatthana. After a salute and the national anthem, the Minister of Foreign Affairs made an official announcement: the Kingdom of Laos had become a member of the United Nations. Later, this announcement was broadcast on the radio; in the afternoon, sports games were played at the National Stadium, and in the evening, dance performances and movie screenings entertained the public while a reception for dignitaries was held at the Festival Hall at the Presidential Palace compound.[65] The following year, United Nations Day entered the calendar of public holidays in Laos, celebrated on October 24, the date of signing the United Nations Charter in 1945.[66] For years to come, the anniversary of Laos' admission to the UN would be commemorated in the Royal Lao Postal Service stamps, designed by the renowned artist Marc Leguay.[67]

Membership in the UN was a matter of post-colonial recognition. Most Southeast Asian countries, including Laos, achieved independence not by a singular proclamation of national determination but through a prolonged, contested, and often violent process of power transfer from a colonial to national administration. In Laos, gaining

[63] "Une grande nouvelle pour le Laos," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 16.12.1955.
[64] "Journée de l'admission du Laos à l'OUN," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 22.12.1955.
[65] "Programme des cérémonies commémoratives de l'admission du Laos à l'OUN," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 23.12.1955.
[66] Royal Order no. 125, *Journal officiel du Royaume du Laos* (1956).
[67] Engraved by Jean Pheulpin.

independence took a decade, from 1945 to 1954, argues Simon Creak.[68] But in 1954, its membership in the UN was denied.[69]

Admission to the UN in the 1950s was part of the Cold War power game and ideological bloc-building. UN founding members (of which China was represented by the Taiwan-based government of the Republic of China until 1971) could exercise their veto on admitting new countries. For Cold War superpowers, getting friendly nations in and keeping adversaries out of the UN General Assembly was a boon for lobbying their interests. Some newcomers, like India, used the UN platform to project their own ambition for leadership in the decolonizing world and promote geopolitical designs contradicting the logic of the superpowers.

Australia proposed the Lao candidacy to the UN in 1954, but the USSR blocked it on the pretext that the situation in Indochina was still volatile.[70] In 1955, the candidacy was again on the table alongside those of other seventeen states. Yet, when Mongolian membership, promoted by the USSR, was blocked by the Republic of China, the USSR vetoed the memberships of all non-communist countries. The US was not in favor of admitting Eastern European communist countries—Albania, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania—so it abstained from the vote. Eventually, the stalemate was resolved by Nehru's negotiation with the Soviet diplomats, and sixteen members, including Laos and Cambodia, were admitted to the General Assembly, whereas Mongolia and Japan were excluded.[71] The Vietnamese case would not be settled until 1977, as the USSR

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[68] Simon Creak, *Embodied Nation: Sport, Masculinity, and the Making of Modern Laos* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2015), 88.
[69] "L'U.R.S.S. estime prématurée l'admission du Laos et du Cambodge aux Nations Unies," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 15.11.1954.
[70] "L'admission du Laos et du Cambodge a l'O.N.U.," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 24.08.1954.
[71] "Admission de nouveaux membres aux Nations Unies; le président Maza explique le rôle de Nehru," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 30.12.1955.

consistently denied membership to South Vietnam while the US did not recognize the government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV).

Above the prestige of the recognition, the UN membership was important to Laos for access to its Cold War development programs. Grant Evans writes that, in the 1950s, the RLG was optimistic about the nation-building project, yet had fewer financial resources than when it was subsidized within French Indochina.[72] Its agriculture was mediocre, with yields per household in the northern provinces below the average for mainland Southeast Asia.[73] It had a rudimentary light industry, producing cigarettes, soft drinks and beer, an underdeveloped transport infrastructure, and a heavy industry limited to the minuscule mining sector.[74] As Laos lacked domestic sources of investment, the RLG hoped that the UN agencies would help channel foreign funding for modernization.

Laos started to partner with UN agencies in 1951 and fostered relations with UNESCO, the United Nations Technical Assistance Administration (TAA, later TAO), and ECAFE, an agency with a regional focus on Asia.[75] The missions of these organizations differed, and in the early 1950s, Laos was an unimportant country for any of them. The agencies gathered some preliminary data in Southeast Asia and provided basic technical training to enable this data collection. UNESCO was assessing Southeast Asian countries' educational priorities and helped with curricula and teaching materials.

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[72] Grant Evans, *A Short History of Laos: The Land in Between* (Silkworm Books, 2002), 94–95; Martin Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 76.
[73] *Progress of the Colombo Plan, 1960* (Colombo Plan Bureau, 1961), 48. Overall, rice yields per hectare in colonial Laos were below average for French Indochina. See rice cultivation statistics for 1913–1943 in Pierre Broucheux and Daniel Hemery, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858 – 1954* (University of California Press, 2009), 260.
[74] Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, 95–96.
[75] Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, 75.

In Laos, UNESCO activities were limited to a fact-finding mission.[76] ECAFE started its operations in the region by collecting economic statistics and topographic and hydraulic data and partnered with TAA to facilitate planning processes. In Laos, TAA and ECAFE anticipated some minimal training for electricians and topographers. [77]

To increase Laos' profile on the UN's agenda, a Lao diplomat, educator, and the wife of the most prominent politician in the RLG, Princess Souvanna Phouma (née Aline Allard), assumed the position of Director for International Relations at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In this capacity, she championed the relationship with UNESCO's Director General Luther Evans, participated in its General Conferences, and cooperated with officials of ECAFE and TAA in Bangkok. [78] The UN was one of the targets of Lao diplomacy, but the strategy was to cast as wide a Cold War aid network as possible.

When thinking about Cold War developmentalism from a Southeast Asian perspective, the idea of political bipolarity as an exclusive alignment with one of the blocs, or a non-alignment as no partnership with any superpower, quickly comes undone. The urgency of national economic development led to a common approach to seek aid from all prospective donors, including a former metropole, the "free world" (with Japan), and the communist world. The former colonial powers strived to prolong their economic and cultural, if not political, influence over erstwhile colonies. Rising Asian powers, such as India and China, were keen to project their regional leadership,

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[76] "L'activité de l'UNESCO au Laos," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 22.01.1955.
[77] "Dîner offert par S.E. Outhong Souvannavong en l'honneur d'un membre de l'Assistance Technique des Nations Unies," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 01.06.1954.
[78] "Mise au point du Programme d'Assistance Technique des Nations Unies pour 1956," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 24.05.1955; "Arrivée à Vientiane du Dr. Luther Evans, Directeur Général de l'U.N.E.S.C.O.," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 08.03.1956.

even if requesting developmental aid from the West or the USSR themselves. Accepting aid from one of the superpowers did not oblige the leaders of local governments to establish exclusive relations with its Cold War bloc. Diversifying economic aid was not seen as ideological promiscuity on the part of the decolonizing nations; rather, it meant that the need for national modernization did not translate to the political loyalties the Cold War donors hoped for. More than that, playing superpowers against each other in the competition for influence often proved conducive to maximizing foreign aid.

Norodom Sihanouk and Sukarno were especially successful in receiving economic aid from multiple sources. As the novelist Han Suyin writes:

> Being neutral, Cambodia gets help from everyone. The airport was French aid, the road was American; an enormous, dazzling white hospital was Russian, something else was Czech; three factories were given by China, the Japanese were taking out rusty water pipes and replacing the lot with Made-in-Japan plumbing; and so it went on.[79]

Indonesia also enjoyed economic aid from various donors, including the Dutch, Americans, Soviets, and Chinese. In fact, in the 1950s–60s, Indonesia received the most Soviet aid of all Southeast Asian countries.[80] One of the projects donated by the Soviets was the Asian Games Complex, completed in 1962—a multi-venue sports facility with the main stadium modeled after the Central Lenin Stadium in Moscow—and Nikita Khrushchev attended the Complex opening ceremony alongside Sukarno.[81] At the same time, American architects were supervising the constructions of new skyscrapers and highways across Jakarta, funded by the US.[82] Despite being courted by both sides,

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[79] Cited in Roger Nelson, "Locating the Domestic in Vann Molyvann's National Sports Complex," *ABE Journal*, no. 11 (2017), 67–92.
[80] Ragna Boden, "Cold War Economics: Soviet Aid to Indonesia," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 10, no. 3 (2008): 110.
[81] Stefan Huebner, *Pan-Asian Sports and the emergence of modern Asia, 1913–1974* (NUS Press, 2016), 147–173.
[82] *Setiadi Sopandi,* "Indonesian Architectural Culture during Guided Democracy (1959–1965): Sukarno

Sukarno had his own ambition for leadership in the non-aligned movement and gravitated towards China.[83]

Similarly, the RLG aimed to build a diverse network of economic aid and to partner with several developmental agencies. However, their help was limited, proportionate to Laos's small footprint in the region, or driven by considerations ignorant of the RLG's priorities. The US in particular saw developing the Lao economy only as a subordinate objective to making the country a buffer between North Vietnam and the rest of Southeast Asia. In other words, Cold War developmentalism in Laos was not about bringing a capitalist future to the country but securing it for the rest of the region.

Besides UN agencies, Laos joined the Colombo Plan in 1950, and RLG officials held bilateral consultations with Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, but the partnership proved to be modest. [84] By the 1960s, Australia, the biggest Colombo Plan partner for Laos, donated 150 radios, several hospital refrigerators, ten scholarships, and some road-building equipment. Five Australian experts served in Laos.[85] The UK, New Zealand, and Canadian aid consisted of a few scholarships.[86]

France, on the other hand, took more interest in supporting its former colony. The French defeat in the First Indochina War brought a new Cold War urgency to French

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and the Works of Friedrich," in *Dynamics of the Cold War in Asia: Ideology, Identity, and Culture,* ed. Tuong Vu and Wasana Wongsurawat (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 53–72; and Ria Hutabarat, "American Freeways in Indonesia," in *The Indonesian Town Revisited*, ed. Peter Nas (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002), 65–66.

[83] Guan, *Southeast Asia's Cold War*, 87–88; Odd Arne Westad, *The Cold War: A World History* (Basic Books, 2017), 328.

[84] Antonin Basch, "The Colombo Plan: A Case of Regional Economic Cooperation," *International Organization* 9, no. 1 (1955): 8.

[85] *The Colombo Plan* (Colombo Plan Bureau, 1962), 16.

[86] *Progress of the Colombo Plan, 1960*, 52 and *Progress of the Colombo Plan, 1961* (Colombo Plan Bureau, 1962), 68.

economic aid to the RLG. Communism proved to be more powerful in Indochina than anticipated, and Laos was the least developed but also most Francophile of the new Indochina states.[87] During the colonial period, it was considered economically unprofitable and, hence, was poorly integrated into French Indochina logistics. No year-round roads were built between Vientiane and Phnom Penh, Hanoi, or Saigon. The colonial administrative apparatus in Laos was largely staffed by Vietnamese bureaucrats, and in 1921, only 360 French nationals lived in Laos, compared to 24,482 in Indochina.[88] At the same time, the Lao king was staunchly pro-French, and many of the Lao elites looked up to France as an ideal of modernity.[89] All that made France consider assistance to Laos *after* independence more important than during colonialism.

Yet now, the French aid had to be delivered in French francs, since colonial French piastres were obsolete and Laos introduced its national currency, the kip. Limited French francs had to be spent wisely. In 1955, the French Mission of Technical and Economic Aid opened in Vientiane and identified two focus sectors: education and roadbuilding.[90] From 1957, the Lao-French Cultural Convention regulated support to the education sector and the cultural research of the École Française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO), "to disseminate the French language, culture, and civilization in Laos."[91]

The choice of French assistance in educational in post-independence Laos was logical. The Lao schooling system was insufficient on all levels and dependent on the

[87] Evans, *A Short History*, 53.
[88] Broucheux and Hemery, *Indochina*, 183.
[89] Evans, *A Short History*, 62–64.
[90] *Les réalisations de la Mission Française d'Aide Économique et Technique au Laos* (1960), 5.
[91] *Convention culturelle franco-lao du 13 Avril 1957*.

French teaching staff.[92] It operated on French curricula and in the French language. With France's assistance in education, the future Lao elites would remain francophone and integrated into the French cultural orbit. A new Lycée de Vientiane was completed in 1958 with French aid, with a capacity of 2,200 students, increasing high school admission in the capital twentyfold. The state-of-the-art lyceum's compound occupied six hectares of prime land, comprised seventeen academic and seven auxiliary buildings, and provided dormitories for provincial students and lodging for professors.[93] France covered the salaries of fifty professors in the lyceum and other schools in the country for the next three years and supported teachers' training.[94] The construction of an education center started in Luang Prabang, and equipment for technical training was supplied to Vientiane and Savannakhet. 205 scholarships to study in France were allocated between 1955 and 1960.[95]

In transportation, French technical assistance concentrated on improving the southern section of Route 13, particularly the Vientiane-Thakhek segment. Route 13 traverses Laos from the border with China in the north to the southern border with Cambodia, connecting all major cities in the country. In the 1950s, only isolated stretches of this road had an asphalt surface, and the rest was impassable during the rainy season, or 3-6 months per year. Building an all-year-round road downstream from Vientiane meant improving connectivity between southern cities and the capital and access to Laos from Cambodia and South Vietnam. Additionally, French engineers

[92] See Grant Evans, *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance: Laos since 1975* (Silkworm Books, 1998), 156–157; *Raport statistique: Direction générale de l'Éducation, année scolaire 1962-1963,* (Royaume du Laos, Ministère de l'Éducation nationale, 1964), 9.
[93] *Les réalisations de la Mission Française,* 47.
[94] *Convention culturelle franco-lao*.
[95] *Les réalisations de la Mission Française*, 49–53.

cooperated with the RLA on the construction of a new bridge to Luang Prabang Airport and upgraded the terminal of Wattay Airport in Vientiane.[96] All these improvements aligned with the logic of anti-communist containment.

In 1955, the biggest donor for the RLG entered the scene—the US.[97] Soon, its aid was larger than the expenditures of all other foreign sources combined. By 1959, it was thrice bigger than other revenues of the RLG's national budget and continued to grow annually until 1973.[98] However, the US aid was spent predominantly on the military and not on economic development. The US State Department decided to finance 25,000 troops of the RLG, effectively increasing its size from 12,800 troops in 1954, despite a recommendation of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to just maintain the original number.[99] The bloated army drew manpower from productive sectors in the Lao economy, as it was by far the best opportunity for income and social mobility in the country. However, the US's unrestricted spending on communist containment through the militarization of the RLG zone backfired. In 1959, the Congressional hearing on US aid in Laos concluded that "giving Laos more foreign aid than its economy could absorb, hindered rather than helped the accomplishment of the objectives of the Mutual Security Program."[100] The

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[96] Ibid., 19–35.

[97] Laos received US aid from 1951, but in 1951–1954 it was distributed by the US program for Indochina administered from Saigon.

[98] For the domestic revenue of the national budget being three times less than expenditures (with the deficit covered by loans and foreign aid) in 1959–1961, see *Progress of the Colombo Plan, 1960*, 49, *and Progress of the Colombo Plan 1961*, 66. In 1961–1963, the deficit was even bigger, as the USAID booklet states: "During Fiscal Year 1961, 1962, and 1963, total revenue of the Royal Lao Government came to the equivalent of $98,260,000 in kip. Of this amount, $22,300,000 came from domestic sources. The balance, $75,960,000, was furnished through U.S. assistance." United States Agency for International Development, *American Aid to Laos* (ca. 1965), 22. For the national budget deficit being bigger than domestic revenue annually in 1964–1969, see *Statistiques Essentielles pour l'Année 1968.* (Royaume du Laos, Ministère du Plan et de la Coopération, 1969), 8. For total amounts and growth rates of US aid to Laos for 1955-1974, see Phraxayavong, *History of Aid to Laos*, 85, 103–104.

[99] U.S. Congress, Committee on Government Operations, *U.S. Aid Operations in Laos, Seventh Report*, 86th Cong., 1st session, no. 546, 1959, 2; Evans, *A Short History*, 101.

[100] Ibid., 1.

cash flow channeled to the RLA filled the corruption schemes devised by high-ranking Lao generals, politicians, and US operatives. The Congressional hearing established that the misuse of US aid damaged the image of the RLG, created anti-American sentiment among the population, and benefited the popularity of the communist Pathet Lao. This assessment echoed the opinions of American anthropologist and junior USOM officer in Laos, Joel Halpern, and the most revered Lao politician, the former leader of the independence movement, Lao Issara, Prince Phetsarath.[101]

Economic aid was less than 15% of the total US foreign aid to Laos.[102] It was administered by the USOM, and, in essence, was an extension of the containment strategy rather than a plan of economic improvement. The American Aid Program report from 1957 implied that, contrary to developmental theories, USOM considered economic modernization in Laos a time-consuming process to be addressed only after more urgent defense needs.

One of the earliest USOM projects was the improvement of the Mekong ferry crossing between Tha Deua in Laos and Nong Khai in Thailand.[103] After that, an electricity generator was brought to Vientiane, "the single biggest piece of equipment ever transported by Thai Railway System."[104] In the late 1950s, USOM ordered roadbuilding equipment worth 1.5 million dollars, including bulldozers and asphalt paving machines.[105] While the French Mission worked on the southern part of Route 13, USOM repaired its northern part between Vientiane and Luang Prabang. Both Missions

[101] Joel Halpern, "Economic Development and American Aid in Laos," *Practical Anthropology* 6, no. 4 (1959): 167; Prince Phetsarath cited in Evans, *A Short History*, 109.
[102] Phraxayavong, *History of Aid to Laos*, 67.
[103] United States Operation Mission. *Cooperation for Peace and Prosperity Laos–America: American Aid Programs in Laos* (1957), 34.
[104] Ibid., 30.
[105] Ibid., 26–29.

collaborated on installing an automated telephone system in Vientiane. However, the USOM blocked the French project to improve Wattay Airport midway in 1958 in favor of its own alternative design. Guided by similar anti-communist considerations, the US and French embassies in Vientiane were deeply suspicious of each other and developed an antagonistic relationship. Over the following two decades, US assistance to Laos grew in size, totaling almost $ 700 million by 1970. With ongoing US bombing in Laos, the priorities of its economic aid gradually changed from improving logistics to providing humanitarian relief to internal refugees displaced from the bombed areas.[106]

Perhaps less visible but lasting impact on infrastructural development in Laos was made by Japan. Carrying post-WWII reparation obligations, Japan distributed developmental resources to all Southeast Asian countries. However, Laos and Cambodia waived their reparation claims in favor of technical assistance, and in 1958, Laos and Japan signed the Agreement on Economic and Technological Cooperation.[107] This arrangement was beneficial for both sides, and Japan became a significant development partner for Laos. It managed some projects on a bilateral basis, such as the improvement of the water supply system in Vientiane, completed in the 1960s on a budget of 1.2 million dollars.[108] Often, Japanese development agencies were also subcontracted by international organizations, including the Colombo Plan and the UN. As Japan had experience and technical experts on the ground in Asia, it was a regional supplier of choice for Cold War developmentalism. I will review the role of Japan in more detail

[106] Charles Mann, *4 Questions on American Economic Aid to Laos* (USAID Mission to Laos, 1969), 5–6, 8–17.
[107] Hiroyuki Hoshiro, "Reconsidering Japan's War Reparations and Economic Re-Entry into Southeast Asia," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 34, no. 3 (2023): 686.
[108] *Report on Water Supply Facilities in Vientiane City, the Kingdom of Laos* (Government of Japan, Overseas Technical Cooperation Agency, 1972), 1.

when discussing the Mekong project, but first I address the Western Cold War developmentalist time theory.

Time Theory of Cold War Developmentalism

Cold War developmentalism was a historically specific practice, embraced by both Cold War blocs. A mode of technological and infrastructural transfer to underdeveloped territories, internal or external, it sought to modernize these economies and link their underlying structures with Cold War metropoles and global capitalist or socialist networks of influence. Cold War donors invested in global peripheries in the hope of integrating them into Cold War camps economically *and* ideologically. Ironically, the logic that economic benevolence in the form of financial aid leads to political hegemony was agnostically embraced by both superpowers, irrespective of their capitalist or socialist models, and resisted by the aid recipients, insistent on their vernacular visions. Yet, by all parties, Cold War developmentalism was understood similarly, in a sense that it was a conduit for the expedited transfer of modernity—an optimistic Cold War time machine.

The Soviet Union practiced Cold War developmentalism at home and abroad. It invested heavily in its peripheries, Siberia and the Far North, for natural resources extraction, or modernizing nature, and in the Central Asian republics as its internal Others, modernizing its ethnic subjects. Soviet projects in Central Asia also served as its laboratory and showroom of building socialist modernity in climatic and social conditions similar to the Third World. Lukasz Stanek, Rossen Djagalov and Peter Kalliney provide accounts of how the USSR chose cities in Soviet Central Asia as

centers for international cultural events, inviting thinkers, writers and filmmakers from the Third World to attend film festivals and literary workshops and witness the results of Soviet Modernization in Alma-Ata and Tashkent.[109] Indeed, Soviet modernization in Central Asia was spectacular, provoking a range of feelings in the visitors from the Third World, from ambivalence to admiration. Kalliney narrated how South African novelist Alex La Guma saw the Soviet project in Central Asia as a model for the future Third World decoloniality.[110]

Before the Sino-Soviet split, the USSR also spent millions of dollars on foreign aid to China. It invested in the Chinese economy to prove its potency in accelerated development, and by extension, the potential of the socialist model in Asia. Odd Arne Westad writes:

> The Soviet assistance program for China was not only the biggest Moscow ever undertook outside its own borders. It was also, in relative terms, the biggest such program undertaken by any country anywhere, including the US Marshall Plan for Europe. The total from 1946 to 1960 amounted to around $25 billion in today's prices, a little bit less than 1 percent of the Soviet GDP yearly. But in reality the costs were much higher than this.[111]

In a sense, Soviet Cold War developmentalism was a mode of socialist modernization and its *representation*.

Western Cold War developmentalism, on the other hand, represented itself through the scientific language of economic theories and rhetoric of causation. Yet, its

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[109] Rossen Djagalov, *From internationalism to postcolonialism: literature and cinema between the Second and the Third Worlds* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020); Lukasz Stanek, *Architecture in Global Socialism: Eastern Europe, West Africa, and the Middle East in the Cold War* (Princeton University Press, 2020); Peter Kalliney, *The Aesthetic Cold War: Decolonization and Global Literature* (Princeton University Press, 2022).
[110] Kalliney, *The Aesthetic Cold War*, 115–116.
[111] Westad, *The Cold War: A World History*, 237.

vocabulary betrayed an orientalist Malthusian undertone—of managing the exponential growth of the population of color. It operated with the comparison of investments in national economies versus Asian demographic growth rates and argued that only when investments exceed the rates of population increase can livelihoods in impoverished Asian countries improve. Economists advancing these theories calculated minimum required investment percentages and their recommended split between social sectors vis-à-vis infrastructural development. The underlying assumed causation behind the theory, however, was as follows: investments lead to economic growth, which in turn increases personal income and, therefore, leads to *liberal democracy*. At its core, Western Cold War developmentalism was anti-communist. Economic scientists advising the UN and the Colombo Plan reasoned that a successful Asian manufacturer would be interested in holding on to his private property and the profits it generates. And vice versa, as Marx put it, "the proletarians have nothing to lose, but their chains," and hence, if getting poorer, are more predisposed to communism.[112] Strictly speaking, impoverished farmers in Asia did not represent a proletariat in the Marxian sense, but the proponents of modernizing theory were not concerned with this semantics and equated poverty with the danger of communism. Following this logic, poverty alleviation in Asia became a Cold War job for the West.

The chief economist of the International Bank of Reconstruction and Development, Antonin Basch, summarized that argument: after World War II, damaged Asian economies fared poorly, and the average per-capita income was so low that the population suffered from a shortage of food and clothing. At the same time, the

[112] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, ed. Geffrey Isaac (Yale University Press, 2012), 102.

advancement of Western medicine and vaccination resulted in lower death rates, especially infant mortality, and population growth. Poor Asian nations do not have enough savings to start modernizing, and even to maintain current living standards, their economic growth has to keep pace with population growth. The only solution to alleviating poverty in Asia was Western assistance.[113] Basch asked "[W]hy so little attention had been given to these countries with their low standards of living and pressing population problems when billions of dollars had been granted to much wealthier countries under the Marshall Plan".[114]

To boost anti-communist resistance in Asia, Western Cold War developmentalism grappled with a difficult question of capitalist temporality: how to make Asia develop faster than the West has ever managed? It took centuries for Western Europe to evolve its medieval preindustrial economy into what it is today, argued British economist Frederic Benham. Meanwhile, Asian societies and technologies were developing slower, he continued, forgetting to factor European colonialism and its economic extraction into his equation. But now, Asian economies cannot afford to take the same time to industrialize as Western economies did in the past. They have to close the gap in productivity and per capita income as soon as possible.[115] Arguably, Benham expressed a utopian desire of Western Cold War developmentalism to move Asian economic time from one similar to medieval Europe to its Cold War present.

David Webster argues that technical assistance became the silver bullet of Western Cold War developmentalism in the 1950s.[116] Third World countries had ample natural

[113] Basch, "The Colombo Plan," 1–3.
[114] Ibid., 3.
[115] Benham, *The Colombo Plan,* 28.
[116] Webster, "Development Advisors," 249–250.

resources and unskilled labor, but no advanced technology. They used traditional methods that yielded outputs manyfold lower than in developed countries. The production capacities of Third World countries were further hampered by electricity deficits, whereas agriculture was vulnerable to flooding and droughts. Therefore, introducing simple irrigation systems could increase local farmers' output; more sophisticated dams could also generate hydroelectric energy and power small manufacturing in the vicinity; and a comprehensive development of dams and irrigation canals could transform a whole region: increase agricultural yields, control floods, and power industrialization. What was necessary was to send qualified engineers to design these infrastructural solutions. A few experts, with the support of local governments, transform national economies in a matter of a few years.

Webster locates the origins of Cold War developmentalism in Truman's "Point Four" program, announced in 1949. This program outlined the US approach to global security as a support to freedom-loving nations, their economic recovery, and technical assistance to underdeveloped areas. In 1950, the Technical Cooperation Administration (TCA) was formed, a precursor to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). As a national agency, TCA was responsible for executing the American vision of Cold War developmentalism—a new pillar in US foreign policy. The UN also prioritized its developmentalist mission "at a time when its peace and security functions seemed ineffective," noted Webster, and its agencies, TAA and ECAFE, spearheaded UN Cold War developmentalism in Asia. [117] The UK initiated the Colombo Plan with Asian countries as the recipients and the UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand,

[117] Ibid., 249. The USSR was a founding member of the UN but largely abstained from participating in the UN developmental initiatives.

and, later, Japan as exporters of expertise. Early on, the Colombo Plan extended membership to Nepal and the Indochina states, yet privileged development in the Commonwealth: India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. France opted for bilateral assistance to its former colonial territories.

In the 1950s, the landscape of Cold War developmental bodies took its initial shape, comprising national and international agencies, but funding was predominantly American. The UN functioned on members' contributions, of which American contribution was the largest. The Colombo Plan also counted on the US as the main source of funding.[118] Combined with the budgets of its national agencies, the US was by far the most significant donor of Western Cold War developmentalism. Yet it lacked knowledge about Asia and the managerial expertise in the Third World that some other countries, like the UK or Japan, possessed. Henceforth, in addition to its own technical assistance programs, the US dispersed funds through the transnational developmentalist network.[119]

Developmental approaches were consistent between the US, the UN, and the Colombo Plan. ECAFE and the Colombo Plan publications shared similar theoretical preambles, recommended shares of investments in agriculture, industry, education, the health sector, administration, and planning, as well as the focus on irrigation, hydroelectric energy, and short-term vocational training for Asian students in the West. As development experts introduced their thinking to the governments in the Third

[118] Of the $10,000 million worth of technical assistance provided by the Colombo Plan by 1962, $8,309.3 million was funded by the US. *The Colombo Plan: Facts and Figures*, 3rd ed. (Colombo Plan Bureau, 1962), 11.
[119] Basch, "The Colombo Plan," 14.

World, the receiving side absorbed it and similarly demanded engineers in hydraulics and agronomists of the Green Revolution, a term coined by a USAID officer.[120]

Yet, each donor also pursued nationally specific agendas. The Colombo Plan sought to uphold the UK's influence among the Commonwealth nations and retain the shape of its trading network in the new Cold War era.[121] For the Colombo Plan, India remained the jewel in the crown, now in the capacity of a developmental laboratory, and received roughly half of the aid.[122] It was also anticipated that soon India would begin training experts from other Asian countries. For Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, the geographical fringes of the West, the Colombo Plan was a platform to assert their centrality in Asia-Pacific developmentalism. It helped these countries position themselves as alternative Cold War nodes, away from Europe and closer to Asia, making them a Western nucleus within the region.

The US Cold War developmentalism in Southeast Asia is understudied, especially from a regional perspective. The historical analysis of US economic aid focuses on the early Cold War and the Marshall Plan, and scholars still ponder whether a cohesive Cold War developmental vision for the region existed in US foreign policy or was a tactical subset of the containment strategy. Nick Cullather writes that the US provided a total of 20 billion dollars in economic aid to Asia over the two decades from 1950, and five times as much in foodstuffs, yet without a defined strategy.[123] In mainland Southeast

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[120] Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World: America's Cold War Battle Against Poverty in Asia* (Harvard University Press, 2010), 7.
[121] Erika Rappaport, "'A Vast Publicity Exercise': The 1952 Colombo Plan Exhibition and the Use of Propaganda at the End of Empire," *Revue francaise de civilization britanniuqe* XXIX, no. 1 (2024): 3, 5–7.
[122] For instance, in 1961, out of $1.2 billion of US funding provided to the Colombo Plan, $655 million was invested in projects in India. *Progress of The Colombo Plan, 1961*, 166, 172.
[123] Cullather, *The Hungry World*, 5–6.

Asia, the US was active in road construction, building "Friendship highways" in Northern Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. These highways stimulated rural economies, but were foremost the logistics of the containment infrastructure rather than economic initiatives. A historian of foreign aid to Laos, Viliam Phraxayavong, suggests that US technical assistance complemented a larger US blueprint of developing defense capabilities in Laos, with the proximity of the PRC and North Vietnam in mind.[124]

The Mekong Project

In 1957, an unprecedented cooperation between the UN and the RLG began—the Mekong Project.[125] It was so ambitious in size and yet so unclear in particularities that, in 1967, the then-General Secretary of the UN, U Thant, proclaimed:

> I regard the Mekong River project as one of the most important and significant activities ever undertaken by the United Nations. […] If this project succeeds, then I am sure that it will stand as a monument, as a model for all regions to emulate.[126]

The ambiguity of U Thant's "if this project succeeds," pronounced ten years into the Mekong Project's execution, a multi-country, multi-million-dollar cooperation initiative, underscores just how deep in the uncharted waters of Cold War developmentalism it was, literally and metaphorically. The Mekong Project's initially proposed scope resembled a social engineering experiment on a mass scale. It targeted

[124] From $480.7 million of US aid to Laos in 1955–1963, only $9.1 million was allocated to development grants and technical cooperation. Phraxayavong, *History of Aid to Laos*, 85. The total amount of US aid to Laos for 1955–1964 is estimated at more than $500 million. *American Aid to Laos*, 3. For the period of 1955–1975, it reached $875 million. Phraxayavong, *History of Aid to Laos*, 104.
[125] A year when the Committee for the Coordination of Investigation of the Lower Mekong Basin, an international coordination body, was formed by Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and South Vietnam to liaise with the UN. "The International Mekong River Project" in *Helping Economic Development in Asia and the Far East: The Work of ECAFE* (United Nations Office of Public Information, 1960), 43.
[126] *ECAFE: A Short Introduction*, 9.

seventeen million people in the riparian communities of the four Lower Mekong countries: Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and South Vietnam.[127] The waters of the Lower Mekong were uncharted since no topographic data, data on water discharge and levels of precipitation, or aerial maps were available for the region. Furthermore, no reliable socio-economic statistics on the population existed. Nonetheless, the lack of geoscientific knowledge of the Mekong did not limit the boldness of the Project's design. It envisioned the construction of eight hydroelectric dams, with seven of them on the mainstream Mekong (fig. 1).[128] Two dams were planned in the vicinity of Luang Prabang, one just thirty kilometers upstream from Vientiane, at Pa Mong, three dams lower downstream on the Lao-Thai border, and two in Cambodia. One of the Cambodian dams was planned on the Tonle Sap Lake, a natural reservoir with the unique hydrology of a reversing water flow in and out of the Mekong twice a year. [129] The hydrodynamic complexity of the Tonle Sap Lake contributes to it being one of the most biodiverse ecological systems in the world, which the dam would drastically reduce.

[127] Ibid. In the population numbers of the late 1950s.
[128] Ibid., 10.
[129] Ibid., 12.

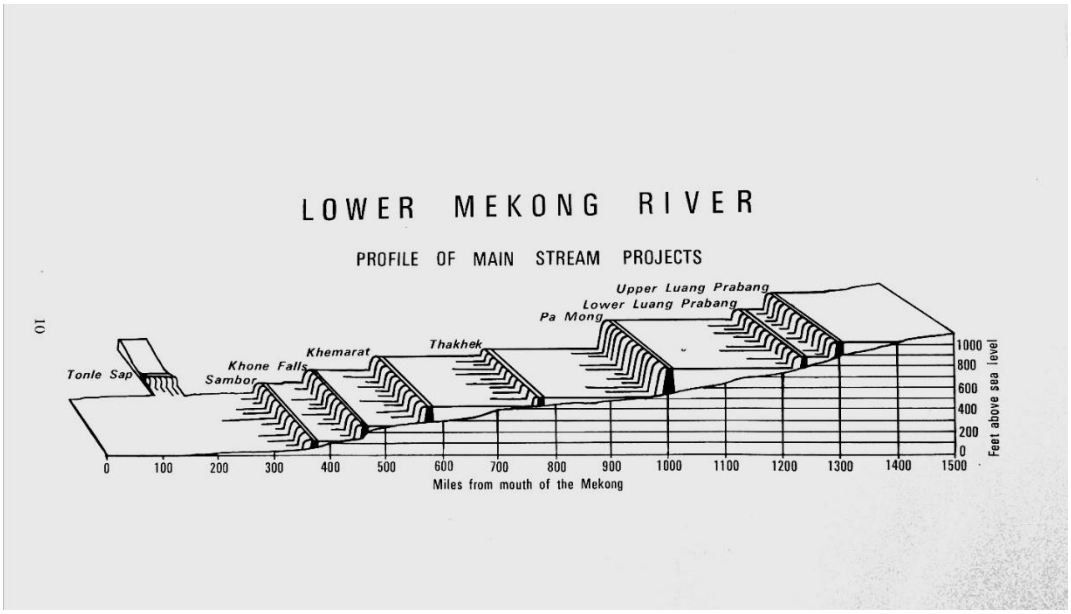


Figure 1.1. The Mekong Project proposal for the dams' location. 1968. Source: ECAFE.

The governments of Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and South Vietnam enthusiastically responded to the UN proposal, agreed to cooperate with ECAFE, and, in 1957, formed the Committee for Coordination of the Investigations of the Lower Mekong Basin, or the Mekong Committee.[130] Yet, despite the optimism of the UN and the participating countries, the execution of the Mekong Project was stalled by the debate between two groups. The UN and the Lower Mekong countries favored the immediate construction of large sites, but the reconnaissance experts cautioned about the lack of necessary data, proposed small tributary dams, and advocated against expensive, symbolically potent, yet less economically efficient mega-projects. Gilbert White's report of 1962 summarized:

[130] Ibid.

> Several factors combine to favor the smaller tributary projects over larger projects along the main river for early actions. The smaller projects are initiated more readily, and they lend themselves to experimentation with as yet untried methods of fostering economic development in the basin. […]
>
> Unlike countries with much larger income per capita the Lower Mekong countries cannot afford to build power and navigation projects yielding very low returns or to carry out irrigation which has full effect upon agriculture only two or three decades later. They cannot stand the luxury of monolithic concrete structures whose most immediate return is inflation of national ego.[131]

The conflict of perspectives arose as early as 1956, when the US International Cooperation Administration (ICA) conducted its investigation in parallel and without cooperation with the UN and recommended only two small tributary projects as a start.[132] Thus, the ICA report contradicted a much larger ECAFE's proposal put forward in 1957. ECAFE criticized the ICA's plan as too modest and implied that its limitations arose from the US's inability to fund and coordinate an international undertaking. Nonetheless, the Mekong Committee requested to review both ECAFE and ICA reports, and the UN agency TAA appointed R.A. Wheeler to evaluate the studies and draft the response.[133] Wheeler proposed a compromise: to continue data collection on the Mekong River for the next five years and to proceed with developing engineering plans for the mainstream dams in parallel. Yet, the main result of the first five years of the Mekong Project was only data collection.

In 1961, a Japanese reconnaissance team completed another investigation of the Lower Mekong Basin and reported some promising tributary sites to the Committee. The Japanese report altered the course of the project, the focus of which shifted to

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[131] Gilbert White et al., *Economic and Social Aspects of Lower Mekong Development* (Committee for Co-ordination of Investigations of the Lower Mekong Basin, 1962), xvi.
[132] *ECAFE: A Short Introduction,* 12.
[133] Ibid.

immediate tributary development.[134] One tributary site was selected in each country, with Nam Ngum in Laos. The Japanese findings did not mean that the plan for the mega-dams on the Mekong mainstream was abandoned. Work on the engineering plans for these dams, including Pa Mong near Vientiane, continued but for the later phase of the project.

The following years saw the completion of two small dams in Thailand, on the Nam Pong and Nam Pung rivers, in 1966. In 1968, the construction of the Nam Ngum hydroelectric dam in Laos began. Its first section with two modules started to operate in 1972, totaling 28.5 million dollars lent by the World Bank, and the construction executed by Japanese Nippon Koei and Canadian Acres International.[135] By 1972, an additional five small dams were built in Thailand and two in Laos.[136] One of the dams in Laos, on the Nam Dong river, provided electricity to Luang Prabang, a city of twenty-three thousand people, and the king's palace.[137] As such, the Nam Dong Dam was not so much a project of economic development to improve the livelihood of a riparian community as it was an act of Cold War diplomacy towards the king and Lao elites. Only one irrigation site was developed in Cambodia, and none in Vietnam.[138]

By 1973, the Mekong Project ran into financial crisis. Albeit encapsulating the UN's ambition to deliver Cold War anti-communist modernity to Southeast Asia, it was a casualty of US "disengagement" from the region. The US withdrew from the Vietnam

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[134] Ibid., 13 and Hiroshi Hori, *The Mekong: Environment and Development* (United Nations University Press, 2000), 85.
[135] *Laos. Nam Ngum Project. Evaluation study of Phase II* (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 1973), i.
[136] Jeffrey Jacobs, "Mekong Committee History and Lessons for River Basin Development," *The Geographical Journal* 161, no 2 (1995): 141–142.
[137] Based on the demographic statistics for 1966–67. *Plan-cadre de développement économique et social 1969–74: Priorité au secteur productif* (Royaume du Laos, Ministère du Plan et de la Coopération), 3.
[138] Jacobs, "Mekong Committee," 142.

War in 1973, scaling down its investments in Southeast Asia.[139] Without its biggest donor, the UN could not sustain its developmentalist programs and paused activities in the Lower Mekong. In 1975, unified Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos had communist revolutions, and in the global popular imagination, Indochina was lost to the red side. The government of the new Lao People's Democratic Republic pleaded to the UN to continue the project, yet to no avail. The Mekong Committee regrouped in 1978 as a three-country body (without Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge), claiming to retain its original goals, but the Mekong Project in its Cold War inception was over.[140]

Laos benefited the most from the Mekong Project among the four participating countries, and its outcome, as only one large tributary dam, turned out to be a blessing in disguise. The Nam Ngum Dam was powerful enough to satisfy the needs of the Vientiane Plain and export 90% of its total electricity output to Thailand.[141] With later enlargements, it was the single biggest enterprise in Laos in terms of export and foreign currency inflow till the end of the Cold War.[142] No mainstream dams were constructed near Luang Prabang, now a UNESCO-protected heritage site, nor was the mega-dam built at Pa Mong in Vientiane province, the project that would cause the then-unforeseen relocation of 15% of the country's population and massive inundation.[143]

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[139] See, for e.g., the analysis of the impact of US withdrawal on the Thai economy in Benedict Anderson's chapter "Withdrawal Symptoms" in *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (Verso, 1998), 153–155.
[140] *Interim Committee for Co-operation of Investigations of the Lower Mekong Basin* (Mekong Secretariat, n.d.), 2
[141] Hori, *The Mekong*, 87.
[142] See "Hydropower" entry in Martin Stuart-Fox, Simon Creak, and Martin Rathie, *Historical Dictionary of Laos*, 4th ed. (Rowman and Littlefield, 2023), 209.
[143] As stated in Hori, *The Mekong*, 89. Building the Pa Mong dam alone would require relocating 400,000 people, which, based on 1970s statistics, would equal approximately 15% of Laos's population.

With the present-day knowledge of the impacts of hydroelectric dams on riparian ecologies, ECAFE's plans of 1957 to build seven mainstream dams on the Mekong and a dam on Tonle Sap Lake would now be condemned as an ultimate ecological crime. The change in the UN's perspective on its own methods evidences Cold War developmentalism as a historically specific phenomenon. ECAFE devised its proposal when the Cold War modernizing race was at its height at home and abroad. The USSR revolutionized agriculture in its Central Asian republics through large-scale irrigation projects. But a few decades later, these Soviet development projects turned into ecological disasters, as the Aral Sea in Central Asia nearly disappeared, drained by the irrigation systems on the Syr Darya and Amu Darya rivers. Soviet Cold War developmentalism became the target of critique in the new wave of Cold War studies. Yet Hiroshi Hori, a historian of the Mekong Project and its leading advisor in the 1960s, admitted that UN developmentalist methods were not dissimilar to those of the Soviet Union. "The problem was that adequate consideration had not been given to such related matters as the socio-economic conditions in the lower basin and the relocation of people from the inundated areas," he writes.[144] In this context, the ECAFE proposal illustrates that in the 1950s Cold War developmentalism of both blocs was a blend of utopian optimism, dangerous experimentation, and competition. It also shows that the UN's expertise did not match its social engineering ambition. Moreover, Western Cold War developmentalism was too vulnerable in its financial dependence on the US. Once the US withdrew from Southeast Asia, the collective efforts of the UN and the Colombo Plan were exposed to have a limited impact.

[144] Ibid., 85.

Dependence without Delivery

The Cold War development warriors did not know in advance the results and the risks of their proposed projects. Nevertheless, governments of Southeast Asian countries counted on their promises. For the RLG, foreign aid became the cornerstone of its economic program, a financial base of vernacular Lao capitalism expected to be donated by the "free world."

In 1953, the RLG developed the *Five-Year Plan for Social and Economic Development of the Kingdom of Laos*. Political instability in the country impeded the plan's realization, but it laid the groundwork for subsequent economic and social planning. In 1959, the next *Five-Year Plan*, for 1959–1964, was approved.[145] It outlined what the RLG saw as its utmost duty. The highest priority was developing social sectors: health and education, to ensure a "harmonious physical and intellectual development of the people."[146] The second focus area was the stimulation of the village economy, since most of the population lived in rural communities. The rural economy was also recognized as a locus of small-scale artisanship essential to cultural heritage and craftsmanship. The third focal point was infrastructure development: public works in transportation, communication, and water supply. The question of funding for these programs remained rather obscure. The RLG hoped to administer the cash flow needed for public works, attracting it from foreign donors, international investors, or domestic national credit. The economic development beyond the above-stated programs was

[145] My analysis in this chapter is based on the *Plan de Développement Économique et Social: Période de 5 Ans du 1er juillet 1959 au 30 juin 1964*. The previous Five-Year Plan for 1952–1957 did not survive in the archives; its existence is referenced in Stuart Fox, *A History of Laos*, 77, and *the Five-Year Plan 1959–1964* states that it was developed as a continuation of the previous Plan. See "Note sur le plan quinquennal de développement économique et social du Laos," in the *Plan de Développement Économique 1959–1964*.

[146] *Plan de Développement Économique 1959–1964*, Note sur le Plan.

dismissed as a state responsibility. The private economic sector was seen as a domain of the free market, and the government did not plan to invest in industrial projects.

The *Five-Year Plan* outlined a peculiar macroeconomic theory reflective of a poor state mentality. Its first chapter, "Principles of the Base," started with simple calculations. It presented demographic statistics of the country and the minimum caloric intake required for an adult. Then it calculated the minimum annual per capita rice consumption required to meet that caloric intake. Multiplied by population, the total rice yield resulted in "the base" that the state economy must produce in a year. If national output falls below that base, the state's responsibility would be emergency famine relief, but ideally, the economy of a newly independent state would stay above that line.

Such economic thinking, locked into the logic of poverty alleviation, on the one hand, confirmed the desperate state of the national Lao economy and echoed Cold War developmental rhetoric about Asian economies in general. On the other hand, it perpetuated the systemic problems of underdevelopment. Prioritizing state investment in rice agriculture, the *Five-Year Plan* directed resources to a low-efficiency sector instead of other industries. Agriculture could not generate the surplus necessary to reinvest in modernization. To address these twin chronic problems of funding deficit and underdevelopment, the RLG sought foreign aid. However, the opinions about where to invest foreign aid differed between the RLG and Cold War donors.

The RLG relied on international mega-projects and was pragmatic in the short run. The *Five-Year Plan* noted that, to increase immediate electricity production, a primary goal is building a coal-fired power plant. The hydroelectric energy project was an investment-heavy initiative that would deliver benefits only in the distant future. Hence,

the *Five-Year Plan* affirmed the need to support the Mekong Project's ongoing studies and data collection, but meanwhile, to invest in smaller, faster programs.

In fact, the challenge with planning foreign aid was that the RLG had no say not only in the design of the Mekong Project but, more importantly, in the decisions of USOM, which channeled American aid. Even the size of US aid for the coming year was unknown to the RLG. It was the subject of annual USOM forecasting and approval by the US Congress without consulting the Lao side. After approval, the aid was administered directly by USOM, with the lion's share going towards the Royal Lao Army (RLA) salaries and the rest bypassing the RLG budget. While the ratio of foreign aid to the national budget in Laos was the highest in Southeast Asia, it was virtually outside of the state's control.[147] The US-paid salaries of the RLA were the single biggest revenue source in the country, so the RLG designed the special credit schemes to attract the Army's money to national developmental projects. Yet, it is unclear whether they were ever implemented. At the same time, long-term private investments were losing attractiveness as the influx of US aid drove inflation, and the cost of living doubled in Vientiane from 1953 to 1958.[148] The vulnerability of the Lao economy to the exchange rate between the US dollar and Lao kip set by Washington offered the worst scenario of foreign aid dependency, which would materialize a few years later. Yet, these anxieties already appeared on the pages of the *Five-Year Plan* in 1959. At some point, the document mentions that if economic aid to Laos were to stop, the country would

[147] *Plan de Développement Économique 1959–1964*, 24; Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam*, 122.
[148] Committee on Government Operations, *U.S. Aid Operations in Laos*, 2. Even higher inflation was reported by the Statistics Service of the RLG, at above four hundred percent. *Bulletin de statistique du Laos, juillet-août-septembre 1959* (Royaume du Laos, Ministère du Plan, Service de la Statistique), 107.

survive. Or rather, the 90% of the rural population that still lived outside of hoped-for modernity would not be affected immediately.[149]

Investing in National Karma

The RLG sought foreign aid for economic modernization and used domestic resources for investments of a very different type—in national karma—epitomized by the celebration of 2500 years of Buddhism. At first glance, the occasion of 2500 years of Buddhism in the Theravada world, a religious and geographically specific event, may seem unrelated to Cold War politics in Laos. In Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Burma (Myanmar), Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos, the 2500th year of Buddhism was observed from May 1956 to May 1957. This anniversary was of momentous importance for the ordained and lay Buddhists alike, and special festivities animated the grounds of temples in these countries for several years. Yet Buddhism, as a powerful marker of identity and an institution participating in national education, grassroots mass communication, and moral authority, as well as a transnational network of exchange, could not be apolitical in the context of decolonization, nation-building, and the Cold War.[150]

How national Buddhism was positioned vis-à-vis state power and its Cold War politics varied drastically depending on the local context. In Cold War Thailand, Buddhism was successfully coopted by the ruling regime into domestic right-wing cultural policing on the popular level.[151] Being a Buddhist was linked to notions of Thai-

[149] *Plan de Développement Économique 1959–1964*, 19.
[150] On the politicization of the Lao Sangha during the Cold War, see Patrice Ladwig, "Contemporary Lao Buddhism: Raptured histories," in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Buddhism*, ed. Michael Jerrison (Oxford Handbooks Online, 2016), 10–13.
[151] Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (University of Hawai'i Press, 1994), 3–6.

ness, loyalty to the monarchy, and anti-communism. In other parts of the Theravada cosmopolis, Buddhism was mobilized within the cultural politics of decolonization and nation-building. The advent of 2500 years of Buddhism provided a perfect occasion to connect religion and nationalism. Burma and Ceylon gained their independence from the British Empire a decade before the anniversary, in 1948. Studying post-colonial Buddhism in Ceylon, George Bond notes that Buddhist revival was understood as a restoration of Sinhalese heritage and identity, suffered from Christian colonial dominance, as well as a conduit for the nation-building optimism characteristic of the 1950s.[152] The revival of a national religion was an act of cultural reparation and, more so, a karmic gain that would bear fruit in the national future. By this token, the nation, karma, and futurity were invoked in the performance of meritorious acts, with the most potent of them being the celebration of the 2500 years of Buddhism. In a way, the celebration opened an abstract nation-building project to popular participation.

In Laos, the celebration enjoyed enthusiastic support. Happening just a few years after independence, it likewise connected personal participation with the contribution to the nation and its karma. Scores of government officials petitioned for short-term leaves and ordained for the time of celebration. Army generals deployed troops to advance Buddhist construction projects. Prisoners were pardoned, and private donations flowed to the temples. Participating in the celebration bridged personal pride and civic duty in generating positive karma and a blissful future for Laos.

Anne Blackburn suggests that constructing and renovating religious buildings and copying religious texts are meritorious acts for a ruling authority and the community

[152] Bond, *The Buddhist Revival*, 75–76.

under its jurisdiction, and this perception guided Buddhist kings for centuries.[153] Likewise, in 1955, the preparations for the 2500 years of Buddhism in Laos started with the pan-national restoration of temples (*vats*) and stupas (*thats*). Over three years, provincial governors, the Ministry of Religion (Ministère des Cultes), and the Ministry of Public Works received allowances from the national budget for projects in every province. [154] New copies of the Tripitaka, a collection of canonical Buddhist texts, were commissioned on palm-leaf manuscripts and in printed editions.[155] In Vientiane, the grounds of the main stupa, That Luang, were enlarged and redeveloped. Historians Francis Engelmann and Grant Evans argue that That Luang is the main religious *and* national symbol of Laos. [156] The stupa was built by King Setthathirat (1548–74) at the onset of the golden age of the Lane Xang Kingdom, a predecessor of modern Laos.[157] With the highs and lows in the history of Lane Xang and colonial Laos, That Luang mirrored the polity's fate in dramatic historical events. It was damaged and rebuilt several times, and in the modern collective consciousness, the state of That Luang came to reflect that of Laos itself.[158] That Luang thus not only represented Laos in an architectural icon; it also visually reflected the state of its current affairs and karma. In the advent of the celebration of the 2500 years of Buddhism in newly independent Laos,

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[153] Anne Blackburn, "Writing Buddhist Histories from Landscape and Architecture: Sukhothai and Chiang Mai," *Buddhist Studies Review* 24, no. 2 (2007): 192–225.
[154] See *Journal Officiel du Royaume du Laos* for 1955, 1956, 1957.
[155] Ibid.
[156] Francis Engelmann, ed., *Le That Luang: Simbole de la nation lao* (Editions du Vientiane Times, 1995), 11; Evans, Chapter "That Luang: 'Symbol of the Lao Nation'" in *The Politics of Ritual*.
[157] Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, 15–18. I maintain the French spelling of the Lane Xang Kingdom, as commonly used in the historiography of Laos.
[158] A few decades after the Siamese Army defeated Vientiane Kingdom in 1827–28, the That Luang Stupa was damaged and raided; with the start of the colonial period, it Luang was rebuilt in the shape of a Western tower much to popular dismay and soon damaged by the lightning; in the 1930s, when the colonial-sponsored project of Lao cultural nationalism was launched, the That Luang Stupa was restored to its original shape with the help of the EFEO. For the history of That Luang, see Engelmann, ed., *Le That Luang*.

it was important to restore the national stupa to grandeur. By 1957, the That Luang compound was enlarged, a new prayer hall was built, and the upper part of the That Luang Stupa was covered in gold. A statue of King Setthathirat was erected in front of the stupa, designed by the Lao politician and general Tham Sayasitsena. It was the first public sculpture of a historical Lao ruler, symbolically significant, as only a statue of the first Governor-General of colonial Laos, August Pavie, existed before that (fig. 1.2).[159]



Figure 1.2. That Luang with the King Setthathirat statue. 1958. Image: Jean Manikus, the EFEO Photo collection.

The most elaborate festivities of the Buddha Jayanti took place in 1957, in Luang Prabang, the royal capital and seat of the Supreme Patriarch of the Lao Sangha, and the

[159] Tham Sayasithsena, *Victory Arch: Construction, Significance, Prestige* (Visahakit Kanphim Chamnai Suksa, 1995), 4.

national capital, Vientiane.[160] In Luang Prabang, the celebration was in May, shortly after the Lao New Year; in Vientiane, it was held on November 4–7, together with the That Luang Festival. Despite the public euphoria around the celebration, virtually no records of it exist in academic literature, either on Lao Buddhism or on Lao history. French anthropologists were fascinated with Lao religiosity and ritual and produced a sizable body of work on Lao traditional festivals. Yet they ignored the celebration of 2500 years of Buddhism in Laos. [161] Luckily, the *Lao Presse* reported on the events in Vientiane, and an American anthropologist, Joel Halpern, in Luang Prabang.

That Luang Festivals in Vientiane in the 1950s–70s were remarkable. One of the biggest annual holidays, the Festival lasted three or four days and included processions along the main Buddhist sites in the capital and special ceremonies in temples. Besides religious activities, cultural events, including a traditional game of *thiki*—a coded sporting competition between the government and the people that always eventuated in the victory of the people—took place, as well as dances and horse or car races.[162] Another part of a That Luang Festival was the That Luang Fair, an international trade exhibition held on the That Luang esplanade.[163] At the Fair, the main foreign partners of Laos set up national pavilions exhibiting their latest achievements in technology and

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[160] The Supreme Patriarch of Laos resided in Luang Prabang, and the Lao Sangha had an administrative office in That Luang in Vientiane. Khamvone Boulyaphonh, "The Life, Work and Social Roles of the Most Venerable Sathu Nyai Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thela (1920–2007)" (PhD diss., Hamburg University, 2015), 7.

[161] For the French anthropology of Lao Buddhism developed in the 1950s, see, for e.g., Marcel Zago, *Rites et Cérémonies en Milieu Bouddhiste Lao* (Universita Gregoriana Editrice, 1972), or the publications of Charles Archaimbault.

[162] For an analysis of *thiki*, see Creak, *Embodied Nation*, 19, 20–22, and Evans, *The Politics of Ritual*, 45–46.

[163] Henri Marchal described the That Luang Fair of 1955 in *Lao Presse*. Famous EFEO architect, celebrated for his contribution to the restoration of Angkor, Henri Marchal, moved to Laos in 1954, at the age of 78, as a consultant to the Ministry of Religion. For his description of the That Luang Fair, see "impressions d'un visiteur français à l'occasion de la Fête du That-Luang par H. Marchal," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 11.11.1955.

economy. In the 1950s, its frequent participants were France, the Republic of China (Taiwan), Japan, Thailand, South Vietnam, the UK, and the US.[164] The RLG sponsored ministerial tents showcasing advances in agriculture, forestry, public works, education, health, and artisanship. The RLA, the Lao women's organization, and private enterprises, such as Air Laos, had their own booths.[165] The That Luang Fair was not unique in mainland Southeast Asia, and similar annual fairs were organized in Bangkok, Phnom Penh, and Saigon, drawing on the legacy of colonial-era exhibitions and reflecting new Cold War alliances.[166]

The celebration of 2500 years of Buddhism made the That Luang Festival in 1957 especially grand but consistent with the established proceedings. Foreign delegations arrived in Vientiane and found the capital decorated with national and Buddhist flags. On November 4, the celebration started with government officials, officers, and the general public joining a procession from Si Muang, a city pillar, to That Luang, passing important temples and government offices en route. In the evening, a special sermon was given at That Luang under the aegis of the Minister of Religion. In the following days, more sermons and ceremonies were held in That Luang, attended by the Crown Prince and high civic and religious dignitaries, and in the afternoons, popular entertainment took place.[167]

Mass participation of the Lao public in the celebration had meaning beyond civic duty. It dovetailed with the RLG's program of constructing the national identity. A

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[164] "Les stands à l'Exposition de That Luang," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 17.11.1959.
[165] "Foire Exposition du That Luang de 1955," *Lao Presse* (Vienetian), 27.10.1955.
[166] For the representation of Indochina in French colonial exhibitions, see Penny Edwards, *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation, 1860–1945* (Silkworm Books, 2007), 28–29, 153–154.
[167] "Les Fêtes de Vat Si Muong, du Grand Serment de l'An 2 500 de l'ère bouddhique et du Stupa That Luang," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 09.11.1957; and "Les Fêtes de l'An 2500 de l'ère bouddhique et du Stupa That Luang," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 11.11.1957.

discourse on Buddhism and its consequential societal traits of a harmonious, gracious, and peaceful "Lao race" was well-established by the French colonial anthropology, justifying benevolent French patronage over Lao territories. The "Lao race" applied only to the lowland Lao ethnicity and excluded half of the kingdom's ethnic minority populations. Yet, this compound of Buddhism and Lao-ness was adopted by the RLG in its nationalist rhetoric. To be a cultural lynchpin of the national identity, however, Lao Buddhism had to be decolonized and upgraded from a legacy of the bygone golden age to a reputable modern religiosity. This endeavor inspired the production of vernacular scientific knowledge on religious practice. The Literary Committee of the Ministry of Education initiated academic research on the history and anthropology of Lao Buddhism, resulting in a manuscript by the Head of the Committee, Nhouy Abhay. The publication established the genealogy of Buddhism in Laos from prehistoric times and the specificity of contemporary Buddhist rituals. [168] As a Catholic, Nhouy apologized for not being in a position to propose measures for modernizing Buddhism, but nonetheless, insisted on such necessity and made suggestions. Repeating colonial prejudices about Lao Buddhist work and scholastic ethics, Nhouy called on Lao monks to engage in diligent scholarly study of Buddhist scriptures in Pali and to act energetically as role models for modern citizens. Maha Sila Viravong, the secretary of the Literary Committee and leading Buddhologist in Laos, uncovered a *Tham* language Tripitaka in the National Library of Thailand and commissioned a copy.[169] Having a Lao version of the Tripitaka supported the claim that Lao Buddhism complied with classical Theravada

[168] Nhouy Abhay and Thao Kene, *Buddhism in Laos* (The Literary Committee, 1958).
[169] Buddhist texts in Laos are written in monastic script *Tham* (from Sanskrit *dharma*), different from civic Lao script, *akson Lao*.

orthopraxy from precolonial times, and the Lao Sangha had a long, dependable scholarly tradition.[170]

The existence of the premodern Tripitaka text also supported the diplomatic credentials of the Lao Sangha. The celebration of 2500 years of Buddhism created an opportunity for the Theravada countries and aspiring Asian powers to engage in active cultural exchange. It became a platform of international diplomacy with an emphasis on shared heritage, religious traditions, and contemporary decolonizing agendas. Buddhist networks escaped the suspicious Cold War gaze of Western powers, and the events surrounding 2500 years of Buddhism became an alternative stream of cultural Cold War diplomacy hidden in plain sight. Burma hosted the Sixth Buddhist Council from 1954 to 1956, a two-year working session to authenticate national-language Buddhist canons vis-à-vis Pali scriptures, attended by eight nations. The Fourth World Buddhist Conference took place in Nepal in November 1956. The celebrations of Buddha Jayanti in December 1956 in Ceylon attracted numerous international delegations. The Indian government hosted festivals, conferences, art exhibitions, and international gatherings throughout 1956.[171]

The RLG mobilized the Lao Sangha as an arm of its Cold War cultural diplomacy. The Ministry of Religion sent delegations from the Lao Sangha to events commemorating 2500 years of Buddhism in India, Nepal, Ceylon, and Burma, among other countries. The Lao Sangha's official and private international pilgrimages

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[170] On the politics of vernacular versions of the Tripitaka in French Indochina and Laos, see Ewards, *Cambodge*, 203–209; Justin McDaniel, *Gathering Leaves and Lifting Words: Histories of Buddhist Monastic Education in Laos and Thailand* (Silkworm Books, 2008), 48–52, and Gregory Kourilsky, "The *Institut bouddhique* in Laos: Ambivalent dynamics of a colonial project," in *Theravada Buddhism in Colonial Context*, ed. Thomas Borchert (Routledge, 2018), 175.

[171] Douglas Ober, "From Buddha Bones to Bo Trees: Nehruvian India, Buddhism, and the poetics of power, 1947-1956," *Modern Asian Studies* 53, no. 4 (2019): 1314.

increased the visibility of Laos on the religious map and strengthened its diplomatic network. During these trips, the Lao Sangha enjoyed the recognition of religious figures and politicians, most notably the Prime Minister of Burma, U Nu. These visits boosted cultural ties, which subsequently translated into economic aid from Asian countries, including non-Theravada ones. As India and Japan strived for political and cultural influence in the Asian Cold War theater, both deployed the trope of shared Buddhist roots to support the idea of Pan-Asianism and fostered relations with Laos.

Ceylon, the cradle of the Theravada school, enjoyed a particular prestige. In 1956, the Sinhalese Sangha invited its counterparts to celebrate Vesak Day, the Buddha's birthday, enlightenment, and death day. The Lao Sangha was officially contacted via the Ministry of Religion and received a travel allowance from the national budget. In Ceylon, it was provided with transportation to the pilgrimage sites across the country, assistance from the Ceylon Ministry of Religious Affairs clerk, lodging, and meals. Over two weeks, the Lao Sangha's delegation participated in numerous events, chanting with Sinhalese monks and laypeople, exchanging gifts, and receiving relics to be brought back to Laos. On the main day of the celebration, the Supreme Patriarch of Laos delivered a speech, followed by the Burmese Prime Minister, U Nu's talk (fig. 1.3).[172] The meeting with U Nu resulted in an official invitation to Burma, during which the Lao delegation visited religious sites and had meetings with U Nu, as well as with the Minister of Religious Affairs and National Planning, the President of the Union of Burma, the Minister of Education, and the Minister of Industry, among other officials.

[172] U Nu stepped down as Prime Minister in the second half of 1956 and returned to the position in 1957.

At the end of the visit, the Supreme Patriarch of Laos was bestowed the honorary title of the Most Eminent Great Spiritual Teacher.



Figure 1.3. The Supreme Patriarch of Laos (sitting) and the Prime Minister of Burma, U Nu (standing to the right), in Sri Lanka, 1956. Image: The Buddhist Archive of Photography.

The Lao Sangha's visits to India and Nepal were private pilgrimages. India and Nepal shared an area where the historical Buddha was born and proselytized, and the Indian government encouraged mass international pilgrimage of Buddhist monks with reduced train fares.[173] The fact that Buddhism was no longer a major living religion in India did not prevent Nehru's cabinet from using the occasion for its foreign relations.[174] Douglas Ober writes that as Nehru harbored an ambition for India to be a leading

[173] "Réduction de 50% sur les chemins de fer indiens pour les pèlerins bouddhistes laos," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 19.04.1957.
[174] Ober, "From Buddha Bones," 1312.

postcolonial power in Asia, his diplomacy promoted a narrative of a pan-Asian cultural sphere with India as its historical nexus.[175] As material conduits of this cultural connection, Buddhist relics were gifted by Indian diplomats to Buddhist countries. In 1957, a seedling of a banyan tree from Benares, a tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment, was donated to the RLG and planted in Luang Prabang.[176] The Buddhist cultural Cold War relations between India and Laos literally took root.

The RLG deployed Buddhism for crafting an international image of Laos as a "peace-loving nation." This tagline of the RLG's foreign relations articulated its desire for neutrality in the regional Cold War. Nonetheless, the RLG's neutrality was somewhat right-leaning, as Buddhism was repeatedly invoked at international conferences and to the foreign press to affirm the foreignness of communism to Laos and to disassociate Laos from its neighbor, North Vietnam. Introducing Laos to other nations at the Bandung conference, Prime Minister Katai Don Sasorith mentioned Buddhism in the opening line. To him, Buddhism exemplified the cultural values of the Lao people and underscored their similarities with other Asian nations.[177]

Historians of Laos pay little attention to the diplomacy advanced by the Lao Sangha. Yet the fact that the Ministry of Religion, the Ministry of Education, and Prime Ministers of the RLG coordinated the Lao Sangha's travels over the years suggests that it was part of a broader state diplomatic design. The Sangha's activities attracted less scrutiny from the US embassy in Laos or USOM than the diplomacy of the government. This circumventive diplomacy resurfaced later in the Cold War as well. In 1969, a

[175] Ibid.
[176] "Réception du Banian Sacré de Benares (Inde)," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 21.10.1955.
[177] "Allocution de S.E. Katay D. Sasorith."

delegation of the Lao Sangha visited the USSR. The visit was organized as an unofficial trip at the invitation of the Mahayana Buddhist clergy in Ulan Ude.[178] Despite its unofficial status, the Lao Sangha toured at the Soviet expense in Moscow, Leningrad, Ulan Ude, and Tashkent. It visited a Catholic church, an Orthodox church, a Buddhist temple, and an Islamic mosque, as well as the museum of space exploration and nuclear science, and the marvel of Soviet transportation and public art, Moscow Metro.[179] Through this itinerary, the Soviet Union communicated that, as a communist state, it had advanced technology, but, contrary to Western propaganda, exercised religious tolerance and was a home to the major world religions, including Buddhism (fig. 1.4).



Figure 1.4. Lao Sangha in Leningrad. 1969. Image: The Buddhist Archive of Photography.

[178] Soviet Mahayana monks visited Laos earlier, most likely in 1968. The Lao Sangha delegation's trip might have been a response visit. Boulyaphonh, "The Life," 270.
[179] Ibid., 271. A museum of space exploration and nuclear science mentioned in the Lao Sangha travel diaries was most likely an exhibition at the Polytechnic Museum in Moscow.

Conclusion

This chapter argues that, since independence, the RLG embarked on an optimistic project of postcolonial nation-building but faced challenges. It aspired to modernize the country, recognizing its severe underdevelopment, and sought to attract a diverse set of foreign donors. It opportunistically hoped that foreign aid would stimulate industrialization in Laos and relied on the UN's development promise to bring hydroelectric prosperity to the nation. The currents of capitalist technology and hydroelectricity proved to be illusory, a veneer for anti-communist design that compromised the RLG's popularity and stability. Early on, the RLG recognized the dangers of foreign aid dependency, as the US disproportionately empowered the Royal Lao Army and increased the vulnerability of the national economy. The UN promises turned out to be overstated. They delivered a powerhouse of the Lao national economy, the Nam Ngum Dam, alas, too late for the RLG.

Nonetheless, the RLG nation-building project generated some other currents—karmic, cultural, and diplomatic. These currents powered the RLG's construction of national identity and the visibility of Laos on the Asian diplomatic map.

This chapter does not intend to present a detailed account of the nation-building strategy of the RLG but focuses on its most telling and unconventional elements, informed by a particular historical moment when Western Cold War developmentalism aimed at the accelerated transfer of capitalist modernity to Southeast Asia as its anti-communist method. This method was experimental, driven by the compound of the "domino theory" and the theory of modernization. Both theories relied on visuality—of

the binary of a domino collapse versus the futurity of topographic charts of hydroelectric plentitude. Laos figured in this visuality as a small but integral piece, not important by itself, yet critical for the Western Cold War imagining of the conflict in the region. In this schema, the RLG's interests were disregarded. In the end, foreign aid did improve transportation infrastructure in Laos and provided its biggest industrial enterprise, the Nam Ngum dam. But it also damaged the RLG's chances to win the Cold War at home.

The next chapter turns to the RLG's opponent, the communist movement in Laos, the Pathet Lao, to explore its vision of socialist modernity, ideal futurity, and the cultural work that sought to popularize socialist ideals in Laos.

CHAPTER 2. Communist Caves: Futural Technologies of Imagining a Socialist Ideal

> Utopia, the perfect future that men wish for, and history, the imperfect future that men are in the process of creating, do not correspond. […] Yet […] it is the striving for utopia, not its accomplishment, that is the dynamic force in history.
> – Maurice Meisner.

Introduction: International Friendship Hotel

The International Friendship Hotel opened its doors to the first visitors in April 1969.[180] It welcomed guests from the fraternal socialist countries to the headquarters of the communist movement in Laos – the Pathet Lao. Here, members of diplomatic delegations and reporters found rest between meetings with the party leaders and tours of facilities: a publishing house, a military school, a hospital, or a factory. In the after-hours, they would attend a concert or watch a movie in the nearby grand meeting hall. Sometimes, they would be treated to an international production—a joint performance by Lao singers, dancers, and musicians with their international counterparts. On one of these evenings, a Soviet journalist and historian of Southeast Asia, Aleksandr Guber, sketched in his fieldwork notes how deeply he was moved by listening to a Russian song "Volga-rechen'ka," performed by a famous Lao singer, Vilayvan, and accompanied by a group of musicians from Moscow. The song resonated so powerfully with him not only because of Vilayvan's masterful performance but also because "Soviet artists traversed ten thousand kilometers to show Soviet art to the Lao people, to discover the art of these

[180] I.V. Shchedrov, *Partizanskimi Tropami Laosa* [By the Partisan Trails of Laos], (Moscow: Molodaya Gvardia, 1970), 90.

freedom-loving people, and to show to the audience an expression of fraternal solidarity of the Soviet people."[181]

The Friendship Hotel, where Guber stayed, opened its doors to its guests only figuratively. In fact, it had no doors. Like all other venues in the area that later would be named Vieng Xay—the Victory City—it was in a cave, one of the many in the nearby mountain ridges.[182] It did not have doors or windows, nor did it have running water, but it had a power generator for heating, a luxury appliance in the caves, much appreciated on chilling winter nights in the northern Houa Phan province of Laos. Concerts were held in the Elephant Cave—the biggest cave in Vieng Xay, which also doubled as the Lao People's Army garrison (Fig. 2.1). Altogether, the communist caves housed twenty thousand people and were a de facto underground capital of the Pathet Lao-controlled liberated zone from 1964 to 1973.[183]

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[181] A.A. Guber, *Bomby, Peshery, Liudi* [Bombs, Caves, People], (Moscow: Nauka, 1969), 49.
[182] Vieng Xay, in the Lao language, means "Victory City." The cave complex received this name after the 1975 communist revolution; I use it here retrospectively to designate the historical site.
[183] The approximate population of Vieng Xay was given to me by the tour guide of the Museum of the Memorial Cave of Kaysone Phomvihane, Bounphanh Phommueang, in Vieng Xay, 16.01.2023.



Figure 2.1. The meeting hall of the Elephant Cave, also used as a theater. ca. 1964–73. Image: The Museum of Kaysone Phomvihane Cave.

The Pathet Lao leadership moved to the caves in 1964 from the provincial capital of Houa Phan, Sam Neua, at the start of the American bombing of its territories. Before that, Vieng Xay had been an obscure mountainous area a few miles away from the North Vietnamese border (Fig. 2.2). When the bombing started, the caves provided shelter for the Pathet Lao but were too small to satisfy all its needs. They were gradually enlarged with dynamite explosions and subsequent interior development.[184] By the end of the decade, the complex featured the individual party leaders' caves, the caves for the Lao People's Army, schools, teachers, medical, and military colleges, civilian and military hospitals, a bank of the liberated zone, a party administrative office, metalsmith and

[184] Martin Rathie, "The History and Evolution of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party," in *Changing Lives in Laos: Society, Politics, and Culture in a Post-Socialist State*, ed. Vanina Boute and Vatthana Pholsena (NUS Press, 2017), 36.

weaving factories, a publishing house, a radio station, and a film production unit. The caves of the party leaders were fortified with bombproof doors and fitted with Soviet air filters in the event of a chemical attack. A publishing house and a radio station shared information from Vieng Xay with socialist countries and international news agencies. Ivan Shchedrov, a correspondent for *Pravda* newspaper in the 1960s and a historian of the Vietnam War, was impressed with the scale of developed facilities in the caves and described Vieng Xay as a "multistoried skyscraper city underground."[185]



Figure 2.2. The Vieng Xay landscape. 2023. Image: Anna Koshcheeva.

A high-profile delegation from the German Democratic Republic, headed by Johannes Chemnitzer, a member of the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, or SED), visited the Pathet Lao in the

[185] Shchedrov, *Partizanskimi Tropami*, 8.

communist caves in 1970 and 1974.[186] Among the delegation was a photographer and a correspondent for *Horizont* newspaper, Kempen Dettmann. Dettmann sent copies of his photographs and articles back to Vieng Xay. Meanwhile, Soviet journalists specializing in foreign events, and especially the Vietnam War, Aleksandr Guber, Mikhail Il'insky, Julian Semenov, Ivan Shchedrov, and Yuri Yukhanov, wrote detailed accounts of their assignments in the liberated zone and published them in the Soviet press. The trail of these travelogues and images forms the primary sources for this chapter. Additionally, curators of the Museum of the Memorial Cave of Kaysone Phomvihane generously shared hundreds of files from the museum collection and the private libraries of the Pathet Lao leaders with me. I further supplemented these files with my photographs of sites, images from the Lao News Agency collection, and footage from the National Film Archive of Laos.

What immediately becomes evident in these archives is their curatorial logic—the themes they highlight and the images they repeat. In the harsh realities of wartime and bombing and the urgency of political struggle, the archives featured smiling female soldiers, military training drills, bazookas, and party meetings but avoided imagery of mutilated Lao bodies. The corporeal damage of air bombardment was projected onto killed livestock and destroyed Buddha statues from local temples. The photographs illustrated the horror and loss without locating harm in the collective body of the Pathet Lao. Even then, the visuality of armed struggle and physical suffering was rather marginal compared to another part of the imagery: of everyday resilience and optimistic anticipation. A worker at the printing press, a smiling teenager with a military cap with a

[186] Kempen Dettmann, "Sahai Phoumi," *Horizont*, no. 18, 1974.

communist star, and a woman learning to operate a film projector populated the Pathet Lao photographic collage, connoting these themes. Within the archives, pictorial prominence of the publishing house, the radio station, the filmmaking unit, and the performance troupes: song-and-dance collectives and acrobatic groups index their particular importance to the Pathet Lao. With impressive resources invested in this material and human infrastructure of visual and acoustic communication and representation, two questions frame my further analysis. Firstly, what specific functions the sites like a radio station and an acrobatic body perform by themselves and in synergy with each other's modes of representation, and what these functions reveal about a socialist ideal of the Pathet Lao? And secondly, what does this infrastructure, which in its entirety was provided as international socialist aid, illuminate about the relationship of the socialist bloc with the Pathet Lao and its agendas of extending socialist visions to an Asian frontier?

The peoples of the liberated zone were ethnically diverse, heterolingual, heteroreligious, impoverished, and illiterate. Nonetheless, they became the backbone of the communist movement. This case is particular to Laos and emblematic of a Third World socialist struggle against Western Cold War imperialism, unfolding on the global periphery and enabled by transnational socialist cooperation. Many Third World communist movements started in the mountains, jungles, and hideouts. But from the onset, a communist base was a node of highly cosmopolitan cooperation, where transnational socialist forces supplied technologies and expertise and facilitated material and cultural flows. The Friendship Hotel in the communist caves epitomized the meeting point of the transnational, the peripheral, and the representational. But how

exactly was a commitment to futurity and a socialist ideal created simultaneously in a place like a liberated zone and across global Cold War frontiers? This is where I return to the sites of the production of socialist futurity in the Pathet Lao archives.

Lao Print Socialism

Benedict Anderson suggests a direct relation between the spread of literature and print in the vernaculars and the contemporaneity of plots to that of a reader with the emergence of imagined communities.[187] He calls this calculation and simultaneous consumption of literary contemporaneity print capitalism. Anderson is primarily interested in imagined communities as the basis for a mass affiliation with the nation, but his analysis applies to other communities as well. The Pathet Lao programs in promoting literacy, Lao socialist literature, and print media closely resemble Anderson's analysis, confirming its applicability to a liberated zone. For that similarity I call the Pathet Lao efforts discussed below—*print socialism*.

In an interview with Alexandr Guber, Prince Souphanouvong stated that one of the pressing tasks for the political arm of the Pathet Lao, the Neo Lao Hak Xat (NLHX, the Lao Patriotic Front), was to develop the Lao dictionary. [188] He continued that during the anti-colonial struggle against the French, most ethnic minorities learned the Lao language, providing a lingua franca in the liberated zone. Yet, having a common language is not enough to deliver a socialist vision.[189] Since colonial times, higher

[187] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 1983).
[188] Here, I use the Pathet Lao as an umbrella term. More accurately, cultural programs of the Pathet Lao were a responsibility of the Neo Lao Hak Xat (NLHX, The Lao Patriotic Front), the political arm of the Pathet Lao.
[189] Guber, *Bomby,* 21.

education in Laos was delivered in French, relegating Lao to domesticity and colloquiality.[190] There is no appropriate Lao vocabulary to express a number of modern concepts. The language did not at the time possess a necessary political, scientific, or technical apparatus.[191] What Prince Souphanouvong meant by his remarks on the contemporary state of the Lao lexicon was that the Pathet Lao had to invent and teach a socialist Lao language to popularize its vision.[192]

This goal necessitated several preparatory and intertwined workstreams: the eradication of illiteracy, reform of the Lao alphabet, and a massive expansion of schooling of children and adults.[193] Additionally, the socialist vocabulary and concepts had to be explained at an accessible level, in a familiar context, and be incorporated into the existing cultural milieu. These parameters shaped the literary socialist realism of the Pathet Lao, which privileged short stories, often semi-biographical or narrated from an author-cum-witness perspective, and set in a literary terrain of the liberated zone. Emerging Lao socialist literature and poetry introduced down-to-earth characters fighting for the Pathet Lao in the familiar vistas of Lao provinces. It featured patriotic male soldiers and their loyal girlfriends teaching or working, waiting for their beloved to return from the battlefields, ethnic minority women spearheading village-level social change or leading a partisan organization, and so on.

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[190] This opinion was also later expressed by the Soviet linguist Morev. See L.N. Morev, *Laosskiy iazyk* [The Lao Language] (Moscow: the USSR Academy of Science, the Institute of Eastern Studies, 1972), 13–15.
[191] Guber, *Bomby,* 21.
[192] On the capacity of language to "rapidly revolutionize consciousness" and its importance for socialist regimes and the Pathet Lao, see Creak, *Embodied Nation*, 170.
[193] On the educational goal of eradicating illiteracy and replacing French as a medium of education, see Creak, *Embodied Nation*, 174. Alphabets for ethnic minority languages based on the Lao script were also under development, but this process was slow and uneven; see *Voices of Viengxay: Stories from the 'Hidden City' from Interviews with People who Lived under Bombardment in Northeastern Laos from 1964 to 1973* (Lao National Tourism Administration, 2010), 40; Guber, *Bomby,* 22.

To promote mass literacy, the Pathet Lao adopted a tried-and-tested method that the Bolshevik and Chinese Communist parties had implemented before—an alphabet reform. According to Prince Souphanouvong, the anti-colonial struggle had spread fluency in Lao, but only in oral form. The spelling used in Laos until that point was etymological and loosely standardized across the regions of the country. It involved the use of characters that identified the Indic, Khmer, or Thai origins of words reserved for Buddhist or royal context and the abjad spelling that omitted short vowels. These irregularities did not correspond to the Lao pronunciation and necessitated rote memorization.[194] The spelling system therefore was not conducive to mass literacy, was oriented towards the past, privileged the foreign above the Lao, and the elite or religious above the egalitarian. Its underlying logic was contrary to the socialist ideology. The Pathet Lao's grammar reform simplified and streamlined the spelling. In 1967, Phoumi Vongvichit, a member of the NLHX politburo and its cultural theorist, authored *The Lao Grammar*, which was printed by the Pathet Lao Publishing House and adopted for mass education in the liberated zone.[195] Phoumi's grammar followed purely phonetic rules with consonant inconsistencies removed and vowels transcribed.[196] According to Phoumi, this spelling system was superior to the old one, maintained in the RLG territories, because it suited the least educated strata, was purified of foreign influences, and, hence, was nationalist in character. It was rational and scientific, and hence, modern.[197] After the revolution, it was rolled out nationwide as the standard.

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[194] Morev, *Laosskiy iazyk,* 36, 45–45.
[195] Phoumi Vongvichit, *Vainyakon Lao* [The Lao Grammar] (1991); N.J. Enfield, *A Grammar of Lao* (Mouton de Gruyter, 2007), 23-24.
[196] Following the Lao convention, I refer to individuals in Laos by their first names.
[197] See translation of Phoumi's Introduction to *Vainyakon Lao* in Enfield, *A Grammar of Lao*, 27–28.

In the wake of post-socialist revisionism, some scholars criticized Phoumi's reforms as crude or ethnocentric. [198] His Lao Grammar was not optimal for ethnic minority languages and concealed the etymological origins of some words. Nonetheless, such evaluation lacks a historical perspective. Phoumi's grammar was developed in the early post-colonial period with the ambitious goal of supporting the fastest possible uptake in literacy in the common language, and evidence exists that it certainly contributed to that goal.

To illustrate the progress in developing the educational sector, Prince Souphanouvong regularly mentioned statistics to Soviet journalists: the number of enrolled or graduated students, teaching staff, printed textbooks, or training facilities.[199] These isolated data points do not congeal a comprehensive picture; nevertheless, they reveal telling characteristics of the educational system in the liberated zone. First of all, schooling was heavily skewed towards the elementary level. That might seem inconsequential, as historically, the education in colonial Laos was overall poor and severely underdeveloped at the higher levels.[200] In the 1950s–60s, the RLG started to develop the capacity for secondary and tertiary education with the Lycée de Vientiane, and by consolidating colleges in the Sisavang Vong University, and developing its Dong Dok campus, now the main campus of the National University of Laos.[201] The Pathet

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[198] For a critique of Phoumi's *Vainyakon Lao,* see James Chamberlain, "Language and Nation Building," in *Poverty Alleviation for All: Potentials and Options for People in the Uplands*, ed. James Chamberlain and Panh Phomsombath (Embassy of Sweden-Sida, 2002), 6; Enfield, *A Grammar of Lao*, 25.
[199] See, for e.g., Semenov, *Vietnam, Laos,* 149, 177–179; Shchedrov, *Partizanskimi Tropami*, 86; M.M. Il'inskiy, *Laos: Ognennyi Koridor* [Laos: A Fire Corridor] (Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 1972), 35, 64.
[200] Martin Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 43–44; Alfred McCoy, "French Colonialism in Laos, 1893–1945," in *Laos: War and Revolution*, ed. Nina Adams and Alfred McCoy (Harper Colophon Books, 1970), 82.
[201] The University was established in 1958 and included the National Center for the Study of Administration and Jurisprudence, the National Education Center, the School of Medicine, the School of

Lao, on the contrary, prioritized the primary level, targeting children and adult learners. In 1968–1970, the number of adult learners was nearly the same as that of schoolchildren, indicating the equal importance of both groups.[202] Even then, this number did not account for informal adult self-education in reading and writing, which was actively propagandized in the liberated zone.

To expedite literacy acquisition, the education system had to reabsorb educated adults as primary-level teachers as soon as possible. Teacher training was thus a high priority, and teacher institutes and colleges were promptly set up. Yet Kathryn Sweet cautions us that such an orientation toward quantitative expansion entailed some compromises. In her study of the history of medicine in Laos, Sweet discusses medical training in the early post-revolutionary period, a decade after 1975, and points to the incompatibility of the educational levels of locally trained medical personnel with international standards.[203] Reports of Soviet journalists echo this argument and confirm that training in the Vieng Xay medical school was rather brief—sometimes just one year of coursework and one or two years of residency for a nurse and an additional year for a doctor.[204] Similarly, teachers' colleges enrolled the fourth-grade school graduates to become the next generation of teachers at the primary level, while teachers' institutes offered more advanced training. Besides medical, pedagogical, and military professionalization, no secondary vocational or tertiary education was available in Vieng Xay. To acquire skills in other fields, including journalism, filmmaking, or radio

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Agriculture, the National Library, and the National Museum. "Université Sisavang Vong," *Lao Presse*, July 10, 1958.

[202] Il'inskiy, *Laos*, 64.

[203] By the early Lao PDR period, Sweet means 1976–90. Kathryn Sweet, "Women's Health in Laos: From Colonial Times to the Present," in *Translating the Body: Medical Education in Southeast Asia*, ed. Hans Pols, C. Michele Thompson, and Warner John Harley (NUS Press, 2017), 131.

[204] Guber, *Bomby,* 35.

broadcasting, students were sent abroad, most often to North Vietnam for basic practical training and to universities in Eastern European countries for more advanced levels.[205] By the end of the 1960s, the first graduates started to return to Vieng Xay from the Soviet Union. Among them were two children of Prince Souphanouvong and a daughter of Phoumi Vongvichit. Three other children of Prince Souphanouvong were still studying in the USSR.[206]

The infrastructural backbone of print socialism in the liberated zone was the Lao Hak Xat Publishing House.[207] With an editorial office and printing facility, it issued newspapers, composed literary works, and printed everything from textbooks to translated socialist classics and concert tickets. It started its work as a small newspaper in 1950 in Vientiane, then directed by Sisana Sisane.[208] In 1959, following the arrest of the Pathet Lao leaders, the Lao Hak Xat newspaper was banned in the RLG part of the country.[209] In 1960, the Publishing House relocated to the Pathet Lao's base in Sam Neua, and in 1966, it arrived in Vieng Xay (Fig. 2.3).[210] Its administrative office settled in a bamboo hut and adjacent complex of five caves that housed editorial and plate-making rooms, printing presses, and an electricity generator. Eighty-two people worked in the Publishing House in the late 1960s, often both adult members of a family. Their homes were built nearby, as well as a seven-grade school for their children.[211]

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[205] For more on Lao students in North Vietnam, see Vatthana Pholsena, "War Generation," 109–134.
[206] Shchedrov, *Partizanskimi Tropami*, 86; Semenov, *Vietnam, Laos,* 177.
[207] Which I more often call the Pathet Lao Publishing House.
[208] Martin Stuart-Fox, Simon Creak, and Martin Rathie, eds., *Historical Dictionary of Laos*, 4th edition (Rowman and Littlefield, 2023), 445; Shchedrov, *Partizanskimi Tropami*, 104.
[209] Ryan Wolfson-Ford, *Forsaken Causes: Liberal Democracy and Anticommunism in Cold War Laos* (The University of Wisconsin Press, 2024), 186.
[210] Guber, *Bomby,* 60; Semenov, *Vietnam, Laos,* 123.
[211] Guber, *Bomby,* 59–60.

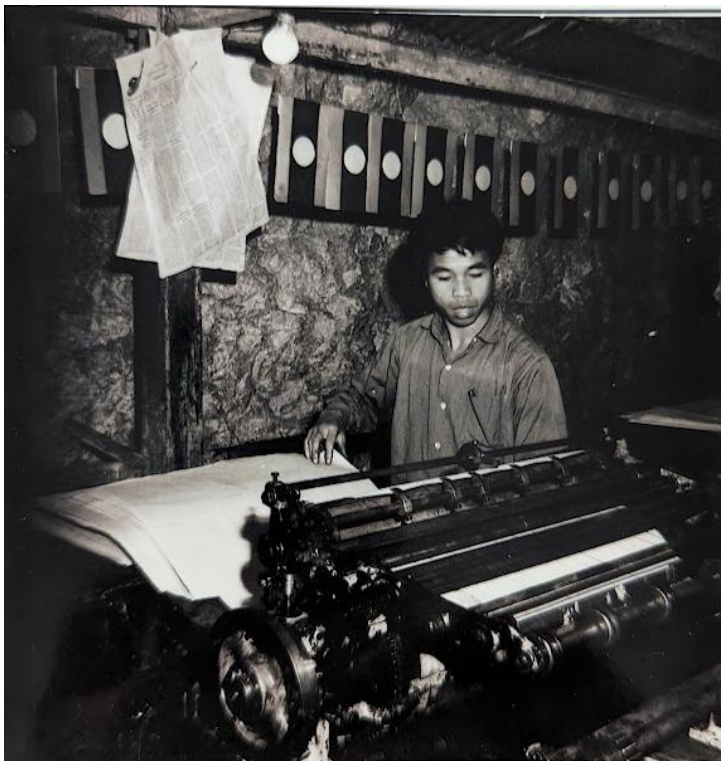


Figure 2.3. The Lao Hak Xat Publishing House. 1970. Image: The Museum of Kaysone Phomvihane Cave, Kempen Dettmann collection.

The Publishing House issued two biweekly newspapers, *The Lao Hak Xat* (LHX) and *The Liberation Army*, with a print run of 4,000 copies.[212] Besides periodicals, the printing shop produced calendars, posters, and invitations to cultural events, particularly when international performers were touring the liberated zone.[213] A big share of its output was textbooks, including Phoumi's *The Lao Grammar*. Prince Souphanouvong noted that, by 1968, the Publishing House had printed more than half a million textbooks.[214] Political materials of the Neo Lao Hak Xat were also issued here. Journalists and writers of the editorial section collected materials for the press,

[212] Il'inskiy, *Laos*, 35; Gubert, *Bomby,* 60. For comparison, the largest newspaper in the RLG part of Laos, *Xat Lao*, was printed in 6,000 copies. See Wolfson-Ford, *Forsaken Cause*, 21.
[213] Gubert, *Bomby,* 56.
[214] Semenov, *Vietnam, Laos,* 149.

conducted research on Lao epics, local folk tales, and songs, and composed short stories. The foreign section translated political pamphlets and socialist fiction into French and English. Some of its materials found their way into the Cornell University Library collections, and I especially enjoyed reading the short stories.[215] The foreign section also translated the socialist classics, including Soviet novels, into Lao. Often, these novels were adapted from the Vietnamese versions rather than the originals, as was the case with Nikolay Ostrovsky's *How the Steel was Tempered*.[216] Translating from Vietnamese versions reflected the language capacity of the editorial office, as Lao writers in Vieng Xay were fluent in Vietnamese but not yet in Russian or Eastern European languages.

Chanthy Deuansavanh was one of the key figures in the work of all sections of the Publishing House, as well as in the Pathet Lao literature. He dedicated most of his time to journalism, translation, research into oral folk traditions, and the composition of new lyrics for popular traditional tunes. In his little spare time, he wrote fiction. An award-winning novelist, Chanthy is perhaps the most widely-read author in Laos. His life-long project, *The Path of Life*, exemplifies the literature that endorsed the revolutionary movement in Laos as historical decolonial inevitability and the bearer of a better futurity.

Chanthy started his revolutionary career at the age of twelve, after years of child enslavement. Upon escaping the abusive household of a Hmong chieftain and joining the Pathet Lao, he was adopted by Phoumi Vongvichith's family. He received an

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[215] See for e.g. such publications as *Political Program of the Neo Lao Hak Xat (Lao Patriotic Front)* (Neo Lao Hak Xat Publications, 1968); *12 Years of U.S. Imperialist Intervention and Aggression in Laos* (Neo Lao Hak Xat Publications, 1966); *The Escalation of the U.S. War of Aggression in Laos and the Settlement of the Lao Problem* (Neo Lao Hak Xat Publications, 1970); *Serious Bankruptcy of Nixon Doctrine in Laos* (Neo Lao Hak Xat Publications, 1971).
[216] Shchedrov, *Partizanskimi Tropami,* 104–106.

elementary education in North Vietnam and then began working for Sisana Sisane in the Publishing House. Soon after, he was sent for journalist training in Hanoi and then returned to his work at the Publishing House in a higher role. In 1963, Sisana transferred the editorial leadership of *The Lao Hak Xat* newspaper to Chanthy, then aged 23, focusing himself on the nascent Pathet Lao Radio. In 1965, Chanthy finished his autobiographical novel, *The Light of Revolution*, which narrated his experience and commitment to the Pathet Lao. The novel received enthusiastic responses from the party leaders and the reading audience. Following the acclaim, Chanthy extended the novel, now titled *The Path of Life*, and the Publishing House printed it in 1970. After the revolution, Chanthy would continue to add new chapters to *The Path of Life*, and the novel would become compulsory reading in Lao middle schools, enjoy five reprints, and a translation into English.[217]

The Path of Life is a novel at the intersection of socialist realism and revolutionary adventure. It is also an author's personal journey of developing historical consciousness and, through it, a commitment to the revolution. In the foreword to *The Path of Life,* Chanthy stresses that his writing is not fiction but represents an accurate rendition of events and his personal experiences of them.[218] He implies that his novel is a work of contemporary vernacular historiography, even if narrated from the first-person perspective and delivered in creative writing. Chanthy's approach to history writing is radically unconventional within Lao historiography. Prior to the emergence of socialist literature, the field was characterized by academic pursuits of two types: colonial

[217] Chanthy Deuansavanh, *The Path of Life: A Memoir*, trans. Sianong Phomkong Burch (The Lao Writers Association, 2016), 9–11.
[218] Ibid.

francophone history of "French Laos" and the post-independence academic research into royal genealogies and cultural histories that sought to connect modern Laos with a "golden age" of the premodern Lan Xang Kingdom.[219] In contrast, the Pathet Lao, like many other socialist movements, had a strong compulsion to historicize itself by writing a "revolutionary history," in which the birth of the revolutionary movement was positioned as a year zero and the start of a new age of awakening. The party meetings' anniversaries represented milestones in the socialist chronicle of this new age.[220] Yet, *The Path of Life* did not comply with this genre either. In the novel, Chanthy blends the assumed objectivity of historical narration of colonial oppression and anti-colonial resistance with personal experience and a self-aware analysis of a transformative journey toward commitment to a better national future. Chanthy opens *The Path of Life* by recounting his childhood hardship. Soon, he adds an interpretive voice to his storytelling, informing the reader that he retrospectively realizes that his childhood misfortune was contingent on a historical condition in Laos—colonial oppression. Once he becomes aware of it, Chanthy embraces the Pathet Lao as an agent of anti-colonial struggle (where French colonialism is superseded by American imperialism) and the only force in the country motivated by the liberation of the people. Gradually, Chanthy transforms from a former slave and a fugitive into the intellectual vanguard of the revolution. As his historical and revolutionary consciousness matures, he begins to desire a better life not for himself but for all his countrymen.

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[219] The Lan Xang Kingdom, or the Kingdom of the Million Elephants, from the 14th to 18th centuries.
[220] See, for e.g., *A Quarter Century of Grim and Victorious Struggle* (Neo Lao Hak Xat Publications, 1970). Kaysone Phomvihane, *25 Pi Heng Kantosu le Saisana khong Phak Pasason Pativat Lao* [25 Years of the Fight and Victory of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party] (Samnakphim chanmai So Po Po Lo, 1980).

Yet, Chanthy's autobiographical character is always humble. Unlike the Stakhanovite literature, the genre of Soviet novels that created larger-than-life images of an ideal "New Soviet man," *The Path of Life* does not cast him as a hero. On the contrary, dramatizing his low social position at the beginning of his journey, Chanthy implies that his readers would be better off than him to start changing their destiny, both as individuals and as part of the collective. In parallel, the novel posits socialist revolution as the dialectic inevitability of anti-colonial struggle. Chanthy legitimizes the Pathet Lao as the bearer of positive social change, a role predetermined by the movement's anti-colonial origin.[221] Narrating his life story, he encourages the reader to embark on a similar path, guided by the results of his personal awakening. Calling for collective agentive transformation, he simultaneously advocates for joining the socialist movement and bringing about a better future to Laos.

Ironically, Chanthy's fate proved complicated after the revolution. The Pathet Lao takeover in December 1975 found Chanthy working at the Hanoi office of the Lao News Agency. In 1976, he was called back to Vientiane to take one of the leadership roles in its central office. Yet, in 1983, Chanthy was purged. He was rehabilitated four years later and, in 1990, became the Director of the Lao Writers Association—a position of symbolic prestige.[222] In 1999, Chanthy received the SEA Write Award and was granted a state pension in 2002.[223]

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[221] The Pathet Lao positioned itself as an heir and successor to the Lao Issara (Free Laos), an independence movement of 1945, led by Prince Phetsarath, an older half-brother of Prince Souphanouvong. Often, the rural population in Laos referred to the Pathet Lao as Issara.
[222] Deaunsavanh, *The Path of Life*, 420.
[223] Ibid., 415.

Chanthy's relationship with the Pathet Lao became tense even before the revolution, yet it did not affect his convictions in the party's cause or his hard work for Lao print socialism. His journalism and leadership in the Publishing House helped to create a shared print space in the liberated zone, while his creative writing advanced Lao literary socialist realism. As a literary phenomenon, socialist realism was often approached with a negative preconception in Western academia. It was understood as a simplistic style prescribed by the Marxist-Leninist ideological agenda, restrictive of writers' creative freedom, turning cultural production to the service of totalitarianism. This attitude to socialist realism in the West was a product of the cultural Cold War, later absorbed in the post-socialist countries. Nevertheless, Boris Grois offers an alternative and insightful reading. He insists that socialist realism is not mimetic; it does not aim for a realistic representation of a proletarian life: "Art ceases representing life and begins transforming it by means of a total aesthetic-political project."[224] Instead of rendering real people in real life, it "is oriented towards that which has not yet come into being but which should be created."[225] Continuing Grois' train of thought, I suggest that socialist realism strives to project an ideal socialist subject in the ideal time of socialism. It thereby represents a socialist future and its denizens already conceived in the present. Chanthy's Lao pre-revolutionary socialist realism bears similarities and differences with the early Soviet socialist realism to which Grois refers. Chanthy's writing is insistently realist, as it narrates his personal experience and recounts historical events. It talks directly and forcefully to the reader, assuming a shared subjectivity and temporality.

[224] Boris Grois, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle (Verso, 2011), 36.
[225] Ibid., 51.

Chanthy is self-aware of the dialogue he creates with the audience, an engaged historicizing with an unapologetic endorsement of his political stance. He does not write about ideal subjects in ideal socialist futurity, yet his writing is temporally minded. He does not strive to author a socialist utopia; instead, he calls for collective action toward an ideal socialist future.

Chanthy's work was essential to print socialism in the communist caves; yet print socialism itself was folded into the larger toolkit of the Pathet Lao's technologies of representing a future, merely one component of what the visual archives of the Vieng Xay caves highlighted. One of the sharpest critiques of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* is the overdetermination of the role of print. The popular consumption of vernacular literature in Anderson's analysis was grounded more in the experience of medieval Europe than in the rise of anti-colonialism in Southeast Asia. David Henley argues that in Indochina, mass mobilization was rooted foremost in political processes of decoloniality.[226] Print socialism in the liberated zone encompasses Anderson's and Henley's perspectives. It created a shared print sociality and was integrated into the international circulation of socialist intellectual and political currents. I turn to the library of Prince Souphanouvong to analyze its international content.

Foreign publications promptly arrived in Vieng Xay and reflected which discourses in socialist theory, practice, and global realpolitik were relevant to the prince. Besides a long shelf of the works of V.I. Lenin, which, I suspect, was rather a pledge of allegiance than reference material for most leaders of the communist movements across the globe, the library included a sizable collection of francophone periodicals on

[226] David Henley, "The Origins of Southeast Asian Nations: A Question of Timing," in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Nationalism* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 271–72.

immediate affairs in the communist world, published in Moscow or Eastern Europe. These periodicals included *The Information Bulletin* of the communist parties (Bulletin d'Information: Documents des Parties Communists et Ouvriers, Articles et Interventions), published in Prague. This *Bulletin* occasionally printed the memoranda of the Pathet Lao. Others were *The Review of International Politics*, *The New Times* (Novoe Vremya), *Socialism: Theory and Practice*, *International Affairs*, and *World Marxist Review*, printed in Moscow; *The Soviet Union* in Vietnamese (Lien Xo); *Peking Information*; and a few bulletins by national communist parties. These periodicals kept socialist movements abreast of each other's affairs and positions. They also helped attune Prince Souphanouvong's diplomacy to different audiences, as his interview with East German journalists illustrated.

Another major section of his library dealt with questions of economic development in the Global South. Titles in this section included: *How to Overcome Economic Underdevelopment: Forms and Methods (Historical Experience of Soviet Asian Republics)*; *The Effectiveness of Socialist Economic Management; The Historical Experience and Social Progress in Africa*; *The Problems of Development of Free Countries*; and others. Several monographs addressed aspects of the Soviet economy, particularly higher education, public health, technology, but also cinema and literature. Several books covered the subjects of liberation movements and non-alignment and offered political analyses of Cambodia, Cuba, North Korea, Bulgaria, the Philippines, Mao's China, and North Vietnam. The section on American foreign policy and US scholarship on Laos included Hanson Baldwin's *The Strategy for Tomorrow*, *Laos: War*

and Revolution, edited by Nina Adams and Alfred McCoy, and *The Roots of American Foreign Policy* by Gabriel Kolko, among others.

Overall, the library focused on Cold War geopolitics, debates in the socialist bloc, and questions of economic development relevant to the Lao conditions. It was pragmatic in nature and cosmopolitan in outlook, centering on foreign affairs and socialist governance rather than theoretical Marxism. A historian, Martin Stuart-Fox, has proclaimed that there have been no Lao Marxist intellectuals.[227] I disagree with his statement on methodological grounds. Theoretical writing would appear in the Lao PDR after the revolution. But in the formative years of the Pathet Lao, we should not expect to discover its ideological vision articulated in print from the Publishing House. Rather, we can decipher such a vision across the content and the media that the Pathet Lao produced to project its socialist ideal.

Sonic Social(ism) Darwinism

By the mid-1960s, another medium appeared in the liberated zone—radio broadcasting. The Pathet Lao Radio (*Vithanyu kachaisiang khong fai pathet lao*) went on air on August 13, 1960.[228] As a technology of mass communication, radio broadcasting became available to the Pathet Lao a decade later than the printing infrastructure, but once the radio station started to work in Vieng Xay, it took over as the center for coordinating and disseminating information. It became the main channel for sending

[227] Martin Stuart-Fox, "Obituary: Phoumi Vongvichit," *Lao Studies Review* 2 (2008), https://web.archive.org/web/20080613152552/http://home.vicnet.net.au/~lao/laostudy/phoumi.htm

[228] Another commonly used name is the Voice of the Pathet Lao, now the National Radio of Laos. See "55 years of the National Radio of Laos," The National Radio of Laos, accessed March 18, 2026, https://lnr.org.la/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/LNR-55-years-Final-PDF-1-1.pdf.

news about the liberated zone to the international community, receiving radio waves from abroad, and circulating information within the liberated zone. Due to its advantage of transmitting the signal regardless of climatic or road conditions or aerial bombardment, it became the core of the media ecosystem, serving as internal infrastructure for print media as well.

The radio was so strategically important to the Pathet Lao that its location was kept secret from journalists, even from the socialist countries. Correspondents were allowed to visit the radio station office only on rainy days, when aerial surveillance by US airplanes was not possible. Yet, the name of the area where the office was located was kept undisclosed to prevent interception. Even then, the actual transmission station was miles away from the caves of the Pathet Lao Radio office.

The scale of the radio station's work corresponded to its importance. By the mid-1960s, seventy people were employed at the station, producing nine hours of broadcast per day. The radio office had multiple editorial sections. The foreign section received news from international outlets, both Western and socialist, as well as news from the RLG-controlled part of Laos and from the Central and Southern provinces of the Pathet Lao territory, with which ground communication was largely impossible. It was instrumental to Pathet Lao foreign diplomacy, communicating its political standpoints on current developments in Laos, exposing American military actions in the country, and proposing the Pathet Lao's resolutions to the crisis. Alexandr Guber wrote that Soviet journalists knew that information about the Pathet Lao came from the original source through its radio communication, even if it was misattributed to intermediary newspapers or agencies in North Vietnam. It was also the only direct source of

information about the situation in the liberated zone for Western audiences. The Pathet Lao Radio aimed at creating an international image of the Pathet Lao as a fighter for national liberation, yet willing to negotiate on peaceful terms. In fact, the Pathet Lao repeatedly stressed its desire for cooperation with the RLG but made US withdrawal from the country its condition.

The foreign section of the Pathet Lao Radio connected the liberated zone with the global socialist cosmopolis. Prince Souphanouvong listened to Radio Moscow, which helped him with learning Russian, his tenth language.[229] He occasionally welcomed Soviet journalists with greetings in Russian, although he preferred to continue the interviews in French, and, responding to the request of a journalist, Jury Yuhanov, he recorded an audio address to the Soviet audiences in Russian.[230] Some Pathet Lao soldiers who accompanied Soviet journalists on their tours of Vieng Xay also tried to learn Russian from the radio but often admitted slow progress due to the wartime.[231] Similarly, the radio waves of Radio Hanoi and Radio Peking were received in the liberated zone. Kristin Roth-Ey argues that radio in the 1960s-1970s became a major player in transnational Cold War communication in the Third World, particularly in less urban areas.[232] She notes that the radio stations in the socialist world were multilingual and expansive in international broadcasting. They emphasized their appreciation of the vernacular languages and cultures of the newly independent countries. This effort to speak a local language and learn local music was not only a powerful affective way to

[229] Guber, *Bomby,* 20.
[230] Y.A. Yuhananov, *Indokitaiskii Smerch* [Indochina whirlwind] (Molodaya gvardiia, 1969), 86.
[231] Shchedrov, *Partizanskimi Tropami*, 15.
[232] Kristin Roth-Ey, "How Do You Listen to Radio Moscow? Moscow's Broadcasters, 'Third World' Listeners, and the Space of the Airwaves in the Cold War," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 98, no. 4 (2020), 712–14.

forge friendly relationships but also indicated respect for previously marginalized peoples.[233] In the liberated zone, the radio capability itself was the product of socialist technological aid, facilitating the integration of the Pathet Lao into the global socialist sonic network.[234]

As instrumental as the Pathet Lao Radio was for international communications, I find its role more important on the domestic front. In the technical aspect, the radio served as an auxiliary medium within the communication system of the liberated zone. From 1968, it was incorporated into a newly established Pathet Lao News Agency, an umbrella organization for mass communication, and served as the internal channel between its branches. To help deliver content to the offices of local newspapers, which would be slow to reach via ground communication, it functioned akin to a telegraph. On specifically designated waves, radio presenters slowly narrated texts from the central Publishing House. The staff at the receiving end transcribed the messages, which were later included in the newspaper columns. Thus, the centralized method of integrating radio transmission into the operations of the Pathet Lao press increased the efficiency with which the news spread to the far corners of the provinces.

Above its ancillary logistical function, the most significant and fascinating aspect of the Pathet Lao Radio's work is its bespoke programming to the audiences in the liberated zone, its *tailored sonic socialism*. The editorial office of the Pathet Lao Radio created content in multiple languages. For international communication, they were French, Vietnamese, and English. Domestic broadcasting was also multilingual. The target audience for programs in Lao was the most ideologically conscious and mature—

[233] Roth-Ey, "How Do You Listen to Radio Moscow?", 726.
[234] Guber, *Bomby*, 65.

the party members and the Pathet Lao Army. Programs in Lao included domestic and international news, debates on local and international politics, and broadcasts of literary works alongside the music composed in the liberated zone. Besides these programs, the Pathet Lao Radio also produced content in the two languages of the most populous ethnic minorities–Hmong and Khamu.[235] Programs in these languages featured domestic news and a newly developed musical genre. On the surface, this genre could be described as neo-traditional for its use of popular folk tunes, well familiar and beloved in particular ethnic communities. New socialist lyrics in Khamu and Hmong were composed to cover these traditional tunes. These lyrics introduced socialist role models, their character traits, and ideal behaviors; on a meta-level, they popularized socialist morals, parlance, and expected changes in societal norms. Focusing on emotions, these songs built on preexisting romantic arcs. As their protagonists embodied ethnic participation in military struggle and social development, they also confessed their love to their romantic partners, the sacrifice of that love until the revolution, and intertwined loyalty to the motherland with their significant others. The former was always prioritized: love for the motherland was demanded now, while love for the partner was deferred to the future.

The music of patriotic romanticism, which deployed traditional tropes for nationalist purposes, is a universal phenomenon. What is distinctive about Lao tailored sonic socialism is its attention to multi-ethnic (*pasason banda phao*) inclusivity.[236] New

[235] Paul-David Lutz, "'Mouthpiece' and 'Arena'?—Social(ist) Media in Contemporary Laos," *South East Asia Researc*h 32 (2024): 80; Nathan Badenoch, "Translating the State: Ethnic Language Radio in the Lao PDR," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 48, no. 5 (2018), 789.
[236] Yves Goudineau, "The Ongoing Invention of a Multi-Ethnic Heritage of Laos," special issue of *The Journal of Lao Studies* 2 (2015), 33.

Pathet Lao songs in ethnic vernaculars were especially successful in this regard, simultaneously reinforcing ethnic pride, desire to belong to a supra-ethnic community, and willingness to sacrifice for its better, socialist future. To be certain, these new songs in minority languages were not a grassroots phenomenon. They were deliberately composed in a cooperative effort between the Pathet Lao literary unit and participants from ethnic minorities. In the same way as the Pathet Lao worked on developing Hmong and Khamu alphabets based on the Lao script, these songs were a product of research into the ethnomusicology of ethnic minorities and commissions of new lyrics for selected traditional songs. When a song was composed, its title deliberately specified the ethnic group and the locale where the traditional tune came from.[237] This way, the circulation of new ethnic minority songs promoted awareness of ethnic cultures and the multi-ethnic character of the liberated zone, boosted the prestige of communities whose songs became popular, and the attachment of these communities to the new lyrics.

There was another reason behind composing songs in ethnic minority vernaculars, and this is where sonic social(ist) Darwinism becomes detectable. Despite the reliance of the Pathet Lao on ethnic minorities, they were generally deemed ideologically immature. The Pathet Lao Radio catered broadcasting to ethnic minority audiences with that profiling in mind. Local news was considered more relevant to rural ethnic villagers than international news, and the new songs were reckoned as an appropriate mode of education-cum-entertainment at the elementary stage of forming socialist consciousness. The ethnic minority audiences were expected to learn the basics of the socialist vocabulary, connect anti-colonial motivation (anti-French and anti-American) with the

[237] Jacques Decornoy, "Life in the Pathet Lao Liberated Zone," in *Laos: War and Revolution*, ed. Nina Adams and Alfred McCoy (Harper Colophon Books, 1970), 417.

Pathet Lao struggle, and embrace upcoming societal changes as beneficial and transformative of their outdated traditional mores. Sisana Sisane, the director of the Pathet Lao Radio, was cognizant of this ethno-social Darwinism, defending his editorial approach as the most suitable for the vernacular societal condition and for mobilizing peoples of "different stages of development."[238]

In the 1960s, the socialist way of listening to the radio on an Asian frontier was a communal experience. Radio signals arrived not to individual devices—expensive and private—but to the public system of loudspeakers—egalitarian and centralized. Early in the morning, loudspeakers would come alive at a village square with a signature call signal of the Pathet Lao Radio and a following news section.[239] Audiences in the liberated zone both desired and could not avoid listening to the radio. Audible to all, giving acoustic autonomy to none, socialism on air was consumed either willingly or involuntarily.

For residents of remote villages with no radio reception, a loudspeaker at a district market had magnetic power. Their only source of expedient information about the world beyond their hamlets, the radio channeled the knowledge about modernity curated by the Pathet Lao editorial team. In their field notes, Soviet journalists detailed the "radio commutes" of peasants to provincial markets. Villagers' barter operations would be completed promptly early in the morning, but they would not rush to set out on a return trip, which could take a few days. Instead, they would mingle on the square for hours, listening to the radio and learning the news—a reason as important for the trip as the

[238] Guber, *Bomby*, 66 (check page).
[239] Kempen Dettmann, "Begegnung in der Hoehle [Encounter in the Cave]," *Horizont*, no. 2, 1971.

market visit itself. Upon their return home, they would be eagerly greeted by everybody in the village and share updates from the radio programs.[240]

Sisana Sisane was arguably the most influential person in the Pathet Lao communications for a few decades. A poet, composer, and writer, he was also a chief propagandist of the NLHX. Sisana's career neatly reflected the evolution of the communication capabilities of the Pathet Lao. Until 1960, he managed the Publishing House, moved on to become the director of the Pathet Lao Radio in 1965, and the head of the Pathet Lao News Agency from 1968.[241] He was particularly attentive to shaping the image of the Pathet Lao in the global socialist community. Well familiar with the Eastern Bloc, which he frequented from the early 1960s, he personally received delegations of foreign journalists, picking them up on a truck from the North Vietnamese border and spending days with them on the road to Vieng Xay. Not only did he share hours-long conversations with journalists, but he also coordinated their itineraries in Vieng Xay and arranged interviews with the party leaders. After the revolution, he became the Minister of Information and Culture. In the mid-1980s, his career took a hit, and he was banished for a couple of years. Rehabilitated, Sisana assumed the role of one of the chief historians of the party (the other being Phoumi Vongvichith), and for the next decade wrote the hagiographies of the revolutionary struggle and its leaders.[242]

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[240] Guber, *Bomby*, 80.
[241] The earlier Directors of the Pathet Lao Radio were Khamtay Siphandone (1960–1962), Souk Vongsack (1962–1963), and Khamma Phomkong (1963–1965), the first two based in Hanoi. See "55 years of the National Radio of Laos," The National Radio of Laos, accessed March 18, 2026, https://lnr.org.la/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/LNR-55-years-Final-PDF-1-1.pdf.
[242] Stuart-Fox, Creak, and Rathie, *Historical Dictionary of Laos*, 445.

The role of radio in building socialism has recently captured the attention of scholars, particularly those of China. Yu Wang argues that the evolution of radio technology and programming directly impacted steel output during the Great Leap Forward. Calling it anticipatory media, Wang illustrates how the sonic governmentality of factory workers antedated their production targets, with radio becoming a productive force itself.[243] My analysis highlights a different role of radio for the Pathet Lao. Rather than focusing on economic modernization, radio in the liberated zone was a force of domestic and international social engineering, creating a supra-ethnic community and integrating it into the transnational socialist network. Through tailored programming, it cascaded sonic socialism geographically to remote villages and demographically to less "ideologically advanced" audiences, bringing them into a shared acoustic space and educating them in vernacular socialism. In the introduction, I outlined my intellectual concern with the way in which the socialist ideal was popularized in the conditions of an Asian frontier. My analysis of Pathet Lao radio programming for ethnic minorities speaks directly to that concern, positing tailored sonic socialism as an ingenious approach. Its combination of romantic neo-traditionalism, socialist linguistic covers, ethnic pride, and supra-ethnic patriotism with crude Darwinist logic and a socialist way of listening made radio an emotionally powerful and acoustically forceful tool. At the same time, the foreign section of the radio brought Pathet Lao news to the socialist world and the West, making its voice heard in the sonic Cold War. It integrated the liberated zone into socialist information space, where the signal of the Pathet Lao Radio intermingled with those of Radio Moscow, Radio Peking, and others.

[243] Yu Wang, "Listening to the State: Radio and the Technopolitics of Sound in Mao's China" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2019), 115–136, ProQuest (2019. 27539744).

Socialist Body Art

Journalists on assignment to the communist caves eagerly anticipated visits to the Publishing House and the Pathet Lao Radio. During their travels, they also frequently encountered another mode of representation—entertaining and educational—that they enjoyed, reported on, and photographed: performances. The most ubiquitous were music-and-dance performances, spontaneous or organized, by professionals and amateurs alike. Soviet correspondents jokingly recounted that nearly every soldier in their security teams had a *khene*, a traditional Lao mouth organ, or was a singer-songwriter. Returning to the caves after assignments, soldiers enjoyed themselves by playing music, singing, and dancing traditional dances. They readily included journalists in their activities, inviting them to dance circles and teaching the moves.[244] Dance in Laos performs many social functions and lubricates all sorts of social interactions and customs. It uplifts the spirits and ensures the continuity of traditional sociality. Yet in this case, it was a gesture of hospitality that young Lao men and women dutifully extended to their foreign socialist guests. The custom of inviting foreign delegates and dignitaries to participate in the traditional *lamvong* dance became a staple of the diplomatic etiquette of the Pathet Lao. Soviet journalists, Cuban doctors, and East German generals all danced *lamvong* in the Vieng Xay caves. Dancing *lamvong* was a performance appearing on two levels: it was an engaged bodily experience of cultural introduction and a transformation of socialist foreigners into socialist friends.

[244] Il'insky, *Laos,* 56.

Similarly, this layered performativity was deployed domestically for socialist community building. Hundreds of amateur music-and-dance troupes were formed by the Pathet Lao across the provinces and sent to tour the countryside.[245] Entertaining villagers with familiar tunes and moves, artists sang the new lyrics like their colleagues did on the radio. In hosting villages, young people, often in their early teens, were enticed to join performance troupes for vacation. Unsurprisingly, many parents resented their children, especially daughters, leaving homes for the itinerant lifestyle of a singer or dancer, but their apprehensions were smoothed by the persistent assurance of the village political workers that such a vacation was now dignified and contributing to the revolutionary struggle.[246] And so, many were recruited. The amateur troupes would arrive at the next village, perform and live there for a while, provided with food and board in reciprocity. The work of these troupes was not remunerated and relied on the help of hosting communities. The work in professional troupes, usually organized within the Pathet Lao Army or among the NLHX cadres, on the other hand, was compensated by food rations similar to those of the workers of the Publishing House and the Radio. Professional troupes often performed internationally, advancing cultural diplomacy of the Pathet Lao among the socialist countries.[247] Soviet novelist and international correspondent Julian Semenov wrote that "the name of the artistic director of the Lao Troupe of Song and Dance, comrade Sisanone, is well known in many capitals of the

[245] On the importance of "human-constituted propaganda infrastructure" and labor of writers, artists, and performance in the battle for hearts and minds in China, see Jie Li, *Cinematic Guerrillas*, 8.
[246] Shchedrov, *Partizanskimi Tropami,* 51.
[247] Somsey Norindr writes: Each [PL] Army unit has its own cultural group, and the "Song and Dance Ensemble" of the NLHX has toured most of the socialist countries. Somsey Norindr, "Nationalism and Communism in the Pathet Lao Movement" (MALD thesis, Tufts University, 1970), 104.

world."[248] The noticeable cultural footprint of the Pathet Lao in the socialist cosmopolis was not an anomaly. In *The Cold War from the Margins*, Theodora Dragostinova argues that small socialist countries, particularly in Eastern Europe, played disproportionately larger roles on the cultural scene, making the socialist cosmopolis a more decentralized and plural space and converting its margins into the zones of cosmopolitan encounter.[249] Her analysis aligns with the results of the intelligence gathering by an American think-tank about the Pathet Lao territories, which revealed frequent visits of Soviet and Chinese artists to the liberated zone with weeks-long tours.[250] As was noted by the Soviet journalists, these artists made particular efforts to perform together with their Lao colleagues and incorporate Lao songs and music into their repertoire.

There was also another performance company that enjoyed popularity among the locals and foreign visitors alike—acrobatics, or as it is better translated from Lao—"physical body art" (*kaiyasin*).[251] Formed in 1966 as a unit within the Pathet Lao Army, the acrobatic company occupied a unique space between entertainment and physical culture.[252] It became the liberated zone's body art par excellence, similar to what ballet, athletic gymnastics, or figure skating were for socialist Eastern Europe. The history of sport, or a broader territory where public spectacle overlaps with corporeal discipline, is voluminous for socialist countries, and its sub-field of Cold War cultural diplomacy

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[248] J. S. Semenov, *Vietnam, Laos, 1968* [Vietnam, Laos, 1968] (Izdatel'stvo Politicheskoy Literatury, 1969), 152.
[249] Theodora Dragostinova, *The Cold War from the margins: a small socialist state on the global cultural scene* (Cornell University Press, 2021), 8–15.
[250] See Paul Langer, *The Soviet Union, China, and the Pathet Lao: Analysis and chronology* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand Corp., 1972), 49–121.
[251] *Kaiyasin* in Lao is a compound of two nouns: *kaiya*—physical body, and *sin*—art, artisanship, or craftsmanship.
[252] *55 Pi haeng vi vatthanakan khong kong kaiyasin haeng sat (20.06.1966 – 20.06.2021)* [55 years of the Evolutions of the Lao National Circus (20.06.1966 – 20.06.2021)] (2012), 21.

through sport and performance is bourgeoning. Yet, this history often privileges high arts and sports at international arenas and overlooks such a peculiar form as circus acrobatics. At the same time, the proximity to the general public and a "lowbrow" character made acrobatics relevant for Asian socialist frontiers. Rooted in domestic traditions of entertainment and cultivated to a fantastic level through professional state-organized schooling, acrobatics in China were regarded by Mao as a "proletarian performing art."[253]

In the liberated zone, several interrelated reasons underpinned the Pathet Lao's preference for acrobatics. First, as with any form of entertainment in Vieng Xay, acrobatic performances had to be light on props and mobile. As I will discuss in the next chapter, similar criteria supported the prevalence of film screenings. Acrobatic acts in Vieng Xay relied on minimal equipment and focused on the performers' bodies. Routinely, artists traveled across the countryside on trucks, their cargo being only a backdrop fabric, a few poles, and a Cyr wheel. The center of the spectacle was the acrobatic body itself—of female gymnasts, bending their bodies to the limits of human anatomy, and male aerial acrobats seemingly flying in the air, defying gravity (Fig. 2.4).

[253] Tracy Ying Zhang, "Bending the Body for China: the Uses of Acrobatics in Sino-US Diplomacy during the Cold War," *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 22, no. 2 (2016), 127.



Figure 2.4. Acrobatic performance. ca.1964–73. Image: The Museum of Kaysone Phomvihane Cave.

Another reason behind the promotion of physical body art in the liberated zone was its capacity in socialist corporeal pedagogy. Acrobatics illustrated what a human body can achieve with persistent training and discipline, or more accurately, how a disciplined socialist body can be cultivated to a higher, super-human level. Moreover, this corporeal pedagogy was widely accessible to the masses, regardless of literacy level.

The conditioning of a socialist body was part of a broader project of subject formation in Marxist-Leninist theory and its Lao variant, argue Simon Creak, MacAlister Brown, and Joseph Zasloff.[254] According to Creak, physical culture was a

[254] Creak, *Embodied Nation*, 167–168. Creak's transliteration preserved; MacAlister Brown and Joseph Zasloff, *Apprentice Revolutionaries: The Communist Movement in Laos, 1930–1985* (Hoover Institution Press, 1986), 217.

subsegment of the "revolution in culture and thought (*kanpativat vatthanatham lae neokhit*)."[255] His analysis attends to official policies in physical education and the Pathet Lao rhetoric in the post-revolutionary period, and I assert the consistency of this perspective with the earlier programs of the Pathet Lao. Acrobatic performances were second to none in illustrating corporeal achievements of gymnasts trained under the aegis of the Lao People's Army. If the bodily transformation of Lao gymnasts from the human average was spectacularly undeniable, it also suggested that other Pathet Lao cultural programs had had a similarly profound effect on forming a socialist subjectivity, even if less visible. Along with the ocular physicality of gymnasts, new language, music, and media attested to a broader transformation in the liberated zone.

The focus on cultural work and representations of the socialist future is characteristic of young non-Western socialisms. These young socialisms, with economic conditions not conforming to orthodox Marxism, placed social transformation ahead of economic modernization. Orthodox Marxism implies that the material base, or the economy and its structure, determines the superstructure. Historically, however, in what Verdery calls "real socialisms," the relationship between the base and superstructure was interpreted along more flexible and rather inverted lines.[256] It was the culture, the social transformation, and conjuring of a "new socialist man," that was a prerequisite for building material socialism.[257] Talking about culture and youth education, Lenin suggested that only new socialist subjects would be able to harness their abilities and determination to build the right type of economy and sociality for a socialist ideal.[258]

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[255] Ibid., 172.
[256] Verdery, *What Was Socialism*, 4.
[257] Grois, *The Total Art of Stalinism*, 46, 58.
[258] V.I. Lenin, *On Socialist Ideology and Culture* (Foreign Language Press, 1957), 2.

Similarly, in Laos, social transformation was seen as a necessary first step, and a visions of an ideal future was a North Star of the Lao socialist project before the revolution.[259] Prince Souphanouvong repeatedly stated that cultural work was equally important to the political and military struggle.[260] This cultural work performed several important functions specific to Laos. One of them was cultural exchange with socialist countries, which located Laos on a map of global socialism. It increased international familiarity with the Lao socialist movement and brought the Pathet Lao into closer geopolitical and cultural proximity with other socialist countries.

International Socialist Solidarity

It may be expected that the socialist countries supported the Pathet Lao, especially considering that it was a target of American aggression during the Second Indochina War. However, the historical reality was more complicated, reflecting the tensions between solidarity and national interests in the Second World. The socialist cosmopolis, as a constellation of sovereign states, started to form after World War II and, in less than two decades, fractured along intertwined ideological and geopolitical lines. Before 1945, only two countries had become communist: the USSR, established in 1922, and its neighbor, Mongolia, which became a People's Republic in 1924. The end of WWII triggered a dual wave of communist expansion in Eastern Europe and East Asia, and

[259] That cultural transformation precedes other steps in building socialism was explicitly stated at the 4th Plenum of the Central Committee of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party in 1977, but it is very likely that this view was developed earlier. See Kaysone Phomvihane, *Revoliutsiia v Laose: Nekotorye osnovnue uroki i glavnue zadachi* [Revolution in Laos: Some Key Lessons and Main Tasks]. (Izdatel'stvo Politicheskoy Literatury, 1980), 182-195; Simon Creak, *Embodied Nation: Sport, Masculinity, and the Making of Modern Laos* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2015), 173.
[260] NLHX Twelve-point program, 1968, in *Vietnam Courier*, cited by Norindr, "Nationalism and Communism," 102; Semenov, *Vietnam, Laos*, 149.

decolonization in Southeast Asia. In 1945, in the wake of the Japanese surrender, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Laos proclaimed independence, which for all was challenged by the returning colonial powers. Of the leading political forces in these countries, only Ho Chi Minh's was socialist; yet communist movements became active in the anti-colonial struggle throughout the region. At this seemingly opportune moment to support Southeast Asian communists and propel them into power, the Soviet Union remained passive.[261] Soviet politicians viewed Southeast Asia as a sphere of Western European control, inherited after WWII by the US, far outside of their geopolitical priorities. Stalin focused his attention on securing control over Eastern Europe and, beyond that, abandoned the idea of global revolution.[262] His interest in promoting socialism in Asia was so negligible that he did not assist Ho Chi Minh, Mao Zedong, or Kim Il Sung in their armed struggles, despite personal acquaintance with them for decades.[263] Contrary to the Cold War political myths of the day, the advance of Asian socialism was a result of vernacular efforts rather than a Soviet plot for global domination. Moreover, once Mao Zedong came to power, Stalin proposed splitting the supervision over the local communist movements between himself in the West and Mao in the East.[264] Communist China became "responsible" for North Vietnam and started to aid it militarily, although Ho Chi Minh carefully guarded his autonomy, remaining wary of Mao. In 1959, Fidel Castro came to power, and Cuba became the first communist country in Latin America.

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[261] John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (Penguin Press, 2005), 10–14.
[262] Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914–1991* (Vintage Books, 1996), 226.
[263] Tuong Vu and Wasana Wongsurawat, eds., *Dynamics of the Cold War in Asia: Ideology, Identity, and Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan US, 2009), 2; Odd Arne Westad, *The Cold War: A World History* (Basic Books, 2017), 65–66.
[264] Ilya Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam, Soviet Policy Toward the Indochina Conflict, 1954–1963* (Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2003), 1–2. Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War.* (University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 3; and Christopher Goscha and Christian Ostermann, eds., *Connecting Histories: Decolonization and the Cold War in Southeast Asia, 1945-1962* (Stanford University Press, 2009), 2.

Castro and especially his Minister of Industries, Ernesto Che Guevara, rekindled the call for a global communist revolution, interpreted as a liberation armed struggle against American imperialism. Che Guevara articulated his militant revolutionism in his famous plea to create "two, three, … more Vietnams."[265] Yet, before the 1960s, communist leaders did not challenge each other, nor were they, apart from Ho Chi Minh, concerned with Laos. The Sino-Soviet split surfaced in 1961, changed the former, and the sudden Soviet airlift in Laos altered the latter.

The Sino-Soviet split annulled the previous division of spheres of control in the socialist world and prompted competition between the USSR and the PRC. ON Soviet home turf of Eastern Europe, Albania moved to Mao's side.[266] In Southeast Asia, the Soviets courted Sukarno of Indonesia but were gradually losing him to the Chinese.[267] They nurtured their relationship with India and Burma, the non-aligned countries with ongoing border disputes with the PRC. The only Southeast Asian country that the USSR officially distanced itself from was North Vietnam. Not that the Soviet Union did not provide any military aid to the Viet Minh, but it did so covertly to avoid any pretext for confrontation with the US.[268]

In 1960, Laos found itself deep in a political crisis and on the brink of falling to a military dictatorship backed by the CIA.[269] The preceding series of coups and

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[265] Ernesto "Che" Guevara, "Message to the Tricontinental" (The Executive Secretariat of the Organization of the Solidarity of the Peoples of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, Havana, April 16, 1967).
[266] Elidor Mehilli, *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World* (Cornell University Press, 2017), 5–6.
[267] Ang Cheng Guan, *Southeast Asia's Cold War: An Interpretive History* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2018), 84.
[268] Vladislav Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 198; Westad, *The Cold War*, 321.
[269] Bruce Lockhart, "The fate of neutralism in Cambodia and Laos" in *Cold War Southeast Asia*, ed. by Malcom Murfett (Marchal Cavendish, 2012), 206–208.

countercoups, supported by the US embassy in Vientiane, squeezed first the Pathet Lao members from the Coalition Government and then the neutralist Prime Minister Prince Souvanna Phouma in favor of rightist Prince Boun Oum and General Phoumi Nosavan.[270] Frustrated by foreign meddling in Lao politics, a young captain of the Royal Lao Army, Kong Le, mounted yet another coup, which caught all political parties by surprise and triggered an avalanche.[271] General Nosavan, with his army supported by the CIA and the elite troops of his cousin, Thai Marshal Sarit Thanarat, moved on Vientiane to retake control from the newcomer and install himself as a military dictator aligned with the US.[272] Ousted Prince Souvanna Phouma formed an alliance with Prince Souphanouvong against the US-backed general. This alliance of half-brothers, a neutralist and the most respected politician in the RLG with the leader of a communist movement, in a quest against an American-favorite military figure, was a good reason to approach the Soviets. Upon the urgent request of Souvanna Phouma, the Soviet ambassador to Cambodia, Aleksandr Abramov, arrived in Laos for consultations. After three months, in October 1960, the diplomatic relationship between the USSR and Prince Souvanna Phouma, as the Soviets' recognized head of the RLG, was established.[273] In December, the USSR provided a massive airlift, regrouping and supplying the forces of Prince Souvanna Phouma, Prince Souphanouvong, and Kong Le on the Plain of Jars. From there, the joint army mounted a counteroffensive against General Nosavan.[274]

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[270] Noam Chomsky, "Introduction," in *Laos: War and Revolution*, ed. Adams and McCoy, xvi.
[271] Fursenko and Naftali, *Khrushchev's Cold War*, 323, 326.
[272] Sutayut Osornprasop, "Thailand and the secret war in Laos: the origins of engagement" in *Cold War Southeast Asia*, ed. By Malcom Murfett (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2012), 172–189.

[273] Fursenko and Naftali, *Khrushchev's Cold War*, 326, 329–330.
[274] Ibid., 333, 335.

Western historians of Cold War Laos overlooked the Soviet intervention, yet it had an impressive scale and significant outcomes. The statistics of the Soviet airlift were never validated. Kennedy's administration released an estimate that 184 sorties were flown by the Soviet airplanes in the first two weeks of the airlift and over 1,000 overall. Soviet diplomats did not provide numbers but intimated that it was a critical mission for Khrushchev and the biggest airlift since WWII. An American expert on Laos, Arthur Dommen, considered it transformative for the Pathet Lao Army's capabilities altogether.[275]

Following such a dramatic Soviet entry into Lao politics amidst the Vietnam War, the immediate goal of all parties was to de-escalate tensions. Khrushchev and Kennedy convened the Second Geneva Conference on Laos in 1961–62, which sought to resolve the conflict by diplomatic means. [276] The outcome of the conference was the Second Coalition Government, which included the neutralist, rightist, and communist groups in Laos. This political truce proved to be nominal. [277] Yet, what concerns me here is not the longevity of the 1962 agreement but the network of diplomatic relations between Laos

[275] Arthur Dommen and Paul Langer cited the Department of State for the number of 184 missions being flown in two weeks from December 15, 1960; see Langer, *The Soviet Union, China, and the Pathet Lao*, 14; Arthur Dommen, *Conflict in Laos: The Politics of Neutralization*, rev. ed. (Praeger Publishers, 1971), 178. Referring to Kenney's statement, Langer also mentions that there were over 1000 sorties by mid-March. Langer, *The Soviet Union, China and the Pathet Lao*, 55. Dommen concludes that the Soviet airlift was "in such immense quantities as to enable the Pathet Lao forces to make the basic transformation from guerrillas to regular forces." See Dommen, *Conflict in Laos,* 179. I consider Dommen's analysis to be an exaggeration in regard to the Pathet Lao Army capabilities that were developed over a longer period and with considerable supplies of munitions from the PRC as well. Regarding Soviet diplomats' explanation, Langer and Zasloff quote Arthur Schesinger's citation of G.M. Pushkin, the Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister, telling Harriman that "apart from the Second World War, this was the highest priority Soviet supply operation since the Revolution. Paul Langer and Joseph Zasloff, *Revolution in Laos: The North Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao* (The RAND Corporation, 1969), 97n. I would take Pushkin's pronouncement with a grain of salt as well, considering the scale of Soviet involvement in Cuba and Congo in the early 1960s. For more measured analysis, see Fursenko and Naftali, *Khrushchev's Cold War*, 334. Nonetheless, all evidence combined, the Soviet airlift indisputably had far-reaching consequences.
[276] Fursenko and Naftali, *Khrushchev's Cold War*, 361–62.
[277] Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, 118–126.

and socialist countries formed in its wake. The Soviet Union opened diplomatic relations with the neutralist government of Souvanna Phouma and established an embassy in the village of Khang Khai on the Plain of Jars. Liaising with Souvanna Phouma meant that the USSR endorsed a coalitional solution to the crisis, whereas direct support to the Pathet Lao would have been detrimental to de-escalation. Following the Soviets, the PRC and DRV also opened diplomatic missions in Khang Khai. The Soviet position was instructive to other socialist countries, and in 1962, upon conclusion of the Geneva Conference, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Mongolia, Poland, and Romania established relations with Souvanna Phouma's cabinet. The DRV, the German Democratic Republic, North Korea, and Cuba, not recognized in the West, could not yet officially open their embassies.[278]

For the next two years, socialist countries cooperating with the RLG was hardly a problem for the Pathet Lao. Prince Souphanouvong, as a deputy Prime Minister in his half-brother's coalition government, was actively engaged in multilateral negotiations. During the Geneva Conference, Prince Souvanna Phouma met with Khrushchev twice, while Prince Souphanouvong conversed with the general secretary on five occasions. In 1963, the king of Laos, Sisavang Vatthana, visited the signatory countries of the Geneva Conference, starting with an official visit to the Soviet Union. Both Prince Souvanna Phouma and Prince Souphanouvong benefited from the engagement with the socialist bloc. Prince Souvanna Phouma expanded his diplomatic network, counterbalancing the influence of the US to some extent, and increased foreign aid, even if only for a short period. Prince Souphanouvong established direct contact with the Soviets and several

[278] Although the relationship with the DRV and GDR was announced by Prince Souphanouvong, see Brown and Zasloff, *Apprentice Revolutionaries*, 87.

other socialist countries, bypassing Hanoi, which also had a disproportional influence over the Pathet Lao. Yet, in 1964, the political situation in Laos deteriorated yet again, and the Coalition Government collapsed. The aligned forces began infighting; the Gulf of Tonkin incident triggered the escalation of the Vietnam War; Prince Souvanna Phouma succumbed to US pressure and approved the US bombing of the liberated zone; and the Pathet Lao moved to Vieng Xay.[279]

This rather long preamble helps to contextualize the peculiar character of the socialist aid to the Pathet Lao during its stint in the communist caves. First, it explained why this aid was covert, particularly concerning the Soviet Union. The double bind of official relations with the RLG and non-involvement in the Vietnam War made the Soviets tread a careful line. No military or civil Soviet advisers were ever present in Vieng Xay.[280] Second, it suggests that while many socialist countries provided aid to the Pathet Lao, their actions were not coordinated. On the contrary, the interests of the USSR, North Vietnam, the PRC, and Cuba diverged, and Chinese and North Vietnamese advisers at best only tolerated each other's presence. Lastly, while the USSR was tied in its activities in the liberated zone, smaller socialist countries stepped up their roles as donors. While the USSR and PRC were the biggest suppliers of military aid and the DRV of training and manpower, other countries, including Cuba and GDR, sent experts and civil and cultural goods.[281]

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[279] Steward-Fox, *A History of Laos*, 138–139.
[280] Langer, *The Soviet Union, China, and the Pathet Lao,* 16–17.
[281] On the PRC's aid to the Pathet Lao, see Nicholas Zeller, "A World Safe for Revolution: China, Laos, and the Possibility of Revolutionary Nationalism" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2021), Chapter 4.

The economy of the liberated zone produced foodstuffs for its rural population. The Pathet Lao Army and civil servants, such as workers at the Publishing House, received rice rations and were expected to supplement them by cultivating small plots of land. Workers sent to serve rural communities, for example, nurses, had to be self-sufficient with the help of the host communities. The provision of rice rations relied on local taxation, collected in kind.[282] As such, the economy of the liberated zone was largely non-monetary, and beyond agricultural produce, relied on socialist aid.

Poland, Bulgaria, and China sent canned food to Vieng Xay residents, and condensed milk, valuable for infant nutrition, came from the USSR.[283] Cuban doctors staffed the hospital in the liberated zone, while medical supplies arrived from North Korea, East Germany, China, and the USSR (Fig. 2.5).[284] The machinery of the Publishing house, including printing presses, typewriters, and teletype machines, was a combination of old equipment taken from Vientiane and East German, Chinese, and Soviet donations. Radio equipment was also Soviet, East German, and Chinese.[285] Celluloid film for the cinema unit was East German.[286] Trucks were Soviet GAZs.[287] The wife of Prince Souphanouvong sported Austrian shoes produced for the socialist market, and Prince Souphanouvong's vinyl collection featured Bulgarian records and compositions of the Prime Minister of Cambodia, Prince Sihanouk.[288] No quantitative data is available for the amount of aid from any country, and only greeting cards to

[282] Guber, *Bomby*, 32; Shchedrov, *Partizanskimi Tropami*, 100.
[283] Langer, *The Soviet Union, China, and the Pathet Lao*, 11n12; Langer, *Revolution in Laos*, 160; Guber, *Bomby*, 51.
[284] Langer, *Revolution in Laos*, 160.
[285] Kempen Dettmann, "Vientiane—Sam Neua," *Horizont* 10, 1973, 17; Langer, *Revolution in Laos*, 160.
[286] Som Ock Soudthiphon, interview by Anna Koshcheeva, February 2023.
[287] Guber, *Bomby*, 55.
[288] These items are still in the holdings of the Museum of Kaysone Phomvihane Cave.

"dear friend" Prince Souphanouvong from Leonid Brezhnev and Todor Zhivkov, or Prince Souphanouvong's words of gratitude to Horst Busch and Erich Honecker, indicate the high level of diplomatic relations established between the liberated zone and the socialist cosmopolis.[289]



Figure 2.5. Prince Souphanouvong with Cuban doctors in Vieng Xay. ca.1974. Image: The Museum of Kaysone Phomvihane Cave.

Some socialist aid was channeled into the industrial development of the liberated zone. As modest as it might have been, the emergent industrial sector offered an excellent boost to the public relations of the Pathet Lao and global socialism. Journalists from the Eastern Bloc compared the economy of the RLG and the Pathet Lao

[289] Helt in the collection of the Museum of Kaysone Phomvihane Cave; for communication with the GDR leaders, see Kempen Dettmann, "Begegnung in der Hoehle," *Horizont* 2, 1971; Kempen Dettmann, "Prinz Souphanouvong: Ein grosser Sieg des Laotischen Volkes," *Horizont* 17, 1974.

territory, stressing that the former ran on American cash which fueled illegal opium trade and corruption among the army and the government and ignored the public sector, while the economy of the liberated zone was industrializing from the ground level, creating jobs beyond subsistence farming, and forming the working class.[290]

The flagship and the publicity darling of the liberated zone's industry was a weaving factory. A compulsory stop on every journalist's tour, it was celebrated in numerous photos and the banknotes of the Pathet Lao kip, the currency of the liberated zone (Fig. 2.6). It started as a small weaving shop with 30 people in 1964 in the provincial capital of Sam Neua, and, like other enterprises of the Pathet Lao, was transported to Vieng Xay later. In five years, it grew to over 100 workers, mainly teenage girls and young women. Its production capacity grew as new machines kept arriving under the neon light illuminating the weaving cave. [291]

[290] Il'inskiy, *Laos*, 26–29, 69–71.
[291] Ibid., 72.

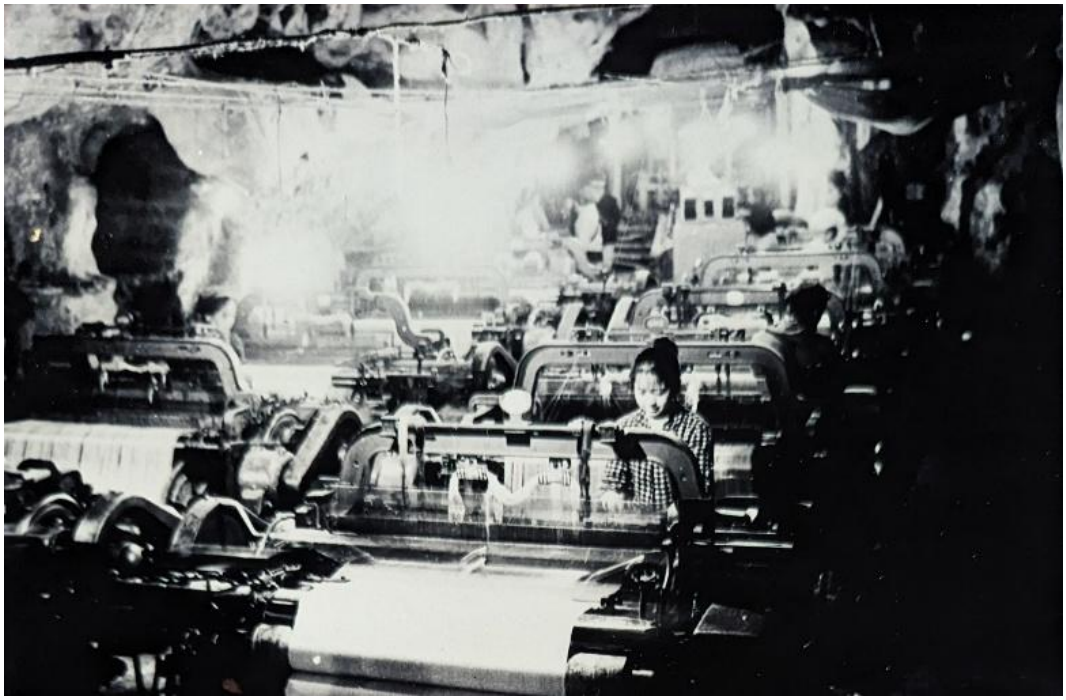


Figure 2.6. The weaving factory in Vieng Xay. ca.1964–73. Image: The Museum of Kaysone Phomvihane Cave.

As much attention as the weaving factory received, reports about it steered clear of exact output statistics, highlighting only growth percentages and no metric measurements, or the provenance of the equipment. Moreover, I doubt that economic considerations were the rationale for running the weaving factory in the caves. The factory indeed stood as a symbol of advanced socialist modernity, able to penetrate the deepest jungles and benefit the furthest socialist peripheries. But its function was exactly that—of a symbol—of the potency of global socialist solidarity and a loud slap in the face of the "free world." For the veneer of unity in transnational socialist solidarity, neither Pathet Lao nor Eastern European news outlets identified the origin of the equipment, and only a French journalist mentioned in Western media that the machines came from the PRC. How the factory's equipment was brought into a cave high on the

mountain cliff and how it was supplied with raw materials is still a mystery.[292] The key output of the factory, I suggest, was not textiles, and, hence, the efficiency in producing it was rather irrelevant. What the factory truly excelled at producing was the material evidence of the potency of socialist modernization, to the point of going beyond the rational lines of calculated economic necessity. It did not make sense to build a weaving factory in the communist caves, and, for that very reason, its presence was especially spectacular and ideologically powerful. It shows that global socialist modernity was so abundant and righteous that it could afford an excess of goodwill and resources for an oppressed socialist liberation movement. Fortunately for the Pathet Lao.

The weaving factory was not the biggest industrial object in the liberated zone. The metalsmith factory had twice as many workers.[293] But if the weaving factory served socialist optics, the purpose of the metalsmith factory was more practical—vocational and political training of the working class. Besides producing basic agricultural equipment by recasting dropped bombshells, the factory organized the workers in the meeting halls for political education, lessons in grammar, and professional instructions.[294] Perhaps only small mechanic shops working across the liberated zone had the straightforward function of repair and maintenance, but according to the estimates of the RAND Corporation expert on Laos, their combined capacity was inadequate for servicing the vehicle fleet and artillery of the Pathet Lao.[295]

The flow of cultural goods between the socialist world and the Pathet Lao, unlike economic aid, went both ways, and Pathet Lao media went beyond the Iron Curtain to

[292] Decornoy, "Life in the Pathet Lao Liberated Zone," 419–420.
[293] Shchedrov, *Partizanskimi Tropami*, 16.
[294] Ibid.
[295] Langer, *The Soviet Union, China, and the Pathet Lao*, 26.

advocate its cause. The importance of the relationship with the international press for the Pathet Lao is reflected in the accommodation provided to visiting journalists. The opening vignette in this chapter illustrates that journalists stayed at the "Friendship Hotel," designated specifically for foreign delegations. They enjoyed the relative comfort of heated caves, security teams, and interpreters and had access to the strategic sites and leaders of the Pathet Lao. Much of the information given during these media tours had a well-rehearsed script. Journalists visited the factories, hospitals, and the printing house, received a briefing from Sisana Sisane on statistics in education, medical care, and the economy, all of which showed impressive growth, and a rundown of official statements of the Pathet Lao regarding American aggression, the settlement of domestic conflict, and the plans for the future. Beyond templated sessions, Prince Souphanouvong, adept at diplomacy, gave personal interviews to journalists. In these interviews, he launched a consistently successful charm offensive, backed by erudition and the tailored use of props. He delighted Yulian Semenov, a scholar and writer, by citing Rabelais in old French, and later, Semenov asserted Prince Souphanouvong's reputation as a leading intellectual in Indochina.[296] Welcoming Kempen Dettmann, Prince Souphanouvong spoke in German, expressed the Pathet Lao's support for the diplomatic recognition of the GDR, and impressed Dettmann with his knowledge of internal GDR affairs. The bust of Lenin that decorated Prince Souphanouvong's deck during the interview with Semenov was thoughtfully replaced with the GDR flag.[297] To

[296] On Souphanouvong's reputation as an intellectual, see Patrice Ladwig, "'Special Operation Pagoda:' Buddhism, Covert Operations, and the Politics of Religious Subversion in Cold-War Laos (1957–60)," in *Changing Lives in Laos: Society, Politics, and Culture in a Post-Socialist State*, ed. Vanina Boute and Vatthana Pholsena (NUS Press, 2017), 90; Semenov, *Vietnam, Laos*, 149–150.
[297] Kempen, "Begegnung in der Hoehle."

Japanese TV reporters, Prince Souphanouvong appealed with his down-to-earth character, demonstrating how he waters vegetables and plays volleyball, and posed for a group photo.[298]

The Pathet Lao invited reporters from across and beyond the socialist bloc. "Friendship Hotel" guests came from the Soviet newspapers *Izvestiya, Pravda,* and *Krasnaya Zvezda,* and the Press Agency *Novosti*, Chinese *Xinhua* News Agency, GDR's *Horizont*, Czechoslovakian *Prague Radio*, French *Le Monde*, Italian *L'Unita*, as well as Japanese television. They witnessed the intensity of the US bombing and the hardship of the local population but also its dedication to the liberation movement. Regardless of whether they came from socialist or Western outlets, journalists admitted improvements in local governance, agricultural methods, and literacy levels in the liberated zone.[299] They also stressed that the Pathet Lao enjoyed a better image than that of the RLG, domestically and internationally. Forcefully criticizing the US political stance in Laos, Noam Chomsky wrote:

> The target of the American attack in northern Laos is the Pathet Lao, which, as everyone admits, is the only political organization in Laos with a popular base, comprising the only element in the Laotian society that has any reasonable plans that offer any realistic hope for social and economic development within the framework of genuine Laotian nationalism.[300]

Chomsky's remarks reminded the US audience about Laos, which frequented the US press in the late 1950s and early 1960s but was overshadowed by North Vietnam as

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[298] Collection of the Museum of Kaysone Phomvihane Cave.
[299] See, for e.g., Decornoy, "Life in the Pathet Lao Liberated Zone," 416–19.
[300] Noam Chomsky, "Introduction," in *Laos: War and Revolution*, ed. Nina Adams and Alfred McCoy (Harper Colophon Books, 1970), xix.

the war dragged on.[301] The Pathet Lao sought to keep global visibility, and its delegations, headed by Phoumi Vongvichith, attended the conferences on solidarity with Indochina. The most publicized of them was the First Tricontinental Conference, held in Cuba in 1966. In the wake of the conference, its founding body, the Organization of Solidarity with the People of Asia, Africa, and Latin America (OSPAAAL), proclaimed October 12, the date of aborted Lao independence of 1945, as the Day of Solidarity with Laos, and in the following years, OSPAAAL artists commemorated this day with annual posters. Others were the Conference on Solidarity with Laos in Cairo in May 1970, meetings in Algiers, and the Conference in support of peace in Indochina in Stockholm in November 1970.[302] The RLG also attended international conferences to communicate its position of neutrality and sent its delegations to the Non-Aligned conferences in Bandung, Cairo, and Lusaka (missing the Belgrade one). The Pathet Lao, in contrast, participated in more radical Cold War meetings with an anti-imperialist and anti-American sentiment. It also joined circuits of cultural festivals and summits, prominent in the socialist bloc. The youth delegations from the liberated zone attended the 9th World Festivals of Youth and Students in Bulgaria in 1968, visited the USSR and the PRC, and hosted Soviet Komsomol representatives in Vieng Xay on several occasions. Lao writers traveled to Beijing for the Afro-Asian writers' summit, and the Buddhist association of the liberated zone participated in regional Buddhist meetings.[303]

Christina Schwenkel elaborates on the motivations behind the "fraternal help" of the socialist West to the socialist East. Her analysis unpacks both the benevolent logic

[301] For American media icons contributing to the visibility of Laos in the US press and TV, see Seth Jacobs, The Universe Unraveling, Chapter 5, on Tom Dooley and Edgar Buell.
[302] Il'insky, *Laos,* 66; Langer, *The Soviet Union, China, and the Pathet Lao*, 44n81.
[303] Langer, *The Soviet Union, China, and the Pathet Lao*, Appendix.

and the contradictions of solidarity between economically unequal participants of the GDR and Vietnam.[304] Aleksandr Guber's account suggests that relationships in the cultural sphere, unlike those pertaining to foreign aid, flattened such hierarchies to some extent. To him, the fact that Soviet artists traversed thousands of kilometers to show their art, and the Lao artists learned unfamiliar tunes and incomprehensible lyrics in a foreign language, was proof of transcending geographic and linguistic distances."[305] Not the virtuoso skills or cavernous setting drove his strong emotional response to the concert, but the mutual cultural introduction and respect for each other's popular culture, engendering emotional closeness. Gregg Brazinsky argues that in the position of comparative economic weakness vis-a-vis the US and the USSR, the PRC emphasized its soft power in the Third World, while Roger Nelson notes that the cultural diplomacy of socialist countries in Southeast Asia was effective thanks to prioritizing popular culture over fine art and addressing mass audiences instead of elites.[306] I suggest that the mode of "cultural introduction" was preferred for the Pathet Lao cultural export to the socialist cosmopolis, not with a revolutionary opera but an outright neo-traditionalism that highlighted the "authenticity" of vernacular folk cultures. In a peculiar form of sartorial and musicological self-ethnography, it sent artists clad in ethnic costumes to their international comrades.

Artistic troupes of the Pathet Lao extensively toured the socialist bloc, tantalizing the audiences with "original and exciting" Lao dance and music.[307] The exotic aesthetic

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[304] Christina Schwenkel, *Building Socialism: The Afterlife of East German Architecture in Urban Vietnam* (Duke University Press, 2020), Chapters 3–4.
[305] Guber, *Bomby*, 49.
[306] Gregg Brazinsky, *Winning the Third World: Sino-American Rivalry during the Cold War* (University of North Carolina Press, 2017), Chapter 5; Roger Nelson, "Modernity and Contemporaneity in 'Cambodia Arts' after Independence" (PhD diss., University of Melbourne, 2017), 231–232.
[307] Semenov, *Vietnam, Laos*, 152.

of Lao arts simultaneously fascinated European audiences with its otherness and created cultural familiarity. In response, international artistic companies visited the liberated zone. Chinese acrobats and dancers, Moscow *estrada*, and Vietnamese ensembles traveled to remote villages from the cave capital.[308] They usually toured for several weeks or months on end, enduring demanding and dangerous trips. This reciprocal movement of bodies and cultural products amidst a war speaks volumes about the importance of cultural diplomacy for socialist solidarity on the Cold War frontiers.

Conclusion

The meeting hall in the Elephant Cave still hosts occasional concerts when the high-ranking members of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party make the pilgrimage to this sacred site of Lao socialism.[309] They fly into a small airport in Sam Nua and take minivans to negotiate a slippery, serpentine road across the mountains. Entering the city, they are greeted by the sign "Vieng Xay City—the Birthplace of the Lao Revolution" (meuang viengxay—tanthiman khong kanpativat lao) hanging on a cliffside. Accompanied by the staff of the memorial sites, they enter the Elephant Cave and reenact the consumption of socialist entertainment.

This performance of ideal socialist subjectivity, together with moving images of an ideal future, spoken, sung, and written words of personal and collective struggle and transformation, marks the temporality of Lao socialism before the revolution. Its goal was preparatory for a leap into the future by moving hearts, winning the revolution, and setting on the path towards socialist state-building. It comprised creating print socialism,

[308] Soviet *estrada* is a potpourri genre of popular music and entertainment, and a common name for artistic collectives working in this genre.
[309] The name the Pathet Lao adopted closer to the revolution.

a tailored sonic education, and the spectacular promotion of corporeal discipline. The Printing House, the Radio Station, and the acrobatic troupes were its key arbiters, producing millions of pages of text, saturating airways, and touring jungles on trucks to deliver socialist morals, motivation, and transformation. Accomplishing this goal was enabled by material flows of global socialist solidarity: a contradictory combination that promoted the universal superiority of the socialist model, both economic and humanitarian, and sectarian ideological rivalry.

Ironically, this rivalry stemmed from differences in national schools of socialist theory and ambitions to impose these schools globally rather than embracing the plurality and vernacularity of socialisms. The Soviets promoted their experiments in Central Asia as proof that their model worked for the Third World;[310] Maoism touted the message of historically shared oppression of non-Western comrades;[311] the Cubans called for violent resistance to capitalist imperialism, and on it went. The vernacularity of socialisms was at once apparent and ignored within the socialist world itself. Younger socialisms engaged with radical dreams, utilizing art and culture to express their aspirations; old socialism, as the USSR in the 1970s, grew bureaucratic and preservationist. Yet, the success of every socialist movement in its formative years relied precisely on its vernacularity—a vision of transforming local reality into a local ideal future.

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[310] Stanek, *Architecture in Global Socialism*, 47–48; Djagalov, *From internationalism to postcolonialism*, 17–18.
[311] Brazinsky, *Winning the Third World*, 1–11; Thomas Burgess, "Mao in Zanzibar: Nationalism, Discipline, and the (de)Construction of Afro-Asian Solidarities," in *Making a World after Empire: The Bandung Moment and its Political Afterlives*, ed. Christofer Lee (Ohio University Press, 2010), 204-206.

Pathet Lao socialism was inherently vernacular. It had to account for the jungle topography, multiethnic demographics, and the pre-industrial economy. It also came of age during the hottest Cold War conflict—the Vietnam War. Because of the former, the core of Lao socialist theory and practice was social transformation prior to economic modernization. Its futural technologies of representing a socialist ideal were central for inspiring social change. It flipped orthodox Marxism on its head, assuming that the future will change the present, that technologies of representing futurity would alter the superstructure, thereby engendering the subsequent transformation of the base. These technologies mediated an ideal vernacular Lao socialist future through text, utterance, and moving images, cinematic and performative. Because of the latter, the Lao socialist project was cosmopolitan. The Vietnam War mobilized international socialist solidarity in support of Laos. It pooled clandestine but steady resources to the communist caves, making it an exemplary socialist frontier of the Asian Cold War.

CHAPTER 3. Warring Paradises: Documentaries of Ideal Vernacular Futures

> Art ceases representing life and begins transforming it by means of a total aeshetico-political project.
> – Boris Grois

Introduction. Warring Paradises

At the core of this chapter is a comparative reading of two films, one produced by the RLG in ca. 1965–66, *The Modern Capital of Vientiane in the Future* (*Vientiane Nakhon Than Samay nay Anakhod*), and *The Land of Freedom* (*Daen Itsala*), made by the Pathet Lao in 1970. I approach these films as two visual terrains that represent ideal futures: one under the RLG and the other conceived by the Pathet Lao. Filmed as documentary reportages and temporally oriented towards futurity, these two films present alternative ideals of Cold War modernity in Laos—cinematic *documentaries of ideal vernacular futures*. Reading these two films, I don't claim that they comprehensively encapsulate all aspects and details of the modernizing visions of the RLG or the Pathet Lao. Rather, they bring forward what I see as the most symptomatic and critical aspects of these visions. I pay attention to the specificity of content in the cinematic articulations of the RLG and the Pathet Lao futures, to whom these films are addressed, and, lastly, to their temporal horizons and limitations. As I contrast the two films that advocate for alternative Cold War futurities in Laos, I call them *warring paradises.*

The contextual analysis of the films helps highlight key elements of the RLG and the Pathet Lao's modernizing ideals, while the review of the cinema industry in Laos, in both RLG territories and the liberated zone, is telling of the methods of their popularization.

The opening part of the chapter, *Screening Urban Cosmopolitanism and Rural Propaganda,* outlines the history of cinema in the RLG part of the country as a two-fold industry: urban commercial cinema of entertainment and mobile film screenings in the countryside as politicizing. It analyses the popularity of cinema halls in newly independent Laos as a space for modern leisure and cosmopolitan belonging to the decolonizing world. Turning to the countryside, my analysis reveals the military and the Cold War nature of the film industry in Laos, with the RLA and USIS being the leading film producers and distributors in rural areas.

Part two of the chapter, *Symbolic City: Cine-architecture of Belated Future,* presents a close reading of the film, *The Modern Capital of Vientiane in the Future*, produced and screened in the RLG-controlled part of the country. The film presents the RLG's vision for national development as an allegory of architectural construction and urban development. It centers on the protagonist of the film—a heteronormative couple of technical college students touring Vientiane on motorcycles. Approaching the couple as a simultaneity of a nuclear bourgeois family, professional and social mobility, and residents of the future, the film outlines a straightforward promise of infrastructural development and technocratic scientific modernity. My critique of this film is that it addresses exclusively urban elites, delimiting rights for the future; presents the city as a symbolic yet unlivable space; and promises the future of Cold War developmentalism, in which the Third World will always lag behind the West. *The Modern Capital's* future thereby reinscribes Laos into the global periphery and economic belatedness.

Part three, *Cinema in the Liberated Zone,* moves to the stronghold of the Pathet Lao, and outlines the history of Pathet Lao cinema from 1964 to 1973. It argues that

filmmaking in the liberated zone served as political outreach rather than as a commercial industry. Mobile film units traveled to rural villages and Pathet Lao Army postings to project films that aimed to inspire anti-American resistance, promote an image of the Pathet Lao as the defender of the people, and ignite the struggle for socialism. 2,500 reels, discovered in the communist caves in the 1990s, testify to the central role of cinema in the Pathet Lao's technologies of representing the future and the media of popularizing it on an Asian frontier.

Part four, *Socialist Paradise in the Caves,* analyses a Pathet Lao film titled *The Land of Freedom*. I read this film as an ideological textbook on building Lao socialist futurity. The film covers the rubrics of scientific collective agriculture and industry, promotion of literacy, education, and healthcare for people of all ages and ethnic groups. It casts the Pathet Lao leaders as visionary and egalitarian. Most importantly, the film stresses the importance of culture in the socialist struggle in Laos. It presents art, cinema, and acrobatics as imperatives for nurturing the souls and disciplining the bodies of those who adhere to socialist ideals. *The Land of Freedom* was filmed in a cave complex, in harsh living conditions, and under constant air bombardment—an unfitting place to film a socialist paradise, yet *The Land of Freedom* attempts to do just that. Arguably, the party leaders and film audiences were well aware of the temporal gap between extant reality and the socialist paradise imagined in *The Land of Freedom*. This distance was simultaneously reaffirmed and subverted by the medium of film and the genre of documentary. On the one hand, the film made the socialist future look radically better than reality, and hence, inspiring. On the other hand, the fact that it was possible to film it asserted its attainability. *The Land of Freedom* achieves not less than stating

that a path towards a bright socialist future starts now, and it laid out how to get there. The temporality of the film, however, is left ambiguous. *The Land of Freedom* imagines a radically bold ideal future, yet already delayed until after achieving a revolution, and then requiring a fantastic temporal leap.

Screening Urban Cosmopolitanism and Rural Propaganda

On July 23, 1954, Madam Nang Ouane received permission from the Vientiane mayor's office to open a cinema hall in the Ban-Sikhay district. As cinema halls were venues of mass congregation, Madam Nang Ouane's establishment had to comply with particular safety requirements.[312] This permission, registered in the *Bulletin Officiel du Royaume du Laos*, reveals that entrepreneurial Madam Nang Ouane considered cinema as a viable business opportunity as it started to attract large audiences in urban Laos.[313] It is not known whether the theater became profitable for Madam Nang Ouane; nevertheless, it marked the start of a rapid boom in the cinema industry in urban Laos.

The year 1954, the start of Madam Nang Ouane's cinema business, was also the year when the independence of Laos was internationally recognized by the Geneva Accords.[314] The independence galvanized an optimistic nation-building project in the kingdom, and the physical and symbolic landscape of Vientiane started to transform

[312] Extract of the Decision 18, *Journal Officiel du Royaume du Laos* (1954).
[313] Cinema in Laos existed before 1954. Panivong Norindr writes that cinema in French Indochina was simultaneously a mass attraction, a tool to promote tourism, and part of the colonial apparatus of surveillance. Very few films were shot in Laos, and only two cinema halls operated, in Vientiane and Savannakhet. What I take from Norindr's analysis of the film industry in French Indochina is that from the very inception, it was incorporated into the state propaganda and military structures. The RLG would later adopt this logic for the production and distribution of films, but only in rural areas. See Panivong Norindr, "The Emergence of the Laotian Film Industry: A Short Overview," in *Southeast asian cinema. Le cinéma d'Asie du Sud-Est*, ed. by Gaëtan Margirier and Jean-Pierre Gimenez (Asiexpo edition, 2012), 244–245.
[314] Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, 83–84.

from a colonial outpost to the capital of the newly decolonized state. [315] Another phenomenon that captured its citizens' desire for belonging to the modern post-colonial world was cinema. Going to a movie meant consuming cosmopolitan entertainment on a par with the audiences in Bangkok, Hong Kong, or Paris.

Cinema boomed as a commercial industry of modern leisure in the cities but also as an avenue for state communication and political proselytizing in the countryside. It was a stratified space along the urban-rural and class divides regarding the audiences and film distributors with their agendas. Private commercial cinemas operated in urban centers, whereas film screenings in rural areas were organized by the mobile propaganda units of the RLA, with USIS support, not-for-profit. Additionally, free movie showings for the general public took place at national celebrations, religious festivals, and market gatherings.

The speed of urban cinema's infrastructure development in Laos in the first two post-independence decades was remarkable. In Vientiane, besides Madam Nang Ouane's venue, Cine Vieng opened the same year, followed by Lao Phanith, Saleum Vieng, and Vieng Samay.[316] By the end of the 1950s, Cinema Bousavanh, Seng Lao, and Cinema Lane Xang were running their businesses, and later, Odeon Rama became an iconic cinema theater.[317] These commercial halls operated alongside foreign-run Cine-Clubs,

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[315] Grant Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, 94.
[316] "Cine Vieng", *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 26.11.1954; "Communiqué", *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 05.10.1955; "Le Cinéma Saleumvieng, Place du Marché, offre une séance de cinéma en faveur des étudiants laotiens à l'Étranger le samedi soir 5 mai 1956," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 04.05.1956; "Inauguration du Cinéma Vieng Samai," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 05.07.1956
[317] "Soirées au profit des réfugiés au cinéma 'Bouasavanh'," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 04.05.1957; "Projection du film 'Liberté' le 19 mars 1959 au cinéma Selg-Lao," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane),18.03.1959; "Cinema," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 07.11.1959, and "Un 'Variety Show' à l'Odeon Rama au profit des familles des militaires victimes de la guerre," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 23.09.1970.

one managed by USIS, and two by French cultural institutions.[318] In Savannakhet, Lao Chaleun and Nang Lit Cinema opened in the 1960s, one cinema hall worked in Seno and two in Luang Prabang (fig. 3.1).[319]



Figure 3.1. Lao Chaleun Cinema in Savannakhet. 2023. Image: Anna Koshcheeva.

The repertoire of movies shown in urban theaters was eclectic. Audiences could choose from a recent Cannes Film Festival winner, a Bollywood musical, a Thai action drama, or even an erotic film. Cinema hall proprietors wooed customers with the newest

[318] For USIS Cine-Club, see "Le nouveau théâtre U.S.I.S.," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 26.04.1956; for two French Cine-Clubs working simultaneously, see "Center Culturel Français de Vientiane: Ciné-Club" and "Ciné Club de Wattay," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 02.01.1972; both commercials are published in the same issue of *Lao Presse*.

[319] Lao Chaleun and Nang Lit Cinema were built most likely in the 1960s; based on my interview with Mr. Soutin (Tin) Satikoun, projectionist of Nang Lit Cinema, in Savannakhet, 25.01.2023; information about the cinema in Seno is based on my interview with Bounmy Choummanyvong, a caretaker of the Seno Cinema, in Seno, 26.01.2023; Two cinema venues still exist in Luang Prabang, albeit not operational.

technical innovations, distinct programming, or celebrity names. The films screened in Vientiane from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s included *Living Desert* (1953) and *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* (1954). The French Cine Clubs focused on arthouse cinema, showing adaptations of Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* (1951), novels by Dumas, and Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* (1965), as well as popular French features, such as a period drama with Marina Vlady and an adventure film, *Tintin* (1961). Seng Lao Cinema specialized in American blockbusters and introduced the Lao audience to such stars as Grace Kelly, Audrey Hepburn, and Sophia Loren. Alongside American films, movie halls also screened Indian, Italian, Chinese, and Japanese films with English or Thai voiceover, or Thai movies with Vietnamese subtitles. The programming strategy of Seng Lao seemed particularly popular, and in 1959, after Crown Prince Sisavang Vatthana's visit to a show, the cinema announced an increase in the number of screenings due to high demand.[320]

With cinema halls catering to all sorts of tastes, the screening landscape became diverse, including films for adult audiences. A photo of the "cinema street" in Vientiane captures a poster for the Thai drama *The New Moon* and a Hong Kong film titled in the Lao language *The Bare Skinned Girl,* featuring a seductive image. (fig. 3.2).

[320] On the visit of the Crown Prince of Laos, Sisavang Vatthana, see "Projection du film 'Liberté' le 19 mars 1959 au cinéma Selg-Lao," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 18.03.1959; on increases of daily screenings, see "Avis," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 13.04.1959.



Figure 3.2. Film posters in Vientiane: Thai film *New Moon* on the left, and the Hong Kong film titled *The Bare Skinned Girl* in Lao on the right. 1973. Image: The Lao News Agency.[321]

The high proportion of "mediocre quality films" troubled the authorities.[322] This category included films with excessive nudity, violence, and frivolous behavior deemed incompatible with and detrimental to Lao morals and cultural customs. Additionally, ubiquitous Thai voiceovers and subtitles were undesirable for their implication of Thai cultural hegemony over Laos. Thus, the RLG sought to impose regulations on the carnivalesque urban cinema offerings. Recognizing its limitations in enforcing rules, the Ministry of Information pleaded with cinema hall owners to exercise decorum and help govern the national cinema. In 1959, it formed the Special Censorship Commission and "invited the proprietors of cinema halls to pay more attention to offer good taste public

[321] Film posters in Vientiane, (1973), file ຖຂ 449, photo archive of the Lao News Agency, Vientiane.
[322] On "mediocre quality of films" and "a need to defend national morals and educate the civic taste of cinemagoers," see "Communiqué du Ministère de l'Information," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 14.04.1959.

entertainment."[323] The Commission included representatives from relevant branches of the government: the Minister of Information, the Director of Propaganda, the General Director of National Police, the Director of Military Security, the Chief of the Psychological Warfare Division, and the Director of Fine Arts, among others.[324] Yet, the Censorship Committee functioned as an advisory body rather than a policymaker. It invited cinema hall owners to debate governmental concerns, but the theater owners often pushed back against the Censorship Committee's recommendations, claiming that such changes require governmental subsidies.

Cinema theaters were quick to bring the newest technology to satisfy patrons' desire for the most captivating experience. Cine Vieng Cinema started to show films in color in 1954 and installed double projection one year later.[325] Other cinemas followed suit. Harder to achieve were two RLG preferences: dubbing foreign films into the Lao language and providing content filmed in Laos. These limitations were contingent on the scarcity of domestic post-production technology, expertise, and talent. Making domestic content, especially the longer format of a feature film, was particularly difficult, and more frequent productions were short black-and-white documentaries or newsreels screened as an add-on before a foreign feature film.

Cinema halls in Lao cities varied in capacity, yet it is possible to approximate the size of the audiences they attracted. In an interview with me, Soutin Satikoun, a lifelong projectionist at Nang Lit Cinema in Savannakhet, stated that the theater accommodated

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[323] Ibid.
[324] Ministerial Order N 75/MIP of the Ministry of Information and Propaganda, *Journal Officiel du Royaume du Laos* (1969).
[325] "Ciné-Vieng," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 01.12.1954, and "Publicité," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 05.05.1955.

a seating of 800 people on the first floor and 300 on the second.[326] Another cinema in Savannakhet, Lao Chaleun Cinema, and Xenorama in Seno were similar in size.[327] In the 1960s-70s, Nang Lit Cinema had two daily screenings on working days and three screenings on weekends, and was always fully booked. The film showtimes catered to the working rhythms of the ethnically diverse population of Savannakhet. The first screening at Nang Lit Cinema at 7 pm targeted Vietnamese audiences and featured Chinese, Indian, or other foreign films, with two versionists, one for male and one for female characters, reading voiceovers from scripts. The 9 pm screening attracted Lao viewers, showing Thai films without voiceover.[328] The ticket price of 100 to 200 kip ($0.40-0.80 per the mid-1960s exchange rates) guaranteed an attractive profit for the cinema's owner.[329] Screenings in Vientiane started later, often having one session on a working day at 10 pm and two on a weekend.

Soutin recalls that cinema halls in southern Laos, like those in Vientiane, showed movies from Thailand, India, the US, Hong Kong, and other countries. Yet in Savannakhet, the chances of seeing a film made in Laos were even lower than in the capital, and no state regulation was enforced on distribution. In other words, cinema halls in southern Laos operated independently from Vientiane, and viewers in provincial cities predominantly consumed foreign content, Western or regional. This fractured nature of the commercial cinema industry and paucity of shared cinematic visuality expose a weakness in the nation-building project in early post-colonial Laos. Certainly, cinema was not the only medium available to the RLG, yet its potential to create

[326] Southin Satikoun, interview with the author, Savannakhet, January 2023.
[327] From my interviews with the projectionist of Nang Lit Cinema and the caretaker of Seno Cinema.
[328] The Thai language is generally comprehensible for most lowland Lao.
[329] Based on the exchange rate in Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, 130.

nationally circulated imagery and narratives was underutilized. Put differently, the ability of commercial cinema to help conjure what Benedict Anderson calls imagined communities, or, more specifically, an imagined national community in early post-colonial Laos, was left untapped.[330] If moviegoers in the south of Laos were better integrated into the film distribution networks of Thailand and India than of the Lao capital, then the commercial cinema did not support the provinces' cultural affiliation with the modernizing program emanating from Vientiane. And vice versa, if the audiences in Vientiane and the provinces were consuming cinematic content that differed from one another, then no nationally shared experience was created by watching films. Conversely, the growing pressure of the Cold War in dividing the population of Laos along ideological lines raised the stakes in affective mass communication, with cinema being its powerful medium.

To that end, the RLG organized non-commercial film screenings in public spaces. These screenings were meant to satisfy the lower classes' desire for modern entertainment and the government's aspiration for popularity. Movies were shown at the National Stadium in Vientiane for the celebration of the Constitution Day in 1954 and, in 1955, on the grounds of That Luang during the That Luang Festival, the biggest annual religious festival in the capital.[331] These screenings became an annual tradition with movies shown to big festive crowds.[332]

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[330] Evans, *A Short History*, 21; Lutz, "'Mouthpiece' and 'Arena'", 6.
[331] "Programme de la Fête nationale du 11 mai 1954," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 10.05.1954; "Foire Exposition du That Luang de 1955," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 28.10.1955.
[332] "Programme de la Fête Nationale de l'Indépendance du 19 juillet 1956," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 18.07.1956.

Civic groups in Laos also used cinema's attraction to lure audiences to their events. In 1955, the Lao Women's Association organized three film screenings to help raise funds.[333] Charity movie shows with profits directed to war veterans, refugees, or Lao students abroad became a staple on the entertainment calendar in Vientiane.[334] Even the Lao Sangha employed cinema as edutainment. In 1967, under the patronage of the Ministry of Religion, the Association of Young Buddhists organized a screening of films about Buddhism at the prestigious Lane Xang Hotel.[335]

Cinema was a tool of Cold War foreign cultural diplomacy in Laos. Foreign legations and embassies organized screenings in Vientiane to promote a positive image of their countries. The Thai legation showd films in 1954.[336] In 1958, the Japanese embassy screened movies about the Japanese economy and expertise in construction. French and Australian cultural attaches brought documentaries on industrial achievements relevant to cooperation with Laos, such as mining and aviation. In 1967 alone, the Indian embassy presented to the Crown Prince a film that documented his visit to India, the Chinese embassy commemorated the 18th anniversary of the PRC with a program that included a film screening, and the Soviet embassy organized the Soviet Film Festival, hosting a week-long screening of Soviet films dubbed into French.[337]

The cinema landscape in rural Laos differed drastically from that of Vientiane. To influence public opinion in the countryside, the RLA, in cooperation with USIS, became

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[333] "Séances cinématographiques au profit de l'Association des Femmes Lao," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 15.02.1955.
[334] "Avis," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 21.02.1956; and Presidential Order N104/PC, *Journal Officiel du Royaume du Laos* (1962).
[335] "L'Association des Jeunes Bouddhistes du Laos organise une séance de projection," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 11.10.1967.
[336] "Séance cinématographique gratuite à la légation thaïe," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 22.06.1954.
[337] "Des films sur la visite en Inde de S.A.R. le prince héritier," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 21.09.1967; "Le Festival de Films Soviétiques," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 06.10.1967.

the country's largest film producer. Cinema in rural Laos was thus a state-run mass communication program, contrary to its commercial and entertainment character in the cities. Propaganda units of the RLA traveled to the countryside on communication missions, organizing film screenings, performances, talks, and the distribution of printed materials. The main objective of these missions was anti-communism. The Department of Psychological Warfare (services de la Guerre Psychologique de l'Armée Nationale), responsible for propaganda activities, aimed at manifesting the state's presence in the countryside and counterbalancing the influence of the North Vietnamese units remaining in Laos after the First Indochina War, particularly around Luang Prabang.[338] Films, in this context, were tools to attract villagers to RLA events and to communicate its messages.

A report in *Lao Presse* details the propaganda unit's experience. It states that on May 20, 1954, a unit of 20 propagandists left Luang Prabang to tour Sayaburi province. The unit traveled on four boats down the Mekong River and, within one month, traversed 500 km, visited 60 villages, and gave 27 screenings. Everywhere, villagers enthusiastically welcomed the unit and were greatly amused by the movies, which many villagers encountered for the first time in their lives. Screening sessions comprised documentaries and the American adventure film *Storm over Bengal* (1938), a fictional story of a local insurgency in British India. Following the screenings, the propaganda unit gave talks to explain domestic politics, alarm audiences with regard to the communist threat posed by foreign elements, and emphasize the need for patriotic

[338] Wolfson-Ford, *Forsaken Causes*, 11–12.

alignment with the government.[339] The members of the unit claimed that "we hoped to show that we are stronger [than the communists] because we are here." "Being here," or reaching the Lao countryside from the capital, was indeed an arduous task, and the *Lao Presse*'s article graphically narrated the travel difficulties of the propaganda team.[340]

This and similar reports outline the itineraries of the propaganda units in northern and southern provinces.[341] They illustrate how, in the Lao countryside, cinema functioned in what May Adadol Ingawanij calls an "itinerant" mode.[342] Mobile propaganda units traveled to various rural locales on trucks or boats, equipped with a projector, electricity generator, fabric screen, microphone, and a team of projectionists and versionists.

Foreign films with sound or text in many Asian and Western languages, especially French, Vietnamese, and Thai, dominated commercial cinema in urban Laos. However, the same content was less suitable for propaganda in rural Laos. Like Lao urbanites, the countryside was multilingual, but fluent in languages other than those of international cinema. Besides the Lao language, the villagers, more than half of whom belonged to ethnic minority groups, spoke a native language and perhaps one of their neighbors, but were less likely to be proficient in French and, much less, in English. Foreign films brought to the countryside certainly could lure, but were ineffective in delivering

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[339] Notably, neither the RLA nor the *Lao Presse* mentioned the Pathet Lao explicitly in these reports. While the Pathet Lao was perceived as a communist organization, the threat to national unity in the Lao press in the 1950s was presented as coming from North Vietnam.
[340] "La fructueuse tournée d'une équipe de 20 propagandistes de l'Armée Nationale," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 15.06.1954.
[341] "Tournée de propagande," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 09.09.1955; and "Notre équipe mobile de propagande dans le sud-Laos," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 10.12.1955.
[342] May Adadol Ingawanij, "Itinerant Cinematic Practices In and Around Thailand during the Cold War," *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia* 2, no. 1 (March 2018): 9-41.

politically urgent messages. For this reason, the Psychological Warfare Department of the RLA embarked on filmmaking as one of its major outlets.

In 1954, the RLA reported on its first cinematic achievements. It produced a patriotic film, *Kham Pheng, a Daughter of Laos*, in the Lao language and with local actors, and screened it across all provinces under the RLG administration.[343] Another film was a documentary about the RLA, which talked about its history and importance in the current political climate. Lastly, three other films, *The Danger*, *The Fight for the Homeland*, and *The Viet*, implied the presence of North Vietnamese troops in Laos and spoke about the danger of communism.[344] Eleven more films were under production, seven of them in color. The descriptions of these films in a Lao daily unmistakably indicate the main concern underlying RLA filmmaking—creating popular anti-communist sentiment in rural Laos.

USIS was another major player in the RLG film industry. In 1954, USIS started to produce documentaries: about the Boat Festival, the Lao king's return from France, Nehru's visit to Vientiane, and an editorial on Lao schools.[345] These films were shot in black and white with narration in English and screened at the US legation in Vientiane. From 1956, USIS made newsreels in the Lao language, organized public screenings, and began operating its own cinema hall on Wattay Road.[346] USIS messaging in films and other cultural production was more subtle than that of the RLA.[347] Overall, USIS aimed

[343] "Realizations du Cinema Lao," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 04.12.1954.
[344] Ibid.; the title of the film in French is *Kham Pheng, Fille Du Laos*.
[345] The Boat Festival is a major annual religious festival in Laos. For USIS documentaries, see "Représentation d'un film d'Actualités lao réalisé par le Service Américain d'Information," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 04.012.1954.
[346] "Avis," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 10.01.1956; "Le nouveau théâtre U.S.I.S.," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 26.04.1956.
[347] On other cultural activities of the USIS and the US embassy, see Yale Richmond, *Practicing public diplomacy: a Cold War odyssey* (Berghahn Books, 2008), 23–36.

at popularizing Lao culture as a guarantor of traditional Lao values that were assumed to be inimical to communism.[348] Later, it emphasized the economic and social progress in Laos supported by the projects of the USOM and USAID.[349]

The RLG tried to consolidate the production, distribution, and revenue generation in the film industry under its control. In 1962, it set up the "provisional and experimental" National Cinematographic Office as a cross-departmental entity under the Ministry of National Security, the Ministry of Information, and the Ministry of Finance.[350] It also aimed at promoting the production of Lao films, and to that end, it established a school of presenters in the Sihom area of Vientiane.[351] Yet, it remains questionable if meaningful control over the cinema industry was ever achieved.

It is hard to estimate the footage output of USIS and the RLA, as neither entity attributed movies to themselves. The RLG official statistics on cinema include only the expenditure on importing foreign films and do not cover domestically produced content.[352] Moreover, no institution in Laos was archiving films until 1991.[353] Considering the speed of celluloid film disintegration in the tropical climate, it is safe to assume that most films produced by USIS and the RLG in the 1950s–60s are lost.

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[348] For USIS's emphasis on promoting religion and traditional culture in its anti-communist programs in Southeast Asia, see Marc Frey, "Tools of Empire: Persuasion and the United States's Modernizing Mission in Southeast Asia," in *Diplomatic History* 27, no. 4 (Sept 2003), 560.
[349] For the US economic assistance to Laos, see Charles Mann, *4 Questions on American Aid to Laos*, (USAID Mission to Laos, 1969), 5.
[350] Office National Cinematographique du Laos (ONCL). Presidential Order No 115/PC, *Journal Officiel du Royaume du Laos* (1962); "Avis," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 12.02.1962; "Avis de concours de scénarios," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 16.05.1957.
[351] "O.N.C.L. Office National Cinématographique du Laos: sa création, sa nécessité, ses buts," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 04.07.1962; "Avis," *Lao Presse* (Vientiane), 08.10.1962.
[352] While the RLA and USIS were leading film producers in early postcolonial Laos, mentions of independent filmmaking are minimal in the Lao press.
[353] In 1991, the National Film Archive and Video Center was established. It is now the National Film Archive within the Cinema Department of the Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism. *The Department of Cinema Booklet*.

Nonetheless, 2500 reels survived in the holdings of the National Film Archive of Laos. This number indicates that many more thousands of reels existed and that filmmaking was a critical avenue for the RLG's communication.[354]

Symbolic City: Cine-Architecture of Belated Future

Nowadays, films made by the RLG or USIS are not available for public screening or scholarly examination. The National Film Archive of Laos does not release the RLG footage from its collection, as it is deemed ideologically inappropriate.[355] A rare, perhaps accidental exception from this policy is *The Modern Capital of Vientiane in the Future* (1965–66).

[354] Based on my interview with the Director of the National Film Archive, Sisavath Hongsombath, in Vientiane, 08.10.2022 and 13.10.2022.
[355] The "RLG period" of 1954–1975 is avoided in the domestic historiography of Lao PDR, and the research on it is discouraged. See the Conclusion in Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, 234–236.



Figure 3.3. Stills from *The Modern Capital of Vientiane in the Future.* The main protagonists of the film. ca. 1965–66. Source: YouTube channel of the National Film Archive of Laos.

The footage of *The Modern Capital of Vientiane in the Future* does not have credits or specify a production year. Nonetheless, it was certainly made around 1965–66 as a state-sponsored commission in cooperation with USAID.[356] Assessing the completion stage of the iconic Vientiane landmarks when the footage was taken, it is possible to date it quite accurately. The Lane Xang Hotel was finished in 1964, and the Anousavaly Monument, still under construction in the film, would be completed in 1967, meaning that the shooting of the film took place between these years.[357]

[356] Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, 150.
[357] These dates are taken from Himmakone Manotham, *Nakhon Luang Vientiane samai Rasaanajak Lao* [The Capital of Vientiane in the period of the Lao Kingdom] (Nakonsii Manotham, 2010), 62.

The film centers on a young couple touring Vientiane on motorcycles (fig. 3.3). The camera follows them and pauses on numerous construction sites and recently completed buildings in the capital: the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Construction and Public Works, the giant of Anousavaly, still just a concrete carcass with a crown of Buddhist architecture-inspired towers (fig. 3.4).[358] To the left, on Lane Xang Avenue, is the National Assembly building. Later, navigating the traffic along the Mekong, the couple admires the Lane Xang Hotel, the new heart of social life in Vientiane, the Nam Phu fountain, and the high-rise building of the Ministry of Information. It seems that construction is everywhere in the capital of the new Lao nation. With a playful staccato, the film shows bricks being laid, fresh patterns of terrazzo floors being polished, and workers lifting seemingly weightless buckets of concrete into the air, smiles on their faces. Vientiane will be a marvelous city in the future, and the film protagonists will be its ideal residents. The narrator announces them as students at a technical college, a Third World epitome for national technocratic development and scientific progress.

[358] The more accurate historical name of the monument is *Anousavaly Naklob Kao*, or the Monument for Veteran Soldiers. Presently, the monument is called *Patuxay*, or the Victory Arch.



Figure 3.4. Stills from *The Modern Capital of Vientiane in the Future.* The protagonists ride towards the Anousavaly monument. ca. 1965–66. Source: YouTube channel of the National Film Archive of Laos.

The first vignette of *The Modern Capital* is about transformation. Architecture and construction work recast the former colonial capital into a modern city and the nation's administrative heart. The young couple evokes social mobility and high-skilled labor. Their union is symbolic on multiple levels. As a heteronormative couple, they allude to the modern ideal of a bourgeois nuclear family. As students at a technical school, they alleviate the RLG's anxieties about the deficit of an educated workforce in Laos. As both a couple and future professional workers, they form an ideal social unit of the future nation. With their bodies circumambulating the capital in the modern ritual of a motorcycle commute, the protagonists and the city become one—an image of a hopeful vernacular capitalist development.

After the tour of the cine-architectural dream of Vientiane, the movie proceeds to the Presidential Palace, implying the RLG's governmentality. It introduces the audience to the Palace's collection of cultural artifacts: Buddha statues, silversmith items, and ivory, a material testimony to the riches of Lao traditional culture and the government's preservation effort. Then, the camera peeks at a high-profile party held at the Lane Xang Hotel. It shows government dignitaries enjoying a performance of traditional Lao dance: the collective masculine body of RLG functionaries, clad in modern suits, consuming a performance delivered by female dancers gracing the stage in traditional Lao dress. Reinforcing the binaries of power, masculinity, and modernity and subjugation, femininity, and tradition, the scene rounds off the film and its presentation of the RLG.

Made in the genre of documentary reportage, the film represents an ongoing national development and the government's patronage of the cultural heritage and living traditions of the Lao nation. This teleological perspective cinematically connects the Lao past, present, and future, and casts the RLG as its caretaker and, hence, an omnitemporal ruler. Yet, the RLG is also a distinctly modern and modernizing force.[359] *The Modern Capital* quite literally translates national modernization as cine-architectural construction. Yet, this construction focuses on the national symbolic—administrative buildings, monuments, and public spaces, gesturing towards modern governance, production of national identity, and civic space. What is absent from this architectural fantasy is residential housing and industrial facilities. These absences betray the RLG's

[359] On a ruling regime gaining legitimacy from being a custodian of this timelessness, see Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

dream of national development, "a-nation-as-construction," as a future city devoid of a place to live and work.

Hence, *The Modern Capital* as the state's vision of a vernacular capitalist future is troubled by two questions: Who has the right to participate in this future, and, more importantly, when is it? The film speaks to Vientiane urbanites, motivated by dreams of social mobility, who are already the elite compared to the majority of the Lao peasant population. My critique aligns with that of the historians of Laos, who assert that the RLG policies and projects were elitist, neglecting the masses.[360] The governance aimed simultaneously at national progress and preservation of traditional power structures and social classes; the limited RLG's efforts to address the grievances of the rural population eventually hindered its popularity in favor of the Pathet Lao.

My second argument about *The Modern Capital* relates to another temporal aspect of the capitalist future. The film conjures the linear historical time of the Lao nation and marks its present moment, aligning Laos with global contemporaneity. The nation's future is expected to conform to the logic of Cold War developmentalism in the Third World. Yet this logic assumes that the Third World will be submitted to the hierarchies of global capitalism and will never catch up with the West; that the capitalist future will reside in the West, and that Laos will always remain temporally behind. Bliss Cua Lim contextualizes the necessity of homogeneous empty time for capitalist function. I argue that Cold War developmentalism, contrary to its promise of the accelerated transfer of capitalism to an Asian frontier, sought to harden temporal disparities between the First and Third Worlds. It locks the Third World into perpetual

[360] Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, 67–68.

adoption of technology and catch-up in productivity, with its future already known, yet never contemporaneous with the West. Subscribing to the rational and scientific notion of Cold War developmentalism, *The Modern Capital* falls into this temporal trap. This trap entails that Laos will be moving towards a capitalist future certainly yet belatedly, to a belated capitalist future. Moreover, this future denies the possibility of other radically different horizons outside of peripheral positionality. This is where I turn to the cinema of the Pathe Lao.

Cinema in the Liberated Zone

A peculiar cinema industry emerged in the liberated zone. It produced documentaries about the Pathet Lao's political struggle and anti-imperialist war. Clearly propaganda, with forceful messaging, poor cinematographic quality, and a presumably provincial adaptation of global socialist realism conventions, Pathet Lao cinema has failed to attract the attention of cultural historians and film scholars of Southeast Asia. Yet, it attests to a fascinating history of cinema on a global Cold War frontier and the way it conjured an ideal socialist future in what was quite an unlikely place for filming it—the Lao jungles under US bombing.

Considering its remote location and the ongoing political and military struggle, it is surprising to discover a thriving cinema industry in the communist caves. Yet, film was one of the key tools of the Pathet Lao outreach to the population of the liberated zone—multiethnic, multilingual, and with a low rate of reading literacy in Lao. Its importance explains why the Pathet Lao requested assistance from fraternal socialist countries to bring filmmaking technology and expertise to Vieng Xay. The earliest help came from North Vietnam, and together with Vietnamese filmmakers, the Pathet Lao

produced its first film, *The Unification of Two Provinces*, in 1956. In 1958, the Pathet Lao Cinema was established, comprising a production and a distribution unit.[361] The filmmaking equipment most likely came from the USSR, and training and postproduction took place in North Vietnam. Administratively, the Pathet Lao Cinema was a unit within the NLHX communication services and was not a commercial organization. As the sole filmmaking and screening entity, Pathet Lao cinema was totally subsumed under the party's communications.

The film distribution unit was responsible for bringing films to the mass audience. The mountainous geography of Sam Neua and Phongsaly provinces and the low population density necessitated that the unit, much like the propaganda units of the Royal Lao Army, travel between villages and military postings, battling poor road conditions. Films were shown in the open air, village markets, and temple grounds. The only "indoor" screening facility in the liberated zone was a cinema hall in Sam Neua's provincial center before 1964 and a meeting hall in the Elephant Cave afterward.[362]

The production unit made short documentaries about the achievements of the party and exposé films dramatizing the atrocities of the US covert military operations in Laos. Some of the titles produced by the Pathet Lao Cinema are *The Unification of Two Provinces* (1956), *The 20 Years of Revolution* (1965), *Dry Season Victory* (1970), and *The Land of Freedom* (1970). As the former director of the Lao Film Archive, Bounchao Phichit, summarized, these films intended to ignite patriotic feelings, buttress resistance

[361] Bounchao Phichit, "Lao Cinema" in *Film in Southeast Asia: Views from the Region*, *Essays on Film in Ten South East Asia-Pacific Countries*, ed. by David Hanan (SEAPAVAA and Vietnam Film Institute, 2000) 64.
[362] The KPL archive's photo of the cinema hall in Sam Neua dates from 1979, yet the construction date is unknown to me.

to foreign aggression, delegitimize "the Vientiane puppet government" as being subservient to American imperialism, and project the Pathet Lao as the protector of the Lao people and their determination for sovereignty.[363]

The narrative structure of the Pathet Lao films often had a rigid pattern. The introductory vignettes announced the beauty of the Lao land, the richness of its cultural traditions, and the multi-ethnic makeup of its people. Picturesque vistas, lush vegetation, and flowers in bloom opened these films. Their common successors were Lao temples, ethnic festivals, the weaving of intricate textiles, and inevitably, a traditional *lamvong* dance and a musician playing the *khene*.

The following part of the Pathet Lao movies reverted to the role of the party in liberating the country from foreign oppression. While the narrator introduced the story of the Secret War, the imagery became saturated with American airplanes, bomb explosions, return fire from the Pathet Lao weaponry, and the devastation of the land after the bombing. Unmistakably, this part of the movie presented the enemy as an omnipotent, irrational, evil Other. The Pathet Lao, in contrast, acted as a stoic Lao David against a capitalist Goliath, channeling the collective patriotic desire of the people.

For consistency, or maybe due to the scarcity of celluloid film, later Pathet Lao films often incorporated footage from earlier productions. With time, Pathet Lao films grew in length, accumulating and solidifying the visual representation of the Pathet Lao struggle. As audio-visual tutorials for mass political education in their logic, they established an official narrative of Pathet Lao history and its pictorial canon. In the end, Pathet Lao Cinema created a monolithic visuality for historiography and museology. To

[363] Phichit, "Lao Cinema," 65.

this day, most museums in Laos use stills from Pathet Lao films in their permanent exhibitions, and history books feature these stills as illustrations.

The Pathet Lao Cinema was unknown to the historians of Cold War Laos until recently. Its reels were rediscovered in Vieng Xay in the late 1990s, and no systematic research has been done on the collection. Yet, even after two decades in the abandoned cave complex, over 2500 items were located. Certainly, the original number of reels was much higher. Some of the reels were from other socialist countries brought for screening, and the percentage of reels produced by the Pathet Lao cinema is unknown. Nonetheless, the find indicates the degree to which film, both domestic and international, was important to the cultural efforts of the Pathet Lao. The number of reels in its collection was similar to those of the RLG, meaning that cinema was a key arena of the cultural Cold War in the country. Film screening was actively deployed to promote contested visions of a nation's future. For the RLG, it was anti-communist technocratic development focused on the nation's elites. The Pathet Lao cinema, in most of its documentaries, attacked the US as an imperialist aggressor and the RLG as its pawn. Yet, the Pathet Lao films that interest me the most exceeded that narrative.

Socialist Paradise in the Caves

The Land of Freedom stands out from the uniform formula of the Pathet Lao Cinema and presents what I call a "future vernacular socialist paradise." I interpret *The Land of Freedom* as a documentary of the future, akin to *The Modern Capital*. Referring in its title to the liberated zone, that is, a territory redeemed from foreign oppression, it shows life in Vieng Xay as a model for constructing future socialist modernity in Laos. Its vignettes illustrate in detail what comprises that project and act simultaneously as an

ideological textbook and a tutorial on the building blocks of Lao socialism. Together with *The Modern Capital*, *The Land of Freedom* forms a genre of Lao documentary cinematic futurology and exemplifies Cold War *warring paradises*—contested cinematic visions of ideal capitalist and socialist futurity.

What captivates me about *The Land of Freedom* is how far a socialist paradise was from the reality of the communist caves and how this distance emboldened the radical imagining of socialist Lao futurity rather than precluded it. Vieng Xay's living conditions were spartan. Summers are hot and humid in the mountains, and winters are bone-chilling. For a couple of months each year, night temperatures drop to near-freezing; the monsoon winds hit the limestone formation stretching towards the Annamite Cordillera, halt at the mountain tops, and turn into dense fog. Cold moisture seeps through everything. During the bombing campaigns of the Secret War, this fog prevented air raids for days on end and was literally a layer of atmospheric protection. Likewise, it disrupted supplies to the Pathet Lao headquarters. Electricity, clean water, food, warm clothing, and blankets were rationed in Vieng Xay. When the fog cleared, the danger of air bombardment returned, and work in the fields and cooking had to be done at night.[364] Any activity outdoors during the daytime posed danger, including filmmaking. Yet, *The Land of Freedom* is shot mainly outdoors, as a socialist future should be.

[364] *Voices of Viengxay*, 19.



Figure 3.5. Still from *The Land of Freedom.* Harvest scene. 1970. Source: The National Film Archive of Laos.

The opening scene of *The Land of Freedom* is a harvest (fig. 3.5). Women in ethnic dress move in rhythmic unison, cutting ripe rice. The harmonious motion of a collective female body produces prosperity and abundance for the future nation. The women smile as if tending to the fields is not heavy manual labor but a joy. The harvesting scene is followed by scenes of watering and collecting vegetables, fruits, and root crops, completing the dream of scientific agriculture.

Smiling peasants collectively working a virgin land is a trope familiar to viewers of socialist cinema.[365] Moreover, anybody versed in Soviet or Asian strands of Marxism would recognize a classic connotation behind this trope–collective farming as the basis

[365] John Haynes, *New Socialist Man: Gender and Masculinity in Stalinist Soviet Cinema* (Manchester University Press, 2003), 115–153.

for a socialist economy in the countryside. With its dependence on manual labor, it is difficult to tell if the farming in *The Land of Freedom* is collective or traditionally communal; nonetheless, the foundational step for building Lao socialism as agricultural progress is put forward.

Next, the film moves on to the subject of infrastructure and industry. The camera shows the construction of roads and irrigation canals, with the party leaders partaking in the labor alongside the workers. Granted, the projects are small, and the labor again largely manual, but the humble scale of work does not take away from the clarity of the message: if the leaders and the people unite with wholehearted enthusiasm, surely, the Lao economy will be transformed.

What is notable in these scenes is the proximity between the party leaders and the people. Prince Souphanouvong repeatedly engages in physical contact with male and female soldiers and workers. He enthusiastically kisses soldiers on their cheeks, shakes their hands, and puts medals on their chests. Some soldiers are visibly flustered by this intimacy with a person of the *sadet chao* status, one of the highest aristocratic titles in Laos. In *The Land of Freedom*, Prince Souphanouvong, in rubber boots, shovels the dirt from a future irrigation canal. Later, he plays volleyball with soldiers, a sport he enjoys. Unmistakably, Prince Souphanouvong has an air of nobility and power about him, and I do not think that the film is trying to mask it. Rather, it contrasts the conduct of Prince Souphanouvong with that of Lao aristocrats in the RLG, who would only appear before the crowd at the opening ceremonies of schools, hospitals, or bridges to engage in the theatrics of power. The physical closeness of Prince Souphanouvong with the people in the liberated zone communicates socialist egalitarianism and the flattening of traditional

social hierarchies. The exaggerated mannerisms of socialist fraternal intimacy, which were embraced enthusiastically across the socialist bloc, might have seemed odd to Lao soldiers and peasants.[366] Yet, these body politics amplified socialist equality, a notion that, some scholars argue, supported the popularity of Marxism in the decolonizing world.[367]

The subject of industrial development, however, had always been tricky for Asian socialisms, where most of the population lived by subsistence farming. Nikolai Voland illustrates how the PRC's anxiety about industrial underdevelopment in the 1950s prompted it to circulate literary works that portrayed China as more industrially advanced than it really was.[368] Similarly, *The Land of Freedom* paid attention to showing the industrialization of the liberated zone, and made the point to include the metalsmith and weaving factories in the footage. Then, it turns its attention to the education and medical sectors. The film shows a kindergarten and a school in the caves. Kids and adults of ethnic minorities learn the Lao alphabet. A vocational school trains doctors. Later, these doctors provide medical check-ups to pregnant women and administer vaccinations to children. Soldiers teach their fellows to read during free time; girls help each other with grammar lessons when taking breaks from weaving. The intended thought of the film is apparent: it is everyone's responsibility to work on their education, help comrades improve their literacy, and take care of their health.

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[366] A great illustration of this exaggerated fraternal intimacy is a famous photo of a kiss between Brezhnev and Honecker reproduced on the Berlin Wall.
[367] Prasenjit Duara, "The Cold War as a Historical Period: An Interpretive Essay," *Journal of Global History* 6, no. 3 (November 1, 2011), 465.
[368] Nikolai Volland, "Inventing a Proletarian Fiction for China: The Stalin Prize, Cultural Diplomacy, and the Creation of a Pan-Socialist Identity," in *Dynamics of the Cold War in Asia*, 93–112.

Modern education and healthcare were the key promises of any modernizing mission in Southeast Asia. In Laos, education and healthcare were emphasized by the French colonial administration and later by US aid programs, even as the lion's share of the budget always went to the army. Global socialism, however, claimed free access to education and medical care to the general public as its goal and as the justification of its moral superiority over capitalism. My analysis in the previous chapter affirmed that similar aspirations animated the modernizing programs of the Pathet Lao. Elementary education, mass literacy, and promotion of literary culture were emphasized as critically important for social transformation in the liberated zone. More than that, education efforts were much broader in scope, including preparatory steps such as developing alphabets and dictionaries, as well as the material base for education: textbooks and school facilities. It is no surprise that no other footage in *The Land of Freedom* features so prominently as basic education. The film offers examples of when short lessons could be taken between other activities by all social strata.

The final part of *The Land of Freedom* addresses the question of socialist culture. The content of this part closely aligns with modes of representation and media I discussed in the "Communist Caves" chapter. As a visual summary, *The Land of Freedom* reiterates that Lao socialist culture should incorporate the existing traditions of the Lao and ethnic minorities and introduce modern visuality, media technologies, and socialist performance. Two modern art forms open this part—filmmaking and the fine arts. The movie shows filmmakers recording scenes in Vieng Xay and a young woman

receiving instructions on how to operate a film projector.[369] Then, young artists hold a plein air painting session in the fields. Some of these artists received schooling in North Vietnam and later would be distinguished as the national artists of the Lao PDR.[370] As Lao and North Vietnamese ideological schools were closely related, so were their art schools. Both North Vietnam, amid the destructive Vietnam War, and the Pathet Lao in the deprivation of Vieng Xay, found it necessary to invest in the fine arts and adopted socialist realism to render their struggle in pictorial form. After the painting session and filmmaking, the film attends to performances as a variety of practices: traditional dance, modern theater, and acrobatics. Musical productions are likewise a combination of traditional genres and Western-style bands with drums and guitars. Theater shares the aesthetics of Asian revolutionary plays. Lastly, international artists stage their pieces, making Lao socialist entertainment cosmopolitan.

The Land of Freedom as a whole achieves two feats. It imagines a socialist paradise and outlines a program of moving toward it. Yet it leaves ambiguous the temporal relation between the two: it does not announce *when* the socialist paradise is and how long it will take to keep building socialist modernity. In an analysis of the documentary cinema of the Great Leap Forward in China, Ying Qian argues that the genre of "artistic documentary" combined the documentary footage with fictional images of the future to dramatize the spectacular results of industrialization projects.[371]

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[369] Based on my interview with the Director of the National Film Archives of Laos, Sisavath, it appears that she might have worked at the Lao Film Center, the predecessor of the NFAL, and contributed to the preservation of the footage that I am describing in this chapter.
[370] Anna Koshcheeva, "Art of Post-Socialist Laos: Contesting the Motherland, her Past and Future," MA diss., (University of London, 2018), 35.
[371] Ying Qian, "When Taylorism Met Revolutionary Romanticism: Documentary Cinema in China's Great Leap Forward," *Critical Inquiry* 46 (Spring 2020), 586–88.

Some films in this genre announced when the socialist future would be reached, others left the moment of its arrival open-ended. For the Pathet Lao, as the Vietnam War was ravaging the liberated zone, the temporal gap between the imagined future and the start of building socialism on a national scale was contingent upon winning the war and the revolution first. For the time being, the socialist paradise was suspended in atemporal representation. It existed in the future, after the revolution and a succeeding temporal leap, and only if and as long as it was believed in.

Conclusion

My analysis of the RLG and the Pathet Lao cinema illustrates how it related to the bipolarity of the global Cold War. Filmmaking was a cultural and representation battleground in Laos, imbricated in military and political structures. The Department of Psychological Warfare of the Royal Lao Army produced and screened films to boost anti-communism in the countryside. Similarly, Pathet Lao cinema disseminated films to the peasantry, promoting the party's cause of anti-imperialist resistance and national unity. As the conflict in Laos was inextricable from the large theater of the Cold War in Indochina, the cinema industry bore the deeds of the foreign powers involved in this conflict. USIS provided the infrastructure on which the Royal Lao Government's filmmaking operated, and film equipment and supplies for the Pathet Lao arrived from the socialist bloc. The power of cinema was considered critical for winning popular support, and the RLA and the Pathet Lao committed significant resources to filmmaking, producing thousands of reels. In the end, the cinematic images of the future that the RLG and the Pathet Lao presented defined their political fate.

I interpreted two films, produced by the contesting powers in Laos, as cinematic representations of their modernizing promises—*warring paradises*. *The Modern Capital* of the Royal Lao Government portrayed a belated capitalist future for technocratic elites. By the same token, it precluded the peasant majority from access to a capitalist paradise. The *Land of Freedom* of the Pathet Lao, on the contrary, conjured ethno-social egalitarianism and social welfare in the countryside, coupled with scientific agriculture, industry, and modern entertainment. It promised a radical dream of ideal socialist futurity, yet ambiguously temporally located. Nonetheless, the Pathet Lao won popular support.

As much as I paid attention to transnational history in analyzing cinema industries, my focus in reading films was on the vernacularity of *warring paradises.* I analyzed *The Modern Capital* and *The Land of Freedom* as visual texts that particularized capitalist and socialist modernizing ideals for the Lao condition. I argued that it is precisely the local specificity of ideal futures that defined their power on an Asian frontier, in a historically specific place and time.

CONCLUSION

Maurice Meisner states that the vision of an ideal future is the dynamic force of history.[372] But what happens when there are two antagonistic visions of the future? This question underpinned my theoretical approach in this dissertation. Cold War futures are peculiar imaginaries at the intersection of social utopias, economic models, and technologies of development. They are ideals of societal organization and subjectivity. Yet, like all futures, they are visions, projections, and representations. Capitalist or socialist, Cold War futures are the aggregates of shared dreams and imagined paradises rather than techno-scientific or socio-economic theories. For this reason I examine Cold War futures where they take shape—in cultural work and visual culture.

As global abstractions, Cold War capitalist and socialist futures were similar in their utopian outlook. Both promised economic prosperity and material abundance. Both regarded technological innovation and scientific management as the lynchpin of progress, of temporal acceleration of production. And both focused on global frontiers, such as Asia, for geographical expansion. As blueprints for modernity-making, they were bold in social and infrastructural experimentation. Chapter One of my dissertation, "Illusory Currents: Transfer of Capitalism, Architecture of Hydropower, and National Karma," argued that both Cold War blocs sought to drastically alter Asia to their designs through Cold War developmentalism. This developmentalism was imagined as a time machine that would temporally transport underdeveloped Asia to the edge of capitalist or socialist contemporaneity. Western Cold War developmentalism, in particular, promoted the mega-projects of agrarian and riparian development and hydroelectric dam

[372] Meisner, *Marxism, Maoism, and Utopianism*, 3–4.

construction. Together with the transfer of technological expertise and vocational training, it aimed at modernizing Asian economies and labor. In actuality, it spurred an influx of foreign aid and modernizing theories, turning Asian frontiers into laboratories of non-Western capitalism. Yet, more often than not, it failed to deliver the promised results due to a lack of local knowledge or a shortage of financial resources. As I illustrated in my analysis of developmentalism in Laos, this failure was a blessing in disguise, precluding ecological damage. Promising eight mega-hydroelectric dams on the mainstream Mekong, the United Nations' Mekong Project delivered one tributary dam on the Nam Ngum River. This dam was still sufficient to be the biggest electricity and cash generator in Cold War Laos.

Despite similarities, Cold War futures were futures at war. Western Cold War initiatives in Asia were staunchly anti-communist, and often this anti-communist agenda undermined economic development goals, as my study of American foreign aid to the RLG illustrates. More concerned with building "the arc of defense" against communism, US efforts in Laos concentrated on establishing military capabilities and logistics, turning Laos into a buffer state to protect the rest of Southeast Asia. The modernizing needs of the RLG in this scheme were ignored, eroding this government's legitimacy.

Asian communists might have been the first to pick up the Cold War fight. The term "Cold War" did not exist in Soviet historiography, and, in the first Cold War decades, the USSR did not contemplate expansion of its sphere beyond Eastern Europe.[373] As such, Western graphic metaphors of the Iron Curtain and the Domino

[373] For absence of the term "Cold War' in Soviet discourse see Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 2; for no expansion motivation in Stalin's USSR, see Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes*, 226.

shaped the early conception of the Cold War.[374] Asian socialist movements, anti-colonial and anti-imperialist, accepted the Cold War logic of animosity. They regarded US politics as neo-colonial aggression, a perspective that resonated across the Global South. Socialist solidarity, thus, was as much about mutual help as mutual resistance. Both perspectives empowered the Pathet Lao in the Cold War on an Asian frontier.

Where Cold War futures differed was in their ideals of social and temporal structures. Capitalist modernization, globally and in Laos, envisioned development that preserved hierarchies of capital: material and social. Western Cold War development theory saw private capital as a lever of economic growth and individual prosperity. It stated that an owner of a business, American and Asian alike, has the multiplication of wealth in his best interests and, hence, should be anti-communist. Local elites could seek foreign patronage for their development projects and retain their power in post-colonial states if they were pro-Western. "Illusory Currents" attested that the modernizing program of the RLG abided by that logic. American foreign aid was channeled top-down through old familial and new military elites of the RLG, and, as Grant Evans argued, exacerbated income disparities as well as urban-rural and inter-ethnic divides.[375] To justify their development policies and newly acquired wealth and to shape post-independence national identity, Lao elites engaged in traditional Buddhist performances of karmic legitimacy and sponsored the revival of a Lao Buddhist landscape.

The transfer of technical expertise for hydroelectric development was intended to launch the modernization of the national economy along the predicted trajectory of

[374] Westad, *The Cold War*, 90–91; Zubok, *A Failed Empire*, 42.
[375] Evans, A Short History, 103–104.

industrialization and raw materials extraction. Capitalist futurity in Laos extended from the linear and gradual temporality of progress, with the gap between severe Lao underdevelopment and Western standards of modernity reducing but never closing. It was a temporality of incremental growth, perpetual catch-up, and belatedness. And as the Mekong Project faltered, the hoped-for progress slowed down.

Lao socialism, on the contrary, sought to undo the previous structure of the colonial or ethnic hierarchy. With a stronghold in the multi-ethnic North, the Pathet Lao advocated for Marxist egalitarianism and equality between Lao and non-Lao ethnicities, with Lao socialist nationhood defined as multi-ethnic (*pasason banda phao*). As I demonstrated in the second chapter of the dissertation, "Communist Caves: Futural Technologies of a Socialist Ideal," Lao socialist futurity assumed universal access to elementary education and basic medical care as well as mass communication and popular socialist culture. Children and adult schooling, eradication of illiteracy, simplification of the Lao alphabet, and development of alphabets for ethnic minorities based on the Lao script were constitutive to boost mass participation and ethnic inclusion in the Pathet Lao educational drive. Radio broadcasting also included programs in Lao and ethnic minority languages, increasing the accessibility of information across the liberated zone. However, as I argued in the section "Sonic Social(ist) Darwinism," broadcasting in ethnic minority languages betrayed the paternalistic side of the Pathet Lao ideological education. To paraphrase George Orwell, all ethnicities were equal in the liberated zone, but some were more equal than others. Nonetheless, the focus on peasantry and inclusivity of the Pathet Lao was undeniable, rooted in its socialist theory. In particular, cinema visualized the breakdown of old

social hierarchies in the Lao socialist future. Prince Souphanouvong, nicknamed in the Western press as "Red Prince," embodied that message with corporeal closeness to common folk and participation in public works. He hugged soldiers, dug canals, fed chickens, and played team sports, showcasing fraternal approachability despite his high aristocratic status.

In terms of temporality, Lao socialist futurity broke away from the notion of gradual progress. It was an unrestrained leap forward from the existent reality of the communist caves with the aerial war, underground living, and scarcity. It was limitlessly optimistic, imagining an ideal across all spheres of economic and public life. Agriculture was scientific and multi-crop, in contrast to primitive rice-reliant farming. Public infrastructure featured irrigation canals and transportation logistics. Manufacturing, nonexistent in Laos, was envisioned as a combination of light and heavy industries, including textiles and metalworking. Education included tertiary professional training; medical services provided vaccination and pediatric care; and the public participated in various cultural activities. The Lao socialist future had it all, except for the temporal coordinates. It was a radically bold dream, luring with limitless possibilities the peasant majority long subjugated to the lowest positions in colonial Laos. It won the hearts with its audacity, even if it was unattainable anytime soon.

Cold War futures became the focus of my analysis, as I wanted to examine the Cold War from the vantage point of a global frontier. I was dissatisfied with the historiography of the Cold War, which views this historical phenomenon through the center-periphery paradigm. It positions the US and the USSR as the nodes of the capitalist and socialist hemispheres, as their models and exporters. Post-colonial theory

showed that the perspective on colonial modernity, as emanating from European metropoles to the rest of the world, was erroneous. Conversely, scholars such as Stoler and Mitchell reveal that the frontiers of the Third World were the laboratories of colonial world-making. Similarly, I anticipated that for the capitalist and socialist ideals to be powerful globally, they could not be foreign models conceived in Washington and Moscow, even if the latter thought so. My vantage point on the Cold War from Laos allowed me to uncover what was vernacular about the modernizing vision of the RLG, or what I called "vernacular Lao capitalism," and the communist Pathet Lao, and how they related to the universal features of capitalism and socialism. For this reason "Communist Caves" puts into dialogue the futural technologies of representing a Lao socialist ideal with the project of international socialist solidarity.

I argue that global socialism was not a monolithic political bloc dependent on ideological, cultural, or financial exports from the USSR. Rather, socialist modernity was also pioneered on global frontiers as smaller Western and non-Western socialist countries engaged in a transnational project of solidarity. North Vietnam, Cuba, Bulgaria, and the German Democratic Republic were some of the most active donors for the Pathet Lao. While the USSR and the PRC treaded a careful line in global geopolitics and competed with each other, smaller socialist countries aligned around a shared anti-imperialist agenda. They leveraged their expertise and cultural capital to champion socialist engineering. I do not claim that their motivations were fully altruistic. Transnational projects allowed them to increase their profile within the socialist cosmopolis and position themselves as pioneers in different spheres, such as cultural for Bulgaria, medical for Cuba, and technological for the GDR. Their commitment turned a

global socialist periphery into a cosmopolitan socialist frontier.

The Pathet Lao, much like the Royal Lao Government, counted on foreign aid for its modernizing projects and strategically managed the diversity of donors. North Vietnam, China, and the USSR were its biggest providers of military capabilities. At the same time, the Pathet Lao was careful not to lock itself into dependence on a single patron or alienate other donors. It anonymized socialist aid to its specific projects and spoke of a socialist bloc as an aggregate benefactor. Its infrastructure for cultural work, indeed, testified to the importance of aid from smaller socialist countries.

The core intellectual task of this dissertation was to explore the links between specific modes of representation, or what I call "futural technologies" of projecting an ideal, and the types of future they popularize. Marshall Berman argued that for modernity to actualize, it first needs to be dreamt into being through creative production. His literary analysis in *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* periodized the evolution of modernity through the work of modernist writers.[376] Yet, Berman's analysis was restricted to Western literature (including Russian). Likewise, Katerina Clark considered the shaping of the early Soviet culture as a future-oriented civilizing project.[377] I add that a state-endorsed doctrine of socialist realism aimed at creating a vision of an ideal socialist man and ideal socialist future as mimetic reality. Socialist realism became a prescribed aesthetic of futurology in Asian socialist countries as well and evolved into distinct national styles. Yet, I wanted to probe deeper into the connections between aesthetics, media, and futurity as particularity potent for the Pathet Lao struggle.

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[376] Marshall Berman, *All That Is Sold Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (Penguin Books, 1982).
[377] Katerina Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931–1941* (Harvard University Press, 2011).

Photographic records in the Pathet Lao archives revealed remarkable energies dedicated to publishing, radio broadcasting, fine arts, dance and music performances, acrobatics, and cinema. Hundreds of employees provided educational services, conducted research on folk culture and oral traditions, produced literature and journalism, composed lyrics, made films, and served in mass communication. The output of the Pathet Lao printing house ran into millions of pages, and the filmmaking unit produced hundreds of reels. The final chapter of my dissertation, "Warring Paradises: Documentaries of Ideal Vernacular Futures," analyzes cinema in Cold War Laos. In this chapter, I interpreted a film made by the RLG and a Pathet Lao documentary as cinematic expressions of their ideals of modernization. The RLG film, *The Modern Capital of Vientiane in the Future,* visualized Lao vernacular capitalist modernity as an urban space inhabited by technocratic elites. The Pathet Lao film, *The Land of Freedom,* featured the countryside, where people of all walks of life collectively build socialism, encompassing education and healthcare, agriculture and industry, and cultural work and mass communication. I note in "Warring Paradises" that cinema on both sides of the Cold War in Laos was integrated into political and military structures and enabled by foreign powers. Unmistakably, cinema was a Cold War battlefield. It sought to influence public opinion, steer political preferences, and mobilize support for the RLG or the Pathet Lao. The cinematic content of their films represented their visions of ideal Lao futurity, calling for a choice between vernacular capitalism and socialism and epitomizing warring Cold War futures.

Futural technologies of representation in Cold War Laos simultaneously reflected universal promises and vernacular interpretations of capitalist and socialist ideals. The

RLG's visuality translated Western developmentalist promises of architectural abundance in hydroelectric power into opportunities for future technocratic elites and urban development. It legitimized its vision through a Buddhist performance of karmic investment into the national future. And it envisioned a gradual process of modernization in Laos that would nonetheless retain its temporal and geographical marginality in global capitalism.

Radical dreams of the Pathet Lao promised material and cultural abundance to the rural multi-ethnic population and the exit from traditional social marginality. The Pathet Lao's ideal vernacular socialist future was open to all and incomparably better than reality. Its credibility was supported by cosmopolitan socialist solidarity from across continents and the theoretical backing of Marxism, albeit drastically reinvented for the Asian context. The innovation in Lao socialist theory and the departure from the Western orthodox Marxian school was the primacy of social transformation in engendering socialism, guided by futural representations. The Pathet Lao came to power in Laos in 1975. Its ideal vision of the socialist future won the local Cold War battle, a small battle on the global Cold War frontier.

Cold War futures were utopian and reckless. As visions of ideal modernity, they captivated the minds and channeled creativity. They turned technology into the gospel, and culture into a laboratory of social engineering. They emboldened science and pushed the horizons of possibilities. They tamed the atom, put a man in space, eradicated diseases, spread the green revolution, birthed the internet, and unleashed computing. Yet, they were futures at war. They split the world in two and militarized both halves. They clashed in proxy zones and civil conflicts on the Asian frontier and

discarded millions of lives of color as collateral damage. In the end, no one won the Cold War. We all gained and lost something along the way in the First, the Second, and the Third World.

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