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# Conceptualising Party-State Governance and Rule in Laos

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**ABSTRACT**

This article develops a framework for conceptualising authoritarian governance and rule in the Lao People's Democratic Republic. After introducing the national and academic context, which go a significant way towards understanding the paucity of comparative political work on Laos, we propose an approach to studying post-socialist authoritarian and single-party rule that highlights the key political-institutional, cultural-historical and spatial-environmental sources of party-state power and authority. In adopting this approach, we seek to redirect attention to the centralising structures of rule under the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, illustrating how authoritarian institutions of the "party-state" operate in and through multiple scales, from the central to the local level. At a time when the country is garnering greater attention than at any time since the Vietnam War, we argue that this examination of critical transitions in Laos under conditions of resource-intensive development, intensifying regional and global integration, and durable one-party authoritarian rule, establishes a framework for future research on the party-state system in Laos, and for understanding and contextualising the Lao People's Revolutionary Party regime in regional comparative perspective.

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Lao People's Democratic Republic; Lao People's Revolutionary Party; authoritarianism; post-socialism; single-party regimes; state formation

The Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) or Laos is garnering greater attention from scholars, development agencies, non-government organisations and the media than at any time since the 1970s. This is not just because of the country's rapid economic transformation and strategic position at the "crossroads" of Southeast Asia. Laos has also emerged as a kind of scholarly laboratory for understanding the variegated social, economic, ecological and geo-political consequences of resource-led development and global integration. Fifty years ago Laos found itself located along the fault lines of great power politics associated with the Vietnam War (see Chomsky 1971; Branfman 2013). Today it is a resurgent China at its northern border that provides geo-political context for the country's increasing prominence. Like both China and Vietnam, moreover, Laos offers the additional interest of being one of the world's few remaining Marxist-Leninist – or "market-Leninist" (London 2012) – states, with the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) taking the country down a "Leninist road to capitalism" (Evans 2012, 227–265).

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While observers agree these factors raise crucial issues at the intersection of political economy, state sovereignty, environment-development and post-socialist transition, there has not yet been a commensurate scholarly analysis of how these processes reflect the re-organisation of state power and political authority within Laos.[1] At a moment when Laos has its highest profile for decades, this journal special issue seeks to understand the national context, and regional similarities and particularities, of Lao authoritarian rule.

A paradox characterises the ways in which scholars and other observers conceptualise state power and authority in Laos. On the one hand, the LPRP rules through a one-party Leninist political system with National Assembly elections that are uncontested by other parties. In basic political terms, this means that political parties other than the LPRP are effectively deemed illegal by the constitution, last amended in 2015. Specifically, Article 3 defines the LPRP as the "leading nucleus" of the political system, whilst Article 5 "subordinates all state organizations to the principle of 'democratic centralism'…the ultimate organizational and leadership principle of party, state, and mass organization in all communist states" (Croissant and Lorenz 2018). As a result, the opaque and carefully managed plebiscites for leadership positions at the LPRP's five-yearly congresses are far more consequential than elections for the National Assembly. These features of the political system are fundamentally similar to those of China and Vietnam.

On the other side of this paradox, Laos has been characterised as a "weak state" or as having "weak state capacity," labels that are rarely applied to Laos' more powerful post-socialist neighbours (Leifer 2001, 22; Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2006, 129; Roberts 2012).[2] While the accuracy of these depictions can be debated, they highlight the error of assuming parallels between Laos and its larger neighbours, on the basis of superficially similar forms of authoritarian post-socialism. Given that Laos has rarely (if ever) been used as an empirical basis for understanding comparative politics and political economy, there is a need to develop a theory of authoritarian power and elite politics that can explain Laos' political regime.[3] After introducing the national and academic context, which help to understand the paucity of comparative political work on Laos, we introduce an approach to studying the nature of post-socialist authoritarianism and single-party rule, focusing on key *political-institutional, cultural-historical* and *spatial-environmental* transformations in Laos since the revolution in 1975. While our approach is not exhaustive, we hope it will illustrate how authoritarian institutions in Laos operate in and through multiple scales, from the central to the local level, by delimiting local action and the range of political possibilities.

## Laos in Critical Focus

Recent events and ongoing development trends reinforce the urgency of directing greater attention to party-state governance and rule in Laos. The past decade of resource-intensive development has contributed to some of the highest rates of economic growth in the Asia-Pacific region. Not atypically for transitional economies, this period has also been characterised by a highly uneven pattern of development, increasing urban–rural wealth disparity and environmental controversies of national and regional significance (Rigg 2016; Warr, Rasphone, and Menon 2015). Examples of the latter include debates over the transnational geo-politics of the Mekong River as the Lao government proceeds with the construction of dams on the river's main stream; issues relating to large-scale land acquisitions, land grabbing and related pressures on rural livelihoods; questions of how

changing livelihoods and property relations in rural Laos relate to mobility and internal or cross-border labour migration; and international criminal syndicates involved in the trafficking of wildlife and endangered species (see, for example, Barney 2012; Hirsch 2016; Lu and Schönweger 2017).

Indeed, Laos has recently found itself in the international political and media spotlight on a number of key issues – and not always to the government's liking. Of particular interest have been deepening bilateral relations between Laos and China, as demonstrated by surging investment in resource industries, special economic zones, controversial casinos and the Lao–China railway project (Nyíri and Tan 2016). Most poignantly, human rights controversies – exemplified but not limited to the disappearance of civil society leader Sombath Somphone in December 2012 – have resulted in unprecedented international fallout (Creak 2014). While attracting significant international coverage, this assortment of policy issues and political controversies has yet to be analysed by scholars in a dedicated manner that draws connections across different fields of analysis. Such work is crucial to tracing the ongoing reorganisation of state power in Laos, and to our understandings of the functioning, legitimacy and trajectory of the single-party regime.

Equally, the growing focus on Laos sheds new light on issues facing the region. As in Vietnam and China, the post-socialist era in Laos has been defined, on the one hand, by the consolidation of single-party rule, and, on the other, by economic, socio-cultural and environmental transformations driven by rapid economic expansion, shifting patronage relations and integration into regional and global commodity flows. Laos also provides a case study for some of the most important issues facing the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in a new era of China-influenced global geo-politics. This is especially salient in the aftermath of Laos' second stint as the rotating chair of ASEAN in 2016, associated visits from global leaders, including Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, the then American President Barack Obama, and in November 2017 President Xi Jinping of China. The authors in this special issue seek to place Laos' transition in historical and regional context, and ultimately to address the question of how we might conceptualise the evolution of state power and authority in this country, more than 60 years after the founding in 1955 of the Lao People's Party, later renamed the LPRP. This approach will help to better understand the under-appreciated workings of the LPRP in patterns of state-formation and the consolidation of power and authority under the party-state system.

## Laos in Comparative Political Scholarship

If the politics of post-socialist Vietnam remain understudied compared to those of China, the region's third contiguous Marxist-Leninist state represents an even wider lacuna in our understanding of how state power and authority operate under conditions of socialism and post-socialism. Beyond state secrecy and non-transparency, which feature in all three countries, there are a number of clear reasons for the relative oversight of Laos in the comparative political literature.

Most fundamentally, the country was virtually closed to foreign researchers between the revolution of December 1975 and the early 1990s and did not welcome significant numbers of scholars until the early 2000s. The first decade of the Lao revolution also saw the evisceration of the nascent intellectual and academic culture that had developed under the Royal Lao Government (RLG), especially after the flight of teachers and members of the

intelligentsia after 1975 (Evans 2012, 168, 197). Moreover, the officially sanctioned scholarship that took its place was under-funded and tightly circumscribed by the ideological line of the LPRP. Until recently, the country's small size and lack of an international profile did not seem to warrant the trouble and resources required to overcome these limitations. Finally, in comparison with the most influential scholars of Southeast Asia, who have tended to focus on the larger and more influential states, scholars of Laos have historically held a rather marginal position in Southeast Asian studies. Although this is changing, the paucity of knowledge and analysis about Laos' political system is related to its marginal economic and geo-political influence, which until recently has been institutionalised in area studies knowledge production.

Against this background, the acceleration of aid and investment since the late 1990s has been accompanied by a surge of new research on the country, particularly in the form of doctoral dissertations and related articles and monographs. This interest has resulted in a renaissance of scholarly work on Laos, and the country and its diaspora are now more firmly established within the field of Southeast Asian studies. However, this growing body of knowledge on globalising Laos has continued to be framed through national political realities, which constrain research access and shape approaches to certain research topics. Thus, for a variety of reasons, new-generation researchers have tended to avoid a direct focus on national and elite politics.

A key pragmatic factor is the need to obtain research visas and access. In the absence of a clear policy relating to research by foreigners, scholars have negotiated access to the country in a range of ways, from gaining official access through the Ministry of Education or other state agencies, to conducting research unofficially while on business or work visas with third-party organisations. While the specifics vary from case to case, these strategies have been developed in a political context in which state officials – indeed many Lao citizens themselves – discourage examination and even direct discussion of state politics. For example, a senior academic administrator at the National University of Laos told one of the authors in 2005 that the university would support his doctoral research on the condition that it avoided sensitive issues, such as resettlement of ethnic minorities, human trafficking and human rights.

More generally, suspicion towards outsiders and Western researchers remains institutionalised in the state and especially the LPRP (with which the state overlaps at every level). As one of Baird's (2018) informants asserted, "Foreigners aren't supposed to know about the Party." The informal sanction on critical discussion of politics is evident amongst nationals, including overseas Lao students and is pervasive. A persistent system of party secrecy and the internal security apparatus, which extends to the level of district, *kumban* (village cluster or sub-district) and village, enhances party-state oversight of foreign researchers, constraining studies of politics further still. As a result, the new generation of scholars remains closely attuned to the people with whom, and situations in which, politics can be discussed and researched (Singh 2012, 10–12).

In addition to considerations of research access, the development trajectory of Laos, as a historically revenue-poor but resource-rich country with a growing extractive sector, has attracted a disproportionate number of scholars from particular disciplines, such as development studies, geography, anthropology, environmental and agricultural science and resource management. As state agencies also see these areas as priorities for national development, they can also be more easily presented to gatekeeping authorities as areas of

technical or de-politicised intervention (Li 2007, 7–12). For both pragmatic and scholarly reasons, then, the current cohort of scholars have often examined questions of political power and transition in an indirect manner, particularly through the problematics of resource governance and other areas related to the international development sector.

Yet, these explanations for the lack of attention to politics, while important, are not completely satisfactory. Most obviously, the research context is much more open than it was during the height of totalitarian rule and socialist state-building in the 1980s, a period when historian Martin Stuart-Fox commenced a series of studies on sensitive topics, including LPRP politics, the political culture of patronage and corruption and relations with Vietnam (see, for example, Stuart-Fox 1980 and 1986). A more serious factor, therefore, appears to be a lack of sustained disciplinary interest in the study of Lao politics. Few if any political scientists have specialised on Laos since the retirement in the 1990s of Cold War-era scholars MacAlister Brown and Joseph Zasloff (see, especially, 1986).[4] More recently, Stuart-Fox has also retired. It is primarily due to this lack of disciplinary interest that research on the LPRP lags so far behind the steady stream of scholarship charting the crises of transition and adaptation that are confronting its counterparts in China and Vietnam, as well as Cambodia (see, for example, Wright 2010; London 2014; Morgenbesser 2017). In two recent edited volumes by political scientists focusing on understanding the comparative politics and the institutionalisation of party systems in contemporary Asia, references to Laos were light or missing entirely (Kuhonta, Slater, and Vu 2008; Hicken and Kuhonta 2014).[5]

There are signs that this pattern is changing. As this article was being prepared in late 2017, we noted the publication of a new edited volume on politics, culture and society (Bouté and Pholsena 2017). As well as chapters addressing historical, environmental and cultural politics, this collection includes an important chapter on the institutional history of the LPRP (Rathie 2017). The year also saw the publication of articles on the inner workings of the LPRP Congress and the local manifestations of LPRP power in the resource sector (Soulatha and Creak 2017; Kenney-Lazar 2017). These publications, building on a 2013 special issue of *Asian Studies Review* on "The Banalities and Intimacies of the Lao State" (High and Petit 2013), have helped to redirect attention to the state, and several are cited in the following sections. Most recently, Croissant and Lorenz (2018) offer a valuable overview of the system of the institutional structure of government through which the LPRP exercises power. As the proceeding discussion also makes clear, however, research on Laos has yet to adequately address the nature of post-socialist authoritarianism as an integral factor in Laos' political-economic and ecological transition.

## Understanding Authoritarianism in Laos

One of the few scholars to explicitly examine authoritarianism in Laos is Kyaw Yin Hlaing (2006), a political scientist who usually writes on Myanmar. The notion that the Lao state is both weak and authoritarian, Kyaw Yin Hlaing (2006) argues, stems from contradictory aspects of state power and capacity. The perception of state weakness is based on the limitations in the Lao government's technical and institutional capacity to administer and develop the country. Despite the government's guiding policy objective of graduating from Least Developed Country status by 2020 – recently deferred to 2024 (see *Vientiane Times*, June 11, 2018) – Laos remains one of the poorest countries in the region, and is dependent

upon foreign aid for a significant, if declining, proportion of the state's annual budget expenditures (*Asia News Network*, May 5, 2017).

By contrast, according to Kyaw Yin Hlaing, the government enjoys strong perceived political capacity, which he largely equates with political legitimacy. Although public opinion in Laos is difficult to ascertain in the absence of polls or surveys, a number of factors reinforce the popular impression "that the LPRP government is very strong" (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2006, 144). These factors include the lack of credible opposition; the virtual absence of student, labour or other forms of grassroots activism; the close connections between business and party elites; and government control of information. While grievances over corruption are growing and the public is sceptical of state pronouncements, "the absence of alternative political organisations and attendant political constraints has prevented the translation of public grievances into social protests" (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2006, 144). In addition, Kyaw Yin Hlaing (2006, 143) emphasises the strong political value placed on "stability," particularly in contrast to the tumultuous politics of neighbouring Myanmar and Thailand over recent decades. In sum, Kyaw Yin Hlaing (2006, 135) argues, although Laos "is less authoritarian than it used to be," the party continues to rely on a multitude of authoritarian means, especially constraints over the public sphere and public discourse, to remain in power.

Kyaw Yin Hlaing is right to emphasise the multi-faceted character of authoritarian rule in Laos, but important questions go unanswered in his analysis. As one-party, repressive Marxist-Leninist states, China and Vietnam also lack "alternative political organisations," yet there have been widespread social protests in both countries, especially amongst low-income urban dwellers and rural people evicted from land holdings or facing pollution problems. So what explains the relative absence of protest in Laos? The emphasis, we suggest, needs to be placed upon the "attendant political constraints" that Kyaw Yin Hlaing mentions, but does little to develop or elaborate on. In the remaining sections of this article we focus on those constraints which relate to the nature of party-state governance and rule in Laos. In offering this approach, we seek to add deeper comparative and conceptual analysis by proposing three approaches to conceptualising authoritarianism in the country, drawing upon (i) political-institutional; (ii) historical-cultural; and (iii) spatial-environmental approaches.

## Political-Institutional Approaches to State Power and Authority

In political-institutional terms, a number of characteristics of the party-state system are critical for understanding the functioning of governance, and how the Lao political system compares to authoritarian regimes in Vietnam and China. First we note the basic conjunction of the party-state (*phak-lat*) in both institutional and rhetorical terms. Here Laos closely follows the Vietnamese Leninist model, based on earlier models from the USSR and the People's Republic of China. In Vietnam, according to Kingsbury (2016, 32), "the army and the Communist Party of Vietnam are conjoined twins, with no effective separation between them and no effective division between the party and other institutions of state." In Laos, rural villagers in even the most remote districts of the country well understand the basic phrasing and the implications of the term *phak-lat*, and use it in everyday conversations (see Baird 2018). The LPRP is, if not synonymous with the state, understood to be organised into a dialogical configuration with it.

Second is the relatively institutionalised character of Lao authoritarianism, which has placed the top leadership positions less as powers in themselves, and more under the broad discipline of the LPRP. To express this another way, the LPRP provides a disciplining mechanism for the patron–client relations that continue to function throughout society, which in turn depend on party connections. The result has been generally smooth leadership transitions, formalised at five-yearly LPRP congresses. Although media attention focuses on the theatre of the party congress itself – where upwards of 600 party delegates elect the elite Party Central Committee (PCC), Politburo, PCC secretariat and Secretary General – the congress in fact marks the culmination of two years of party renewal throughout the country. This process begins with the selection of district-level secretaries before the same process is carried out at the level of provinces and ministries, and finally at the national congress (Soulatha and Creak 2017).

Throughout this period of party renewal, two parallel processes are placed in tension: the formal observation of statutes decreeing democratic centralism, which requires that LPRP delegates elect representatives to the next level up; and patron–client relations, meaning that in practice leaders at a given level identify their protégés, known as "targets for building" (*pao mai sang*), for elevation. Thus, although up to 25% of the PCC elected at the 10th Party Congress in 2016 were reputedly connected through birth or marriage to famous revolutionary families, the process of party renewal is neither fully institutionalised nor fully personalised (Soulatha and Creak 2017; for the estimate, see Taylor 2016). This process of managed institutionalism permits the dignified exit, and continued influence, of retiring party leaders. In 2016, with a minimum of fanfare, the congress shuffled four senior members of the Politburo out of their formal leadership positions and into "advisory" positions.[6] This system of party governance also seems to have been in play with the surprise resignation of Prime Minister Bouasone Bouphavanh in 2010, apparently forced by the loss of support from his key patron, the officially retired but still powerful former Secretary General, Khamtai Siphandone, who had been appointed an "advisor" in 2006 (Stuart-Fox 2011).

Despite the emergence of many "princelings" – the children and other relatives of famous revolutionaries – among the ranks of the central committee, this pattern of party organisation places Laos in much closer relation to the elite political arrangements in Vietnam and post-Mao China, involving rule through politburo consensus, than to Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen's personalised regime of rule through the Cambodian People's Party (Morgenbesser 2017). Indeed, while the offices of LPRP secretary general and state president have been held concurrently since Khamtai's elevation in 1996, the LPRP now appears more institutionalised than the Chinese Communist Party, where the accrual of official positions and personalised leadership style by Xi Jinping far exceeds anything under the Lao party system. In regional terms, this makes the LPRP most comparable to the Vietnamese Communist Party – particularly since re-elected General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong has sought to re-establish the collective power of the central committee since the 12th Party Congress in 2016 (see *Financial Times*, October 24, 2017; Hutt 2017).

A third characteristic is the aforementioned combination of Laos' durable authoritarianism with a fragile administrative foundation, or what Mann (1984, 113) calls state "infrastructural power" – "the capacity of the state to actually penetrate civil society, and to implement logistically political decisions throughout the realm." Drawing upon his experience of working with Laos' state agricultural extension agency, Bartlett (2013, 4)

identifies a paradox of highly institutionalised authoritarianism within a Lao context of weak infrastructural power, observing that state institutions can appear as "chaotic and inefficient for long periods, yet capable of pulling off amazing feats of coordination and concentrated effort when the need arises." A core issue, he argues, lies with the internal lines of party authority, which run parallel to line agencies in the state bureaucracy, producing a situation whereby "key officials belong to a political organisation that takes precedence over the technical one." While "the implementation of Politburo resolutions takes precedence over strategies and plans produced at the Ministerial level," legal and technical mandates can be diverted and made subservient to discretionary party dictates and personalised priorities (Bartlett 2013, 4–6). The outcome is a state bureaucratic apparatus that can lurch towards incoherence, and is prone to ineffective modes of top-down decision making, target-driven policy directives and inefficient implementation.

Further distinguishing Lao infrastructural power from that of Vietnam and China is the underlying question of administrative-bureaucratic capacity. Even as Laos has proceeded with liberalising reforms in trade and investment, and facilitated new private actors and capital inflows, the country has struggled with building effective fiscal, administrative and legal systems. Despite the state passing a raft of new legislation over the last years through the National Assembly, and establishing a Lao Official Gazette, its transition to a "rule of law state" (*lat haeng kotmai*) remains a work in progress, and is arguably best understood as a key theme in the government's evolving post-socialist "rhetoric of rule" (Creak 2014). Problems of state administrative capacity also take the form of tax leakage and budgetary constraints, as well as stalled or abandoned infrastructure projects (*Vientiane Times*, September 12, 2017; *Radio Free Asia*, October 23, 2017). This has resulted in Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith's recent attempt to clamp down on off-budget provincial infrastructure deals in order to rein in powerful provincial governors, reinforcing an ongoing process of centralisation in decision-making authority in Laos (*Radio Free Asia*, December 16, 2016; *Vientiane Times*, November 7, 2017).

While the Lao government can justifiably proclaim its record of economic expansion, persistent issues of low industrial competitiveness, high corruption, and under-performance in the areas of education, rule-of-law and human rights, speak to remaining structural limitations in the Lao political economy.[7] In addition, Laos' low ratio of poverty reduction per unit of gross domestic product growth has been noted by the World Bank (2015). The bank attributes this to an over-reliance upon large-scale resource development projects, and a lack of public policies in support of social protections and improvements to the investment and regulatory environment.

With these travails in mind, how can we best understand the root causes of Laos' continuing challenges in establishing fiscal-administrative capacity and a system of rule-based governance, particularly in comparison with their socialist neighbours, despite decades of intensive donor- and government-based efforts? It is important to note that Laos has not been a focus for political economists of state formation, authoritarianism and neo-liberalism in Southeast Asia (for example, Kuhonta 2011; Gainsborough 2010b; Glassman 2004). Indeed, a full analysis of the Lao political economy and its connections to the party-state system remains to be written. However, Larsson (2013) provides a useful starting point. Drawing upon a range of comparative cases from Southeast Asia that did not include Laos, Larsson (2013, 338–340) has argued that a state's fiscal and

legal-administrative capacities are shaped by underlying factors of economic development. Specifically, he identifies a "degree of dependence on capital inflows associated with the production of 'complex goods' (i.e., advanced industrial products such as chemicals, automobiles, and electronics)" (Larsson 2013, 350). Complex manufacturing exports, Larsson (2013, 352) argues, in turn require a "constructive relationship between state actors and agents of capital" which is correlated with the development of a more downwardly accountable, co-ordinated, legal-rational administrative framework.

Applied to Laos, this argument helps draw attention to the limited institutional demands that business interests place upon the state, and the uneven progress with "broad coalitions of social forces that regard legal-administrative state capacities as critical to their future well-being" (Larsson 2013, 352). Similar to Cambodia, for Laos the top sectors for foreign exchange earnings – namely exports of unprocessed or semi-processed natural resources, primary manufacturing such as garments, foreign aid, international tourism, and remittances from workers in Thailand – all represent "institutionally much less demanding sources of capital." Larsson continues, arguing that states which fit this profile are "dependent on capital inflows that at best provide weak inducements toward strengthening legal-administrative state capacity and at worst undermine such efforts" (Larsson 2013, 352).

A central puzzle then presents itself regarding the endurance and resilience, indeed the consolidation of the Lao single-party regime, in a context of uneven organisational coherence and struggles with state fiscal, administrative and legal capacity. On first consideration, Laos might be expected to have followed a pattern noted for Cambodia or some countries of sub-Saharan Africa, where state institutional weakness contributes to the funnelling of power, profit and patronage to the apex of a neo-patrimonial governance system. The paradox is made clearer when we consider that in Laos limited infrastructural power and uneven bureaucratic-policy coherence is combined with strong internal party discipline, coercive control over the population, and a nascent domestic industrial and financial sector. Laos' relatively disciplined political control through a party-state system thus elides the "bossism" and "strongman" scenarios of the Philippines or Cambodia, the full junta scenario of pre-2011 Myanmar/Burma, and the "oligarchic" pattern of Indonesia that combines industrial and financial interests with a domestic political elite (Hadiz and Robison 2005; Slater 2003).

One potential implication of Slater's (2003, 82) analysis applied to Laos is that an increasing capacity for overall infrastructural power (that is, a state's "power to implement"), may create the conditions for more personalised, factional or oligarchic forms of state power to emerge, through a political form that mixes business with politics in a much more comprehensive manner than is currently the case. Recent experiences from Laos' neighbours point to a range of potential consequences from this. In Milne, Kimchoeun and Sullivan's (2015) analysis of the Cambodian People's Party, the deepening of elite patronage relations, supported through huge increases in resource-based off-budget revenue streams, acts as a countervailing limit on state capacity and is producing a corresponding loss of popular legitimacy. For Vietnam, Pincus (2012, 12) argues that while advanced market-Leninism "reinforces loyalty to the party and state among powerful groups," it simultaneously leads to sub-optimal economic performance through a misallocation of capital in the national economy.

## Cultural-Historical Sources of State Power

From the above discussion of political-institutional structures and questions of state capacity, we turn to how historians and anthropologists have considered the bases and paradoxes of party-state power in Laos. In the absence of legitimacy bestowed by democratic elections, Marxist-Leninist regimes seek to generate legitimacy by mobilising popular consent (Su 2011). In Laos, as Yamada (2018) shows, the LPRP has always done this by promoting its twin goals of socialism and economic reform. From the 1980s, as the regime conceded that the achievement of socialism would be delayed, the LPRP – like its counterparts in China and Vietnam – turned increasingly to history and nationalism for legitimacy. This task was complicated by the LPRP's overthrow of the monarchy in 1975, which had resided at the centre of nationalist historiography and traced its origins to the Kingdom of Lan Xang (1353–1707). In response to this conundrum, the party has developed a hybrid royalist-revolutionary historical narrative presenting the LPRP as the legatee of the Lao Buddhist-nationalist tradition (Evans 1998). Since 2000, the most striking expression of this narrative has been the erection of statues commemorating a pantheon of national ancestors (*banphabulut*), beginning with legendary kings of Lan Xang and culminating with the leaders of what the party calls the liberation struggle (Tappe 2017). In a similar way, the regime choreographed spectacular national celebrations – including the exuberant Southeast Asian Games in 2009, the first time the country hosted the region's largest sporting event, and the 450th anniversary of Vientiane becoming the "capital of Laos" in 2010 – to reinforce narratives of national pride, capitalist development and regional prestige under the aegis of the LPRP (Creak 2011, 2014, 2015).

More than is sometimes appreciated, these cultural sources of power depend for their efficacy on the more coercive features of state authoritarianism. While some Lao may be sceptical or simply disinterested in the LPRP's historical constructions, its most potent weapon in the cultural sphere is its monopoly on political space (Creak 2018). This monopoly is underlined by the simple demographic fact that, even more than when Evans (1998) first identified these trends two decades ago, the vast majority of the population has no memory of any other political system or nationalist narrative. In 2014, moreover, the regime criminalised online criticism of the LPRP, a potential means of sharing alternative sources of information, and in 2016 charged three citizens for violating this decree (Baird 2018). Such policies reflect the consolidation of LPRP cultural power through the passage of laws and decrees, particularly since the promulgation of the Lao PDR constitution in 1991, which marked the regime's transition from post-war reconstruction to nation-state building (Yamada 2018).

For Stuart-Fox, state legitimacy is explained by the persistence of political culture – the personalised politics of patronage that feed corruption and undermine political institutions – coupled with increased opportunities for elite resource capture since the economic reforms of the 1980s and 1990s (Stuart-Fox 2005, 2006). He traces this political culture to the interpersonal relations that characterised the traditional *meuang* polity of Lao kingdoms of the past, arguing that it is rooted in Buddhist karma, which "traditionally reinforced the hereditary principle underlying political leadership" (Stuart-Fox 2005, 5). Having survived Siamese domination and French colonialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and thriving under the US-backed RLG from 1947 to 1975, this characteristic of political culture went into a brief hibernation after 1975, but re-emerged

soon thereafter. Market-based reforms provided new opportunities for the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of party officials, while also enabling:

> former aristocratic families to re-establish some economic influence, through family members who had remained in the country…With no tradition of bureaucratic administration (as in China and Vietnam), politics in Laos reverted to networks of influence and patronage (of the kind elsewhere described as clientelism, or crony politics) (Stuart-Fox 2005, 8).

Moreover, whereas under the RLG there had been "at least some residual notion of a bureaucracy in the service of the state, rather than of the ruling party, in the Lao PDR the LPRP alone exercised political power and the bureaucracy functioned as a highly politicised arm of the Party" (Stuart-Fox 2005, 8).

Given the static notion of culture it employs, Stuart-Fox's analysis is open to criticism on the grounds of cultural determinism and essentialism. For other scholars, the politics of patronage and development in Laos are more typical of elite resource capturing practices elsewhere in Asia and beyond, whether this is understood in Marxist terms as "primitive accumulation" or in more comparative capitalist terms that render Laos a "state coordinated frontier economy" (Baird 2011; Andriesse 2011). In general, however, studies of political culture in Laos lack the theoretically sophisticated and fine-grained empirical analysis of clientelism and patronage that distinguish political studies of other Southeast Asian countries (see, for example, Hadiz and Robison 2005; Nishizaki 2011; Sidel 1999).

Anthropologists of Laos, working on everyday politics, adopt a more fine-grained analysis of authoritarianism, stressing that "the state is peopled" and that we should "pay more attention to local perspectives" on state authority (High and Petit 2013, 8; Singh 2012, 7). Based on research on local resource management issues surrounding the vast Nam Theun 2 hydropower project, Singh (2012, 7) highlights three crucial features of governance in Laos: "the policy-practice divide, patronage politics, and practices that rely on and perpetuate secrecy, fear, and uncertainty." While gesturing to the forces of state authoritarianism, Singh does not focus on its macro-institutional underpinnings. Rather, she pays attention to the social realities through which state power is organised at local scales: policy remains "negotiable" for those in positions of authority, reinforcing social values of obedience and hierarchy; state–society relations are highly personalised, as can be observed in the minutiae of villagers' everyday encounters with officials; and the LPRP seems to obtain greater legitimacy from secrecy than from propaganda, as indicated in the rumours that propagate misinformation, mistrust and self-regulation. Elsewhere, Singh (2014) has usefully highlighted the ways in which authoritarian state–society relations are reinforced through routine rituals and cultural practices of governance, particularly as related to the practice of religious traditions.

More broadly, Singh argues, state authority is based on Buddhist-inflected notions of "natural potency" and "potential," a formulation that avoids the absolutist connotations of "power." This approach emphasises the conviction among many Lao that the state, despite its infrastructural limitations, possesses the capacity to improve the prosperity of its citizens. Singh therefore collapses Kyaw Yin Hlaing's distinction between the capacity to develop and perceived political capacity, arguing that the belief that the state is on the path to development – in spite of its recognised shortcomings – forms the basis of state authority. Thus, Singh shares with anthropologist High (2013) the position that personal aspirations encourage rural villagers to engage rather than resist state power. Indeed, both

authors seek to reassess the framing assumptions of "resistance studies," associated with scholars such as Scott (1985) and Kerkvliet (2009).

The focus on local perspectives reflects the tendency to see the state not as an objective institutional reality, clearly distinct from society, but as a set of practices and ideas – a tendency reflected in the notions of the "state idea" or "state effect" (Abrams 1988; Mitchell 1999).[8] These concepts have shaped much of the new wave of work on the Lao state. Drawing upon Sharma and Gupta (2006) and other anthropologists, High and Petit (2013, 8–9) frame their recent special issue of *Asian Studies Review* around the motif of the "state as a social relation":

> Viewed in this way, the question is not how the state as an entity has continued or changed, although this remains pertinent. Rather, the key question is an ethnographic one, of how institutions of authority, arbitration and government are continually brought into existence by the real acts of people who operate within and interact with them.

For High (2013, 108) this approach also explains how the state can simultaneously be "reified as the repository of not only disillusion and distrust, but also as hopes for a better future." Employing an approach informed by psychoanalytical theory, she argues that these desires highlight the importance of "extimacy" – the "intimate incorporation of an external entity" – which here is the Lao state (High 2013, 108). Like foreign powers, past and present, the state retains an appeal that belies "its shabby appearance as corrupt, violent and extractive" (High 2013, 104). High (2013, 108) thus argues: "While it is true that the state is viewed with suspicion and fear, there is an extimacy with this feared entity."

While these contributions provide important insights, ethnographies of the Lao state as a social relation must also be situated within local and regional political histories. Given that High's ethnographic fieldwork for *Fields of Desire* was conducted in a lowland ethnic Lao community, undertaking wet rice cultivation in the Siphandone region on the Mekong River, Baird and colleagues (2009) caution against extrapolating this context to that of upland ethnic minority communities. Individuals and villages in these communities have more often been subject to the blunt and harsher edges of authoritarian power, particularly in relation to their ethnic identifications and upland cultural and livelihood practices (Baird and Shoemaker 2007). Moreover, experiences can differ significantly depending on historical positions in support of or opposition to the Pathet Lao and the 1975 revolution (Dwyer 2011; Baird and Le Billon 2012). In short, where the state does become heavily authoritarian, excessively coercive, extractive, violent or indeed neglectful, individuals and communities subject to such oppression may not share the same belief as their more sanguine compatriots in the potential of the state's programme of paternalistic development to enhance their lives.

These observations present an anomaly in the study of the state in Laos. Thanks to Singh, High and others, we now know far more about how the state is experienced at the village level than how state power is organised at central and elite levels. Indeed, while Singh may be right that local perspectives on state authority have been overlooked in Southeast Asia as a whole, it is ironic that in Laos itself recent years have seen many more anthropologists considering questions of politics and power than political scientists. Unintentionally, this focus has perhaps produced an impression that authoritarian power is manifested primarily at the local level, in a manner that can appear quite disarticulated from the organisation of central authority. Despite the shortcomings of the party and state in developing a consistent

level of organisational coherence and efficacy across the territory of Laos, this is ultimately unconvincing in a country ruled tightly by a one-party state for more than 40 years.

This special issue thus proceeds from the argument that we need to emphasise how authoritarian institutions and relations operate in and through multiple scales, from the central to the local level, especially by delimiting local action and the range of political possibilities. While local relationships, practices and processes of negotiation may tell us much about how the state is made meaningful in people's lives, the lack of equivalent focus on centralised political institutions means we are yet to appreciate the degree to which the LPRP, bureaucracy and security forces extend their reach into society. As such, we still have limited insights into the key institutional, normative and coercive factors that structure local state–society relations. The schematic that melds micro-, meso- and macro faces of power can also simplify the negotiated relationships between different levels of governance.[9] These represent important factors in understanding how state power works in a country where central-provincial-local relations have been a persistent source of tension (Yamada 2018; Barma 2014).

In this special issue, therefore, we shift the focus back in the direction of understanding central institutions and norms while maintaining a concern with localities and multi-level governance. We agree with Abrams' (1988, 69) seminal study, drawing on Miliband's observation, that "the 'state' is not a thing, that it does not, as such, exist." This is a statement of the state's disunity; the absence of coherence that is reflexively attributed to the state. As Abrams (1988, 79) put it, "The state is a unified symbol of an actual disunity." But this now commonplace observation does not represent the full sweep of Abrams' formulation, which continues, again following Miliband: "There *is* a state system…a palpable nexus of practice and institutional structure centred in government and more or less extensive, unified and dominant in any given society." Although this system is atomised and differentiated, it is "the relationship of the state system and the state idea to other forms of power [that] should and can be central concerns of political analysis" (Abrams 1988, 82).

If local-level studies of political power in Laos have taught us one thing, it is that citizens hold concrete and practical understandings of how political power and institutions shape and constrain their lives. As mentioned above, these revolve around generalised ideas of the party (*phak*) and state (*lat*) or *phak-lat*. In effect, this is Abrams' state idea in practice. This special issue seeks to understand not only how this idea and these categories were formed and reified, but how they relate to the state system, and how both the state system and state idea relate to other forms of power, such as those nested in the economy and systems of territorial governance.

The tendency to focus on the state idea in lieu of the state system raises another conceptual issue. Writing during the Cold War, both Miliband and Abrams explicitly focused their studies on power in liberal democratic-capitalist societies. By contrast, despite embracing "socialist-capitalism," the Lao PDR, Vietnam and China remain one-party states. This has important ramifications for the securing of legitimacy, which in Abrams analysis remains the state's central and constitutive claim (in that legitimacy produces the state idea). As noted above, in the absence of open votes and plebiscites, one-party states must secure legitimacy by mobilising popular consent. This distinction demands that we attend to the state institutions that seek to mobilise popular consent in non-democratic systems. While these institutions face all sorts of problems, as Creak (2018) demonstrates, it is not possible to understand legitimacy in authoritarian one-

party states without a commensurately greater focus on what the state – as opposed to sectional interests and structures – is doing to secure it.

## Territory and Environmental Statecraft

In addition to political-institutional and cultural-historical approaches, our third framing device for understanding state power and authority is to explicitly locate Laos as a territorial state and an environment-making state (Goldman 2001; Parenti 2015; Clark and Jones 2016). Due to Laos' fraught internal and geo-political history – as a colonial buffer state; nascent nation divided by the Cold War; contested battleground of the Second Indochina War; twenty-first century resource frontier; and small ASEAN state bordering an ascendant China – questions of space, territory, authority and geo-politics have been especially productive concepts in Lao studies (see Ivarsson 2008). A relational analysis of state control over space and territory, and a focus on the politics of "turning land into capital," and nature into exportable resources, have much to offer for understanding politics and rule in contemporary Laos (Barney 2009, 2014; Dwyer 2013).

This third analytical strand thus shifts our emphasis towards the geographies of "environmental statecraft" under Laos' resource-led development model, which is attentive to how territory can be understood as a political technology of state power (Elden 2013). In doing so we take Lefebvre's (2003, 87) felicitous question as an analytical departure: "Is not the secret of the state, hidden because it is so obvious, to be found in space?" In Laos, connecting state theory to an analysis of space, territory, and the politics of resource use and control, opens up productive lines of inquiry that can also ground everyday processes of state making, and the practical establishment of internal sovereignty (see Dwyer, Ingalls, and Baird, 2016; Lund 2011; Mahanty 2017).

In a useful conceptual bridge from our discussion above, Ladwig (2015) outlines the possibilities for "territorialising" historical-anthropological analysis of nationalism and legitimacy in Laos. In particular, Ladwig highlights connections between state patronage and rituals of Buddhist iconography in the form of statues of historical Lao figures, Buddhist palladia and relics. Through the creation of such sacred national topographies, the communist state is mobilised to "create new places of worship, make sacred national heroes of the past, and map the territory of the nation-state" (Ladwig 2015, 1901; also see Holt 2009; Tappe 2017). This formulation points to the role of a spatial approach for understanding the cultural dimensions of state power and legitimacy, in which territory and the environment is not the inert backdrop to, but fundamentally constitutive of, state formation and forms of rule (on Vietnam, see McElwee 2016).

From a related geographical perspective, Parenti (2015) develops the idea of "placing" the state. Inspired by Foucault's and Mann's notes on biopower and infrastructural power, Parenti (2015, 835) defines "geopower" as "the statecraft and technologies of power that make territory and the biosphere accessible, legible, knowable, and useable. As such, geopower is the ensemble of state practices that *make environments*." Ranging from the mundane to the technically specialised, the "geopower" technologies identified by Parenti (2015, 835) include "exploring, describing, cadastral surveys; building roads, canals, dams, railroads, telegraphs; establishing property rights, borders, policing and identification systems; scientific surveys, and all the applied natural sciences, like botany, agronomy, and geology." This spatial focus provides an analytical window into how state

administrative and technical practices that remake territory and the environment, through projects of development, are constitutive elements in the ongoing process of state formation, created through a re-scaling of central-local relations. Recent studies have elaborated upon this spatial and political-ecological turn to understanding processes of state formation and the state as a relational-material entity. For instance Ioris (2015, 168) has argued that state sovereignty is established through territorial practices, and that understandings of environmental statehood require "a reinterpretation of state theory in a way that posits ecological politics inside, and in relation to, statecraft and public policy-making." Ioris thus poses a key question regarding "how the production of environmental statehood has affected state discourse, action and legitimacy" (Ioris 2015, 172). Blake and Barney (2018) examine such concerns in Laos through an analysis of how integrated hydraulic infrastructure and dam development has represented a sectoral arena, and an operational strategy, for authoritarian state-building.

Lao history highlights the tensions that exist between the territorialising impulse of the state and the more challenging practical reality of controlling national space and governing populations. While in the early twentieth century the French colonial regime sought to "carve out a space for a 'Lao Laos' in relation to both a 'Greater Siam' and within the overall colonial space of Indochina," it lacked the resources and incentive to invest in administrative institutions of commensurate scale (Ivarsson 2008, 136). Lao national territorial integrity then came under direct challenge after the Second World War. Violent post-colonial struggles over sovereignty and territory involving the competing factions of the Lao civil war, and Laos' eventual engulfment into the Second Indochina War, were ultimately resolved through the US withdrawal from South Vietnam and, shortly thereafter, the 1975 seizure of power by the Pathet Lao. In the post-1975 era, the LPRP faced hurdles and setbacks in mobilising a productive command economy. As early as 1979, recognising the threat of economic failure to party rule, leaders including General Secretary Kaysone Phomvihane set out to restore certain market principles, later formalised in the New Economic Management Mechanism (Yamada 2018). In the years since then, the liberalisation of the economy, regionalisation and globalisation of investment, and rise of resource-led development has progressively strengthened and intensified sovereign control over resources and the upland periphery (Dwyer 2011). With this, the authority and power of the party and state was also strengthened. Yet, fiscal and administrative tensions between local, provincial and central authorities, a perennial area of contention, remain a key issue (Gomez, Martinez-Vazquez, and Sepulveda 2008; Lestrelin, Castella, and Bourgoin 2012; Yamada 2018).

Researching donor-led hydropower and conservation programmes in the 1990s, Goldman (2001) argued that international institutions, specifically the World Bank in an alliance with global conservation organisations, engaged in a transnational and neo-imperial territorial project, aimed at re-defining and re-scaling political control over key natural resources in the ultimate interests of transnational capital. However, Goldman overstated the hegemonic power of the World Bank in Laos, whose programmes have often encountered significant obstruction, evasion and efforts towards dilution and compromise by state institutions. Particularly since the mid-2000s, support from Vietnam, China and new regional investors has enabled the government to significantly bypass Western donors. One result has been that the state has clamped down on external efforts to support an independent civil society (see Arnst 2014). Sceptical that the World Bank represents Goldman's new "sovereign prince," we align our analysis with recent scholarship that

appreciates the fragmented – but consolidating – pattern of state sovereignty as being established primarily through the mechanisms of the party-state, albeit with complex transnational connections and partnerships (see also Tan 2015). Territory and resources are thus a "site, medium and outcome" of environmental statecraft (Brenner and Elden 2009, 364). Blake and Barney (2018) argue that this dynamic is producing a steadily more robust and spatially intensified form of authoritarian state power. Whitington's (2019) analysis also highlights that forms of environmental authority and population management in formerly more fragmented, trans-nationalised "sustainability enclaves," are now being controlled more directly through state institutions.

Policies and projects of environmental management and resource-led development, and the use of physical infrastructure to establish new landscapes amenable to capital accumulation, are especially productive arenas in which to analyse the constitution of state power. Major resource and investment projects, a flurry of poorly managed special economic zones, and not least, the massive Sino-Lao Railway project now under construction, can be understood as constitutive of the central state's ongoing efforts to enhance its infrastructural power, and to achieve a fully integrated national economy underpinning the nation-state (Tan 2015). Concessionary politics and new infrastructure projects are integrated into the reproduction and re-orientation of state power, and support the territorial extension and administrative consolidation of a market-authoritarian apparatus of sovereign rule, in which options for dissent and resistance are effectively foreclosed. We therefore draw upon ideas of the state as the effect of dispersed disciplinary and socio-technical practices to understand transformations in spatial practices and geographical sovereignty. However, we also stress the importance of a stronger analytical incorporation of centralising political forces, and the political, material and discursive interests of hierarchical institutions and state elites, in establishing a distinctively Lao, market-Leninist, form of authoritarian power and governmental statecraft.

In the coming years it will be critical for scholars to develop a better understanding of the changing nature of market-Leninism in Laos. This could include consideration of how political economy is interacting with key forces of change, including external industrial and financial capital networks; emerging class relations in relation to agrarian producers and between domestic urban entrepreneurs and the party (on China, see Wright 2010); and the terrain of politics involving resource-led development, as these are mediated through party-based patronage networks and party efforts to discipline rent-seeking. In the medium- to long-term, there is potential for a stronger, more administratively capable, authoritarian, Leviathan state to consolidate (Whitehead 2008). On the other hand, as Pincus (2012) identifies for Vietnam, the connection between new Lao business groups and the upper levels of the state could result in economic instability and challenges to party legitimacy, particularly in a context where public debt burdens are increasing (*Asia Times*, November 4, 2017). Recognising that state power and authority are not end points but ongoing social processes helps to focus questions of state sovereignty within the everyday process of state formation, involving concrete political struggles over property, resources, rights and recognition (Lund and Eilenberg 2017).

## The Special Issue

A number of authors in this collection participated in a workshop on understanding state power and authority in Laos, held in 2013 at Kyoto University's Centre for Southeast Asian

Studies; others joined the special issue subsequently. In all cases, the objective of the authors was to engage with the complexity of party-state power in the Lao PDR and to conceptualise how the state seeks to maintain its legitimacy under conditions of authoritarian rule. In accordance with the preceding discussion on understanding authoritarian rule, the authors grapple with this task from one of three primary perspectives – political-institutional, historical-cultural or spatial-environmental – though each seeks to consider relevant intersections between these themes.

The first two articles focus on Laos' key political institutions, starting with the LPRP itself. In the first article, Yamada (2018) presents an important and innovative reassessment of how, from as early 1979, the party pursued post-socialist or market-oriented reforms in order to mobilise consent and secure legitimacy. Whereas most studies highlight the critical juncture in 1986 of *chintanakan mai* ("new thinking" or "new imagination") – thus dividing Lao PDR history into a socialist phase before 1986 and a capitalist phase since then – Yamada argues that the LPRP has worked continuously since the late 1970s to balance the "ideal of socialism" with the "reality of economic reform." In this view, rather than representing a reform policy equivalent to Deng Xiaoping's "reform and opening up" or Vietnam's Doi Moi, *chintanakan mai* was a temporary and short-lived state-building slogan designed to promote the New Economic Management Mechanism. Based on his close reading of historical LPRP documents, Yamada thus produces a new periodisation of post-1975 history, arguing that the key turning point was in fact 1991, the year in which the Lao PDR adopted its first constitution. The constitution formalised the New Economic Management Mechanism and marked the critical transition from post-war reconstruction to a new phase of nation-state building. For Yamada, the dialogical relationship between socialist ideology and economic reform, which continues to underpin Lao party-state politics, has bolstered the legitimacy of the LPRP and ensured that its ultimate goal will remain socialist renovation for the foreseeable future.

Baird (2018) continues with a political-institutional approach to studying state power, with his article on secrecy, falsification and information control. Baird traces the tradition of "obsessive secrecy" in the LPRP to Soviet influences, mediated and extended through the tutelage of the Vietnamese Communist Party. He identifies and explains a key issue which has been so limiting for academic scholarship on Lao politics: the difficulty of accessing information on the functioning of the state, and the associated challenge for understanding the nature of internal factions and party debates, the bases of decision-making, and the terms of political settlements. While the LPRP projects a carefully crafted image of near-absolute unity, the occurrence of disunity points to political divisions. Baird examines secrecy, falsification and information control through a series of key historical moments and junctures, from the personal and ideological rift between revolutionary leaders Kaysone and Prince Souphanouvong, to recent monitoring and arrests of social media activists. Baird highlights the persistent logic of secrecy and information management under the LPRP, and how this relates to authoritarian party structures, internal security and the continuing power of the party-state system.

The next two articles consider historical and cultural bases of authoritarian rule. Working from a Gamscian perspective, Creak (2018) examines the conception and roll-out of adult education and literacy programmes from the 1960s, an initiative that aimed to foster the ideological transformation of society. In addition to its ideological features, Creak identifies a territorial logic to this programme, which aimed to extend the core doctrines of

the regime into peripheral and upland areas, initially in the nation's upland ethnic minority communities, and after 1975 to those lowland areas formerly ruled by the RLG. Through this approach, he focuses on the emergence of revolutionary hegemony through practices that established the key language, ideas, and social categories of revolutionary society. Although the LPRP faced a series of practical constraints, such early socialist state programmes provide critical insights into how a revolutionary grammar – a "rhetoric of rule" – was moulded into a flawed but practical reality. The discursive codes that resulted from the saturation of political space with a single official rhetoric framed the boundaries of acceptable political speech in a manner that continues to underpin party-state power today.

In the fourth contribution, Badenoch (2018) examines ethnic minority broadcasting and the use of language in Lao National Radio. Ethnic radio programmes in Khmu and Hmong languages are viewed by the state as a symbol of its commitment to establishing an inclusive, multi-ethnic national community. However, the work of translating between the political rhetoric of the regime, which is based on ethnic-Lao political and linguistic dominance, and an ethnic Khmu and Hmong radio audience, is a practice filled with linguistic politics. For Badenoch, analysing radio broadcasts is more than simply unmasking party propaganda, or deconstructing the symbolic discourse and metaphors of state power. Rather, through careful grammatical analysis, and a linguist's focus on subtle questions of word choice, loan translations and pronunciation, Badenoch is able to trace the specific ways in which ethnic language radio has become a field of power relations in Laos.

Finally, shifting the focus to spatial-environmental perspectives on party-state governance and rule, Blake and Barney (2018) examine the geography of state-led rural development and logics of sovereign rule in contemporary Laos. Drawing upon critical literatures on displacement, infrastructural violence and the political ecologies of resource-led development, the authors contextualise the rapid social and environmental transitions involved in the Lao PDR's drive to become a regional hub for the export of hydropower electricity. Even under best practice standards, hydropower development and associated compensatory irrigation schemes enable new and more profound forms of state command over internal political space, material, spatial and discursive. This model is supported by a stifling internal state discourse, the terms of which lie beyond public debate or political negotiation, as new dam projects are construed as symbols of technological progress, productivity, poverty eradication and the beneficent influence of patrimonial bureaucratic power. Facing the hegemonic force of the state, local communities in Hinboun district decry the terms of their displacement, while also seeking room to manoeuvre in re-constructing "modern" livelihoods in state-organised resettlement sites. In this account, understanding the organisational logics of state power is critical for locating the broader terms of environmental governance as political rule.

Conceived to develop a model for understanding authoritarian governance in Laos, we anticipate that in bringing together an inter-disciplinary group of scholars drawing upon original empirical research and fieldwork, this special issue will also be of interest to academics who study authoritarianism, post-socialism and development in other contexts in Asia. In framing this introduction and the articles that follow, we have explicitly adopted a comparative approach in order to engage with questions that apply beyond the borders of Laos. Still, studying the authoritarian state under conditions of capitalist development, globalisation and one-party rule is challenging, and we do not

claim to deliver a comprehensive account. One key area that this special issue does not cover sufficiently is civil society. The role of emerging state institutions, including the LPRP-monopolised National Assembly, in representing popular demands also warrants closer analysis. Finally, we still await a comprehensive scholarly assessment of Laos' regionalising political economy. We hope, however, that the articles in this special issue identify a useful set of insights that could lay groundwork for future research on the party-state system in Laos, and for contextualising the LPRP regime in comparative perspective.

## Notes

1. The term "post-socialist" has limitations. Most aptly, it refers to countries from the former Soviet bloc that experienced variegated political and economic transitions after their authoritarian leaderships were deposed. Despite embarking upon significant market reforms since the 1980s, the Lao People's Revolutionary Party remains in power and maintains the aspiration of constructing a socialist state (see Yamada 2018). Nevertheless, in this introductory article, we follow the convention established by Evans (1998, 1) and many scholars of post-reform China and Vietnam, in referring to Laos since the reforms of the New Economic Management Mechanism as "post-socialist."
2. Note, however, that Gainsborough (2010a, 18, 191 n.6) has considered the juxtaposition of weak and strong state elements in Vietnam.
3. Gainsborough (2012) does consider resistance to democratic reform in Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia, but pays relatively limited attention to the case of Laos.
4. It is important to note that Brown and Zasloff's book built on previous work by Langer and Zasloff (1970) for the RAND Corporation, which drew on interviews with Pathet Lao prisoners and defectors facilitated by RAND's association with the US Government. Grant Evans lamented the recent lack of interest among political scientists in an interview with Rehbein (2011) and in his keynote presentation at the 3rd International Conference on Lao Studies in 2010 (see a report by Sweet and Singh (2010)).
5. Another indication of the missing political scientists of Laos is evident from reviewing the annual surveys of Laos published in *Southeast Asian Affairs*, an indispensable guide to contemporary political developments in the country. Since 2005, by our analysis, updates have been written by historians (Stuart-Fox, Creak, and Soulatha and Creak), anthropologists (High, Pholsena), development scholars (Howe and Park), economists (Bouavanh Vilavong), and non-specialists of Laos (Kyaw Yin Hlaing, Lintner, Roberts).
6. This pattern was established with similarly managed exits for previous leaders, most notably the former General Secretary and state President Khamtai Siphandone, who retired in 2006 but retained considerable influence and patronage networks.
7. The business-oriented World Economic Forum ranked Laos 93 out of 138 countries in its *Global Competitiveness Report 2016–2017*, behind Cambodia (89), Vietnam (60) and Thailand (34) (Schwab 2016). Transparency International ranked Laos 135 out of 180 in its 2017 Corruption Perception Index (https://www.transparency.org/country/LAO; accessed February 5, 2018). Freedom House, ranking Laos as "not free" with a score of 12/100, notes issues of enforced disappearances, corruption, surveillance of online and social media communications, and human trafficking (https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2016/laos; accessed February 5, 2018).
8. See Gupta (1995, 376) on the discursive construction of the state, and for a methodology that focuses upon "the effects of the state upon the everyday lives of rural people."
9. Singh's (2014) study of "ritual governance" points to this issue. Singh seeks to highlight "how state authority is an amalgam of centralized institutions and decentralized practices," through a description of the sacred (a *baci* ceremony) and secular (a village meeting) forms, that constitute ritual governance in a village context. She argues that these produce

contrasting images of state authority that, respectively, are "persuasive and coercive." Yet she devotes less of her analysis to the broader structures that provide the grounds of persuasion and sources of "fear."

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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