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OPIUM AND SHIFTING CULTIVATION IN LAOS

State discourses and policies

Paul T. Cohen[*]

Introduction

The government of Lao PDR recently adopted a hard-line policy towards opium cultivation by upland minorities in the country's northern provinces, with measures including rapid crop eradication and reduction of demand. This prohibitionist policy is linked to a discourse that regards opium as both a form of shifting cultivation and a narcotic drug, and as such, a major cause of poverty. By contrast, the attitude of the French colonial government in Laos was both benign and utilitarian in its regard for opium; it was used as a crucial source of state revenue. Even the communist government of Laos proclaimed the fiscal importance of opium as recently as the 1980s. In this chapter I explain this radical discursive and policy change in terms of the convergence of both foreign and domestic factors and offer a brief comparison with the gradualist policies of neighbouring Thailand. I also examine the immediate impact of the rapid elimination of opium in Laos and assess the longer-term prospects of rubber as the major replacement crop.

Opium and shifting cultivation

Opium has traditionally been grown in the Golden Triangle region of Thailand, Laos and Burma as a form of shifting cultivation (or swiddening), predominantly by ethnic minorities at altitudes about 1000m above sea level, and ideally on limestone-rich soils (Figure 31-1). Other swidden crops cultivated with opium included upland rice as a staple, maize (planted in the opium fields and used mainly as livestock fodder) and vegetables. Some opium cultivators felled and burnt climax forest and used the land continuously for a long period, after which the soil was exhausted, forcing a search for

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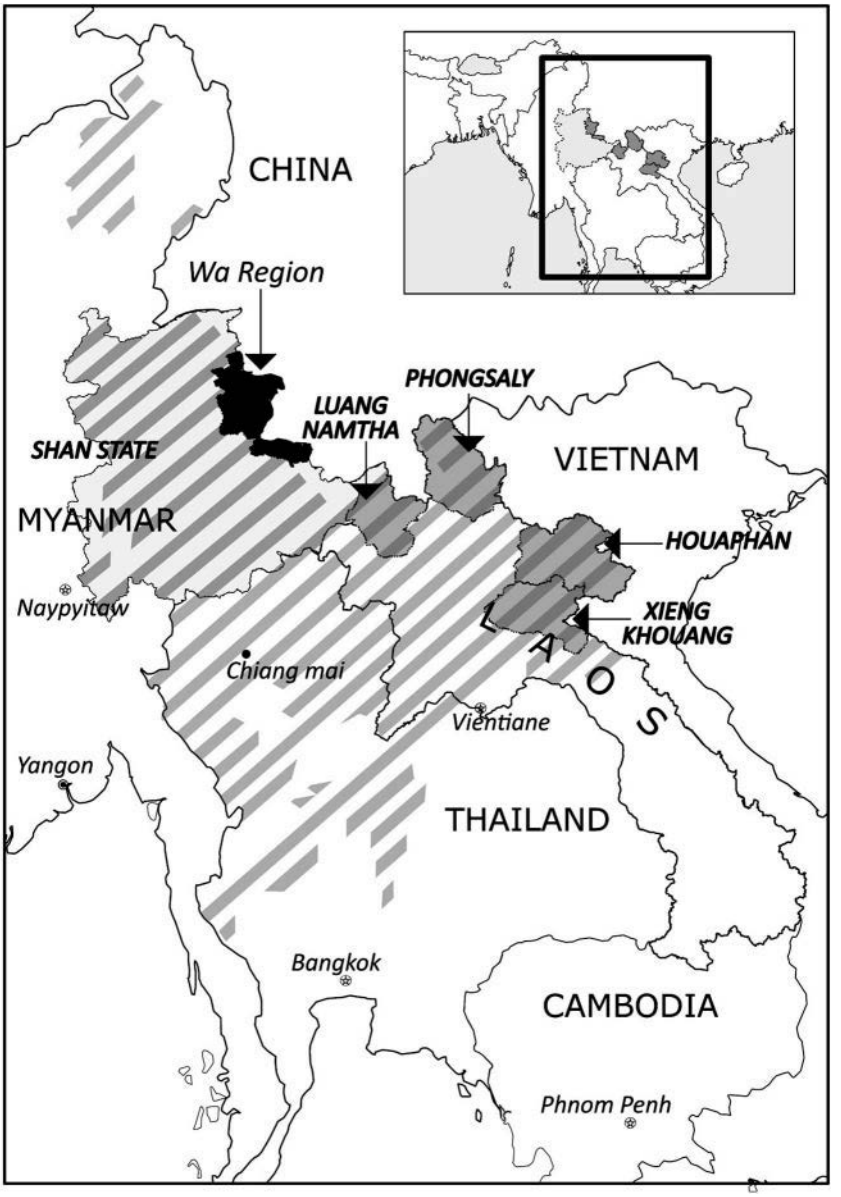

FIGURE 31-1: Areas of past poppy cultivation: The so-called Golden Triangle of Thailand, Laos and Burma.

Source: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

new areas of climax forest that often required migration and village relocation. Thus, Geddes (1970, p4) described the Hmong as 'shifting cultivators in the most extreme sense, who shift not only their cultivation but themselves as well'. However, since about the 1960s, population pressure and rapid deforestation have largely precluded this 'pioneer' type of swiddening. Opium-growing minorities have varied in the

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Papaver somniferum L. [Papaveraceae]

The opium poppy: a beautiful plant with a bad reputation.

priority given to their production of opium or rice. The Hmong, Yao and Lisu tended to emphasize opium production and to give priority to opium in the selection of land, whereas the primary concern of the Lahu and Akha was the cultivation of rice (Feingold, 1970, p330; Walker, 1980, p148; Alting von Geusau, 1983, pp226–227). In the Muang Sing and Muang Long districts of Luang Namtha province in northern Laos, where I have undertaken periodic research since 1995, the small number of Hmong villages were the only ones to produce substantial quantities of opium,[1] while the Akha, the dominant population of both districts, cultivated opium almost exclusively for household consumption and local trade (Epprecht, 1998, p131).

James Scott has characterized shifting cultivation as a form of 'escape agriculture', writing in 2009 (pp195-196) that swidden and forage crops are 'escape crops' that allow political secession from the state, and that they are 'fiscally sterile' in that their low value-to-weight 'will not pay the efforts of the tax gatherer'. In this regard, opium was exceptional, in that its high value-to-weight ratio and other factors such as storability made it particularly attractive for state appropriation. This was certainly so in the case of the French colonial government, which used opium as a lucrative source of revenue to fund the administration of the Indochina colonies.

French opium monopoly

After the annexation of Saigon in 1862, the French established an opium monopoly and imported opium from India, where the British had been producing it on a large scale for mass markets in China and Southeast Asia. The French imposed a 10% tax and sold the opium to licensed Chinese merchants to supply opium shops and dens. Opium monopolies (*régie*) were later established in French protectorates in Cambodia, central and northern Vietnam and Laos. In 1899 these autonomous opium agencies were united into a single Opium Monopoly (*Régie Générale de l'Opium de l'Indochine*) (Michaud, 2000, p61). For the first time, cheaper opium was imported from Yunnan province in China in order to attract customers among poorer workers and thus expand consumer demand. Between 1898 and 1922 the contribution made by the opium industry to the total gross income of the French Indochina colony fluctuated between 25% and 42% (Michaud, 2000, p62).

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In order to increase the production of cheaper opium, French officials forced highland opium growers, in particular the Hmong (Meo), to make deliveries of the drug. Burdensome taxes then led to a prolonged Hmong uprising in northwestern Vietnam and northern Laos (McCoy, 2003, p114). The French colonial government later adopted a more consultative and less exacting system of procuring opium. In the 1930s, the French used Vietnamese, Lao and some Hmong 'brokers' to purchase opium at fixed prices from the Hmong for delivery to the Opium Monopoly. This procurement system (which often required the outbidding of smugglers) persisted during World War Two due to the blocking of shipping and imports of opium from India and the Middle East, and the need to increase local opium cultivation. The French also used prominent Hmong leaders (such as Touby Lyfong) to negotiate prices with Hmong growers (McCoy, 2003, p115).

Post-war policies

After World War Two 'official purchases from indigenous producers decreased significantly and do not appear to have been continued after 1950' (Rapin, 2003, p45). However, during the First Indochina War (1946 to 1954) French intelligence agencies and paramilitary forces exploited the illicit trade in opium to finance covert operations and maintain Hmong loyalty (McCoy, 2003, p131). Opium production in the uplands of Laos increased significantly during the 1950s and 1960s due to protection and distribution by the Royal Lao Government and the growth in the 1960s of the heroin market among United States troops in Vietnam. In 1971, President Richard Nixon launched his global war on drugs – a culmination of the United States' longstanding prohibitionist drug policy, which dated back to the Shanghai International Opium Commission and the Hague Opium Convention of 1909 and 1912, respectively. United States pressure on the Royal Lao Government resulted in opium prohibition and repressive measures against opium consumption and trafficking, and the United States' war against the Pathet Lao resulted in the use of aerial herbicides and bombing to destroy opium fields in Pathet Lao territory (Kuzmarov, 2008, pp360-361). However, after the Pathet Lao seized power in 1975 the new government of the Lao PDR overturned the 1971 ban in order to win the political support of the dissident Hmong, who were the country's largest opium producers. The government set out to control opium production 'in order to earn badly needed foreign exchange by selling opium to Western governments and pharmaceutical companies' (Wekkin, 1982, p190). In a policy that resembled the earlier French *régie*, opium cultivation was officially sanctioned, with a requirement that the Hmong and other uplanders sold to the government at fixed prices (Lee, 1982, p218, Note 33). Opium production in the Lao PDR reached an all-time high of 389 tons in 1989.

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The New Economic Mechanism and its aftermath

Economic reforms initiated by the Fourth Party Congress in November 1986 (and labelled the New Economic Mechanism) were the catalyst for change in state policies towards opium. The reforms involved moving from a centrally planned to a market-oriented economy and included the abandonment of collectivized agriculture, the development of private enterprise and liberalization of domestic and foreign trade. The Foreign Investment Law of 1988 allowed foreign investors to enter most economic sectors by way of subcontracting, joint ventures or wholly owned firms (Chantavong, 1996, pp26-41). These economic reforms have since been supported by concessional loans from international lending institutions, including the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the Asian Development Bank, and international aid organizations such as the United Nations Development Programme.

The New Economic Mechanism reforms locked the Lao PDR into a global economic system that inevitably made it responsive to pressure from the international system of drug control. In the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan intensified the drug war within the United States and exerted increasing pressure on the United Nations to wage war on drugs around the world. In 1987, the International Conference on Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking in Vienna launched a new era of UN drug control. Soon after, the UN General Assembly declared 1991-2000 to be the United Nations Decade against Drug Abuse and, in 1991, established the UN Drug Control Programme (UNDCP). In 1998, a special session of the United Nations General Assembly committed itself to a drug-free world by 2008, heralding a victory for a hard-line prohibitionist approach to drug control (Jelsma, 2003).

Drug prohibition in Laos

In early 1990 Laos embarked upon counter-narcotics cooperation with the United States by signing a memorandum of understanding on Bilateral Cooperation on Narcotics Issues. In 1990 and 1991, the US provided narcotics training for Lao officials and the UNDCP formulated a Comprehensive Drug Control Programme (known as the Masterplan) for the country, to cover the period from 1994 to 2000. In 1996, the Lao government revised Article 135 of the Criminal Code on Drug Trafficking and Possession, thereby formally prohibiting opium production and trafficking. In 2000, Giuseppe (Pino) Arlacchi, the Executive Director of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)[2] promised the Vientiane government US$80 million in aid to expedite the elimination of opium in Laos. The agreement was negotiated and signed by a local UNDCP representative who was later described as an 'anti-drug true believer' (Baird and Shoemaker, 2005, p9). This reflected the hard-line prohibitionist and target-oriented policies of the United Nations during the 1990s and its commitment to the imminent goal of a drug-free world. In December 2000 the Prime Minister issued Decree 14, mandating the total elimination of opium cultivation in Laos by 2006 (later altered to 2005).

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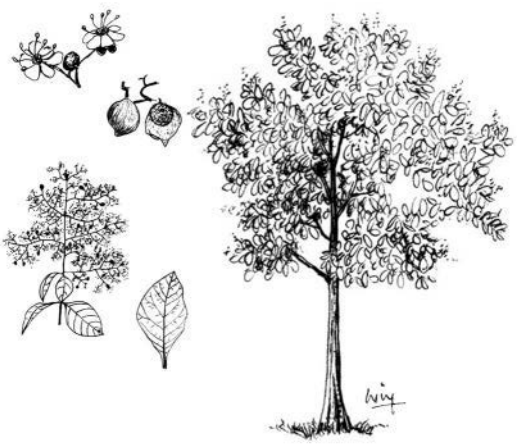
The UNDCP's Masterplan proposed the 'gradual elimination' of opium cultivation in Laos, over six to 10 years, but the Lao government's Decree 14 imposed a more stringent deadline. Within a short period of five years, the government pursued a punitive campaign combining fines and eradication raids, and reduced opium cultivation in the northern provinces of Laos from 19,052 hectares in 2000 to a mere 1800 hectares in 2005.

Forestry and shifting cultivation

Concurrent with the New Economic Mechanism reforms was an increasing reliance on forestry, especially forest plantations, as a source of state revenue. This spawned discursive and policy attacks on shifting cultivation.

The denigration of shifting cultivation in Laos, as well as in other regions of Southeast Asia, was linked to state forestry after World War Two and the declaration of forests as state land. These 'political forests' were a legacy of 'colonial-era state making' (Peluso and Vandergeest, 2001, p762). Colonial forestry was based on scientific forest management and it served several basic purposes: 'legibility', i.e. forests could be 'read' accurately from tables and maps, and this, in turn, could serve the commercial interests of the 'utilitarian state' (Scott, 1998, p13) and the expansion of the state's jurisdiction (Peluso and Vandergeest, 2001, p 768).

Laos was colonized by the French in 1893. Most of the country's forests and forest lands were subsequently directly and indirectly controlled by the colonial administration (Phimmavong et al., 2009, p505). Traditional forest use (the right of monarchs to use the forest) was restricted by an agreement between the King of Luang Prabang and the colonial administration in 1917 (Evans, 2002, p47). Major changes in Lao forest management and policies in the colonial period included the establishment of forestry institutions to manage the forest and forestland and the introduction of a tax system, property rights, plantations and a regulatory framework to limit the use of natural forests by the local population. For example, exploiting the timber from natural forests was one of the main forest policies in the colonial period. The French administration also encouraged the creation of coffee, rubber and teak plantations, although exports were hampered by



Tectona grandis L. f. [Lamiaceae]

Teak plantations were promoted, along with coffee and rubber, by the French administration in Laos.

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poor transport infrastructure, by World War Two and the First Indochina War. From the 1960s through to the 1980s, both the Royal Lao Government and the succeeding Lao PDR government sought to maximize revenue from natural forests. In 1979, 45% of the value of the country's exports came from wood (Phimmavong et al., 2009, pp505, 506). This fell to 40% during the 1990s (Midgley et al., 2012, p161).[3]

Despite the rise in forest revenues, the major impact of the Lao PDR's forest industry on shifting cultivation came earlier, following the initiation of the New Economic Mechanism in 1986, the subsequent internationalization of forest policy and growth of industrial forest plantations. The first national forestry conference was held in 1989 and this led to the Tropical Forest Action Plan, funded by international organizations such the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and the UN Development Programme. It was followed in 1991 by the National Forestry Action Plan. This aimed to protect remaining natural forests, but also to promote forest plantations, with a preference for fast-growing species. Notably, direct foreign investment in forest plantations increased significantly in 2000 and 2001 due, in part, to 'increasing areas with potential for plantation development as a result of shifting cultivation…' (Phimmavong et al., 2009, p507).

According to Barney (2009, p151), the 'potential' for plantation development in Laos was closely linked to a 'neoliberal-inspired discourse of the Mekong as an untapped resource frontier…' The resource frontier metaphor had been exploited by the Lao state and Asian Development Bank to create the impression that the Lao uplands were an empty space of 'degraded land', i.e. land mostly left fallow by shifting cultivators. Barney concludes: 'The rhetoric of "frontiers" can be understood as a legitimating ideological device, used by state agencies, companies and development banks, in the advertising and promotion of Laos as a "new frontier of corporate investment"' (2009, p147).

Shifting cultivation, opium and poverty eradication

The demonization of shifting cultivation in Laos is not recent. In 1930 the French colonial administration introduced a new forest code (*Code Forestier*) prohibiting shifting cultivation (Phimmavong et al., 2009, p505). It was probably largely ignored given limited state control over the uplands. The Lao, whatever their political orientation, have an entrenched cultural antipathy towards shifting cultivation and a preference for lowland wet-rice agriculture. After seizing power in 1975, the Lao PDR government at first encouraged upland minorities to abandon shifting cultivation, to resettle and move towards collectivized farming of irrigated rice in the lowlands (Wekkin, 1982, p190). The Lao aversion to shifting cultivation was reinforced by a Marxist/Stalinist view that shifting cultivation represented a primitive stage in social evolution (Fox et al., 2009, p307). In April 1978, the Prime Minister Kaysone Phomvihane ordered district party committees to impose a total ban on tree felling to clear land for planting. However, in 1979, Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin advised the Lao government to postpone resettlement and collectivization (and by

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implication, the ban on shifting cultivation) so as to prevent further Hmong resistance and migration across the Mekong (Wekkin, 1982, pp191-192).

The government's attack on shifting cultivation resumed and intensified following the Fourth Party Congress of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party in 1986, at which the New Economic Mechanism reforms were written into law and the eventual abandonment of shifting cultivation in favour of wet-rice cultivation was formally announced (Ireson and Ireson, 1991, p930). In 1994, the government decided that shifting cultivation would be eliminated by the year 2000. In that year, the deadline was extended to 2020, but in 2003 it was brought back to 2010 (Ducourtieux et al., 2005, p504).

Coercive enclosures to eliminate shifting cultivation were also imposed under upland tenure policies adopted by the Lao state and supported by large international organizations. The Land and Forest Allocation Programme (LFAP), introduced in the early 1990s, is a land and zoning policy that aims to alleviate poverty by improving access to land for poor farmers through community-based forest management, forest conservation and the 'stabilization' of swidden agriculture (Vandergeest, 2003, p50). Yet, research has revealed that the Land and Forest Allocation Programme has been a major cause of displacement and impoverishment (especially of upland ethnic groups) by zoning village land so that shifting cultivation is permitted only on land without 'secondary' or 'primary' forest cover. This allocation process has forced villagers to shorten fallow cycles, causing soil depletion and low rice yields (Vandergeest, 2003, pp51-52; Ducourtieux et al., 2005, p517). This 'policy-induced' Malthusian squeeze contests the orthodox view that population pressure in the Lao uplands explains the low productivity of shifting cultivation (Rigg, 2006, p126).

Upland resource scarcity, in the form of low yields of upland rice and consequent rice deficits, placed a premium on the cultivation of opium as a means of acquiring rice for household consumption. Epprecht's study of 19 Akha villages in the Muang Sing district of Luang Namtha province revealed a situation in which yields of upland rice were averaging about half the yields of wet-rice in the lowlands. As a result, Akha households produced enough rice for only seven to eight months per year (Epprecht, 1998, pp43-44). All 'productive households' in these villages grew some opium, but most in relatively small amounts. Nevertheless, opium cultivation was critical for household survival and about 65% of all rice purchased or exchanged in the area was paid for directly with opium or cash earned from the sale of opium (Epprecht, 1998, pp66-76).

The vital role of opium as a survival crop in conditions of upland resource scarcity is confirmed by agronomic and anthropological research elsewhere in northern Laos and northern Thailand (Ducourtieux et al., 2008, pp162-164; Cooper, 1984, p62). These findings are at odds with the Lao government's discourse and repeated claims that opium is a major cause of poverty rather than a symptom of poverty in the form of reduced land available for shifting cultivation. The state discourse on opium as a cause of poverty is exemplified in the following declarations in the National

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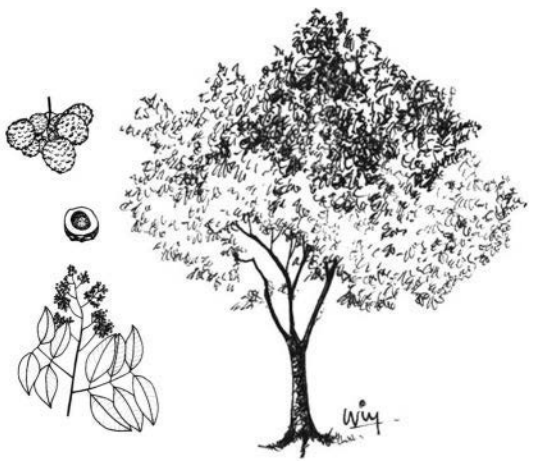
Programme Strategy for the Post Opium Scenario, 2006–2009 (LCDC/UNODC, 2006):

> 'Opium is equal to poverty' (p4) and 'The Seventh Party Congress has identified the elimination of opium and poverty as national priorities. The Government of Laos believes that poverty cannot be eradicated in the northern provinces without the elimination of opium' (p5).

In the eyes of the Lao government, the elimination of shifting cultivation, opium and poverty are inextricably linked. Thus, according to Ducourtieux (2004, p82): 'The goal of eliminating shifting cultivation is motivated by the reasoning that it is one of the main causes of rural poverty… Furthermore, the poverty of families who practise shifting cultivation drives them to grow opium, a source of addiction and therefore increased poverty. The vicious circle is complete and poverty is self-maintained'. The campaign to eradicate opium is an integral part of the National Poverty Eradication Programme, with the aim of enabling the removal of Laos from the list of least-developed countries by 2020 (Ducourtieux, 2004, p81).

'Laoization' and the 'discourse of lack'

The negative symbolism of opium and shifting cultivation has been reinforced by what Pholsena characterizes as the 'remarginalization' of ethnic minorities in Laos since the early 1990s. Under the French colonial administration and the Royal Lao Government, upland minorities (usually referred to as *kha*) were identified as 'primitive' compared to the more 'civilized' Lao and other Tai-speaking groups of the lowlands (Pholsena, 2006, p27). However, when the Lao People's Revolutionary Party seized power in 1975 there was a perceived need to make a radical break with the past and create a new national identity that included ethnic minorities. Such a new national identity would also recognize the debt to upland ethnic groups for their significant contribution to the Pathet Lao victory. The communists envisioned the creation of a 'new socialist man' that accorded



Litchi chinensis Sonn. [Sapindaceae]

Lychees were one of the fruit-tree species that helped farmers overcome the loss of cash income from opium.

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equal rights and opportunities to all ethnic groups. Yet, following the introduction of the New Economic Mechanism and increasing integration of Laos into the global capitalist system, the Lao government became 'less dependent on minority support and responsive to minority demands' (Evans, 2002, p212) and promoted policies promoting the 'Laoization' of ethnic minorities (Ireson and Ireson, 1991). 'Laoization' includes the elimination of shifting cultivation, the resettlement of upland ethnic minorities in the lowlands to farm wet-rice and a nationalist discourse that idealizes Lao culture in a way that remarginalizes and stigmatizes ethnic minorities (Pholsena, 2006, pp3, 16, 180ff).

Furthermore, the consolidation of national culture in post-socialist Laos has been 'accompanied by exhortations to economic competitiveness' and characterized by a 'discourse of lack', that is, a perception that Laos is 'backward' compared to other countries in the region and in the world (Pholsena, 2006, pp63-65). The 'national obsession' with economic development corresponds with an obsession with opium as a symbol of primitiveness, backwardness and poverty.

The post-opium scenario

This fast-tracked eradication campaign had a devastating effect on the livelihood of uplanders in northern Laos, due in large measure to inadequate development of alternatives. Even the Lao Commission for Drug Control and Supervision (LCDC) and the UNODC acknowledged that the rapid elimination of opium in Laos had created a crisis: 'Laos is at a critical juncture. …the fact that opium elimination has outpaced the provision of alternative livelihoods has not improved an already difficult situation' (LCDC/UNODC, 2006, p4). By 2005 more than 50% of opium-growing communities in northern Laos did not have the means or the time to develop new cash crops or staple food crops (UNODC, 2006, p1). Consequently uplanders suffered severe rice shortages in the absence of opium to trade for the staple, decapitalization (e.g. by being forced to sell livestock to survive) and migration to lowland areas where there was limited arable land (Ducourtieux et al., 2008, pp163-164; Cohen and Lyttleton 2008,



Pyrus communis L. [Rosaceae]

European pears were among the fruit-tree crops adopted in the highlands as a replacement for opium.

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pp136–137). Migration was often spontaneous and uncontrolled. In early 2004, *The Economist* reported 'the displacement of some 25,000 Hmong, Akha and other tribes from their traditional homes in the mountains to the valleys'. In Muang Sing, migration snowballed, resulting in the depopulation of whole upland areas.[4]

The rapid eradication of opium cultivation in the highlands of northern Laos had the effect, intended or unintended, of creating a frontier 'empty' space, open for the development and expansion of forest plantations. The preferred plantation crop was rubber. Rubber plantations have expanded rapidly in the north since 2003, as a result of the convergence and interaction of a number of factors: the desperate need in Laos for a cash crop to replace opium; the symbolic appeal of rubber as a 'modern' crop by contrast with the 'primitiveness and backwardness' of opium; demand for rubber in China coupled with declining yields in traditional rubber-growing areas of Xishuangbanna (Yunnan province); Chinese government investment incentives for Chinese businesses linked to its own opium-replacement policy and schemes; and the perception of northern Laos as an untapped resource frontier (Cohen, 2009, pp426–427). By 2008 there were eight Chinese rubber companies operating in northern Laos (Cohen, 2009, p427). Some were beneficiaries of large concessions that excluded local villages from access to their land, threatened their livelihood and in some areas provoked local resistance (McAllister, 2012). However, while acknowledging that not all villagers have benefitted from the rubber boom, Lagerqvist (2013, p68) argues that research in Muang Sing has found that Chinese 'land grabs' have been offset by thriving smallholder plantations using cross-border social networks. Indeed, the boom has advantaged those villagers with land and capital, but excluded those who were displaced from the uplands by opium eradication and forced into dependence on wage labour in the lowlands (Cohen, 2009, p428). This confirms the claim by Rigg (2006, p131) that in Laos, 'market integration' can be both 'livelihood eroding and livelihood enhancing'. Other problems with rubber plantations as substitutes for opium and other forms of shifting cultivation include destruction of natural forests, soil erosion, reduced biodiversity arising from monoculture, the decline in non-timber forest products and the vagaries of the global rubber market.[5] These problems highlight a fundamental difference between monoculture plantation development as an opium-replacement policy and the alternative development policies of international aid organizations that have emphasized livelihood security, environmental sustainability and poverty reduction through community-based development activities. The Chinese business-oriented model of development has prevailed over the Western aid model, restricting Western international development agencies to a secondary role of monitoring investment activities and analysing the social, economic and ecological impacts of these investments.[6]

Northern Laos and northern Thailand compared

The fast-tracked campaign to eradicate opium in Laos contrasts with the Thai government's gradualist policy. There was a lag of about 25 years between Thailand's

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Diospyros virginiana L. [Ebenaceae]

Persimmons were among the fruit crops used by Hmong farmers to help replace income from opium and to avoid relocation to new village sites.

Opium Act of 1959, which prohibited opium cultivation and trafficking, and the beginning of opium eradication in the mid-1980s under pressure from the United States' 'certification policy'.[7] Opium, shifting cultivation and upland minorities were similarly stereotyped in Thailand as the 'hill tribe problem' and denigrated as threats to the Thai nation, but state policy was much more pragmatic and, for a long time, less subject to international pressures. Following the 1967 'Red Meo' revolt and during the 1970s, the government was concerned that opium eradication could alienate 'hill tribe' opium growers and encourage them to join the communist insurgency. Especially influential was the Opium Replacement Programme, one of King Bhumibol's many Royal Projects, which was launched in 1969, and the king's insistence that opium poppies should not be eradicated until viable alternatives existed. According to Renard (2001, p76): 'The king realized that the radical removal of the hill people's source of income would imperil them'. Implicit in this approach, supported by Thai government agencies and the United Nations, was that opium was not a cause of poverty but, in the absence of alternative cash crops, a vital survival crop for many uplanders. Opium cultivation in the northern uplands of Thailand persisted through the 1970s. Yet, even well before a concerted eradication campaign began in 1984, the cultivation of opium had decreased significantly from 17,920 hectares in 1965-1966 to only 6026 hectares in 1980-1981 (Renard, 2001, p36, Table 3). This can be partly explained by the modest success of crop replacement projects (Renard, 2001, p38) and 'resource scarcity' that led to the degradation of opium land and declining opium yields. The Hmong response was to minimize relocation to new areas and voluntarily invest in permanent agriculture, initially in the form of wet-rice fields and later cabbages, cut flowers and tree crops such as lychees, pears, apples and persimmons (Renard, 2001, pp61-63; Tapp, 1989, pp41-42). Road construction into the uplands in the 1970s and 1980s was initially for the purpose of countering communist insurgency. However, it also facilitated the marketing of cash crops and access to social services.[8]

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Conclusions

For many years, colonial and post-colonial governments of Laos exploited opium as a valuable source of state revenue, or at least tolerated opium cultivation, consumption and trafficking despite pressure from the United States and the international drug control system. Yet, quite recently the Lao government embarked upon a campaign to rapidly eliminate opium cultivation within a short period of just five years. I have argued that the Lao PDR government's fast-tracked campaign can be explained in terms of the convergence of several foreign and domestic factors after the mid-1980s.

The Lao government's apparent obsession with meeting international standards of modernity and development in the wake of the New Economic Mechanism resulted in a sense of urgency and a type of deadline-oriented thinking regarding the elimination of opium growing, shifting cultivation and poverty and the attainment of developed-country status.

The economic reforms of the New Economic Mechanism were contemporaneous with intensification of the global war on drugs under US President Ronald Reagan and the establishment of the UNDCP and UNODC, with their hard-line prohibitionist target of a drug-free world by 2008. This international prohibitionist regime was congruent with, and lent authority to, the domestic discourses in Laos in which opium was accused of causing poverty and the uplands were seen as a new 'empty' frontier beckoning plantation development.

The Lao government's hard-line policy and fast-tracked eradication campaign have been in marked contrast with the gradualist policy of the Thai government. While opium, shifting cultivation and upland ethnic minorities in northern Thailand were also denigrated in various ways in national discourses, state policies were more pragmatic and less ideological; opium was never singled out as a cause of poverty. In the 1980s and 1990s, drug-war rhetoric in the United States and the United Nations became more strident and policies more coercive. However, by this time opium cultivation in Thailand was already in decline due to crop replacement projects, road construction and a gradual transition to permanent agriculture. In the post-opium era, state policies in Thailand's northern uplands have aimed at alternative development based on crop diversification, integrated rural development and people's participation – in stark contrast to the potentially precarious and less sustainable future of rubber monoculture in the uplands of northern Laos.

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Notes

1. The Hmong are the most prolific opium growers in Laos, with Hmong villages concentrated in Houaphan, Luang Prabang and Xieng Khouang provinces. Villagers of the four Hmong villages in Muang Sing district of Luang Namtha province migrated there in the early 1990s and district authorities settled them in the lowlands, where there was limited scope for opium cultivation. In the adjacent district of Muang Long there were three Hmong villages which, until the eradication campaign got under way, cultivated opium extensively, some for trade across national borders.
2. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) was established in 1997 as an umbrella organization incorporating the UN Drug Control Programme and the UN's Centre for International Crime Prevention.
3. This dropped to 20% in 2002–2003 and 12% in 2006 (Midgley et al., 2012, p16), presumably due to increased revenue from other sources such as hydroelectric power and mining.
4. In Muang Sing, for example, 338 out of 522 households in 13 highland villages migrated to the lowlands between January and April 2003, following visits from officials who ordered the cutting down of opium poppies and imposed fines for non-compliance (Cohen and Lyttleton, 2008, p129).

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5. In 2010 the local price of rubber was 15,000 kip (US$1.80) per kilogram. By 2014 the price had dropped to between 7000 and 8000 kip ($0.87 and $0.99). The president of the Hadyao rubber cooperative (which pioneered rubber planting in Luang Namtha province) stated that if the price fell below 5000 kip 'the group may not be able to continue to produce rubber sustainably because of the high cost of cleaning and buying saplings' (*Vientiane Times*, 26 March 2014). The fall in rubber prices and a corresponding rise in opium prices may have contributed to recent increases in opium cultivation in Laos, from 1800ha in 2005 to 7000ha in 2012 and 4000ha in 2013 (UNODC, 2013).
6. For example, the recent study by the German Federal Enterprise for International Cooperation, GIZ, *Building up Land Concession Inventories: The Case of Lao PDR* (2012).
7. 'Certification' provides for aid cuts and trade sanctions against major drug-producing or drug-transit countries unless the United States administration certifies that a country is fully cooperating with its anti-narcotics efforts.
8. Renard notes that in 1970 there were almost no roads in the highlands of northern Thailand, but by 1987 there were approximately 400 kilometres of roads (Renard, 2001, p126).

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