

The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology

ISSN: 1444-2213 (Print) 1740-9314 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rtap20

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**To cite this article:** Oliver Tappe (2015) A Frontier in the Frontier: Sociopolitical Dynamics and Colonial Administration in the Lao-Vietnamese Borderlands, The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology, 16:4, 368-387, DOI: 10.1080/14442213.2015.1049202

**To link to this article:** http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2015.1049202

Published online: 21 Sep 2015.

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*The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology,* 2015
Vol. 16, No. 4, 368–387, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2015.1049202

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Taylor & Francis Group

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*When the French finally seized control of the Lao territories on the east bank of the Mekong from the Siamese in 1893, Houaphan became an internal upland frontier region within colonial Indochina. Unfamiliar with the concept of overlapping spheres of sovereignty—during the nineteenth century, Houaphan paid tribute to both Luang Prabang and Hué—members of the French colonial administration held discordant views on whether to attach Houaphan to either Laos or Annam. In 1896, the Gouverneur Général in Hanoi decided to divide Houaphan between the two protectorates. This administrative decision triggered unforeseen consequences such as large-scale migrations of the Lao population from east to west. Only seven years later, Houaphan was united again as a province of Laos. This paper explores the social, political and cultural dynamics of this ethnically heterogeneous upland region with regard to specific colonial administrative practices.*

*Keywords: Laos; Vietnam; Upland Southeast Asia; History; Anthropology; Interethnic Relations; Borders; Zomia; Colonialism*

## Introduction

The colonial encounter in upland Southeast Asia produced manifold local responses and sociopolitical dynamics. When the French appeared in the mountains of the Lao-Vietnamese borderlands in the late nineteenth century, they became enmeshed in complex networks of shifting allegiances and interethnic hierarchies. This paper investigates how different political actors—both indigenous and colonial—interacted within a multi-ethnic environment in the context of emergent colonial state-building. Taking the upland confederation of Houaphan (Northeast Laos; Figure 1) as an example, I will trace historical processes of political relations across cultural difference, as well as rivalries between and within indigenous and colonial elites.

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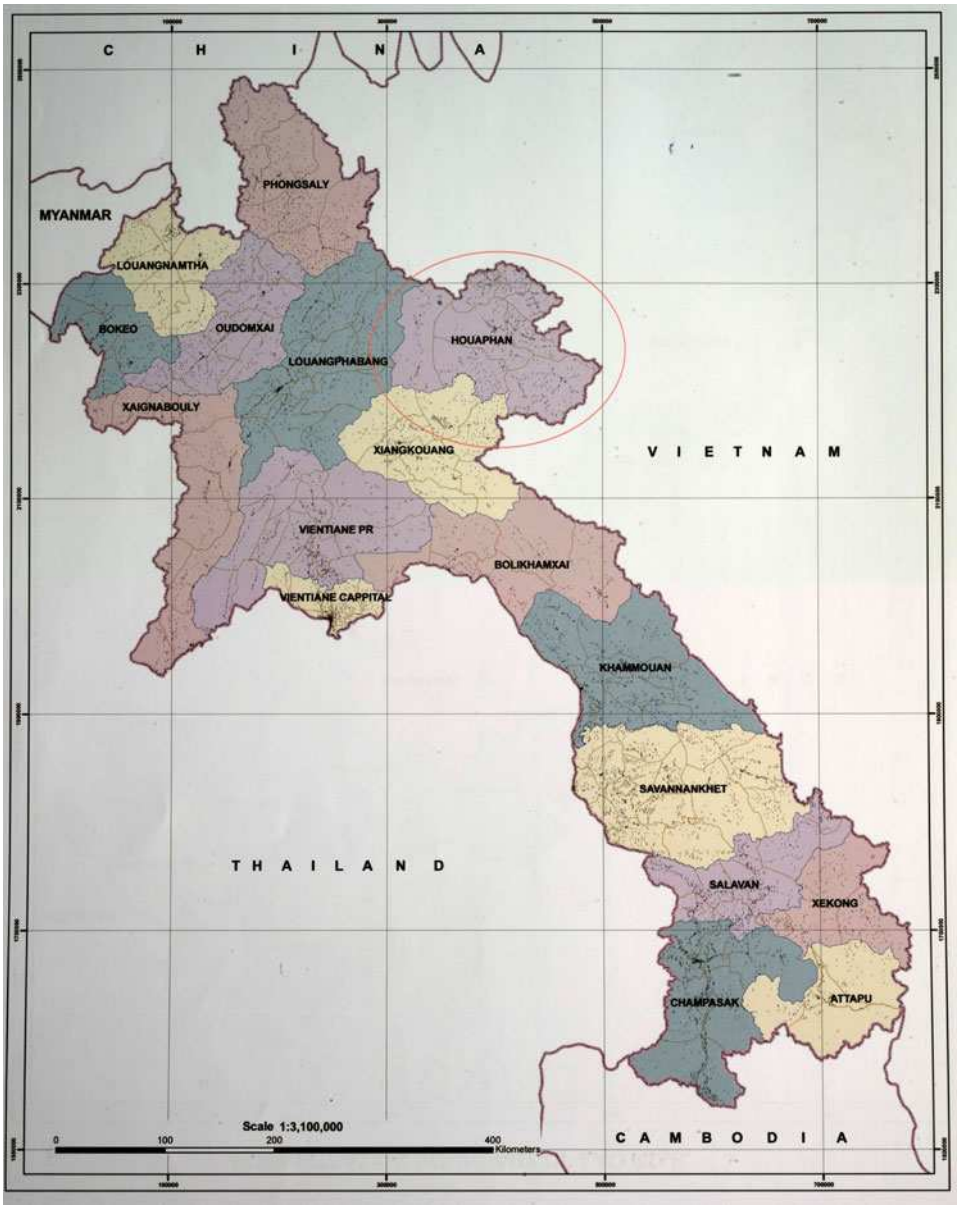


**Figure 1** Houaphan Province in Northeast Laos.
*Source*: Administrative Atlas and Village Location in Lao PDR. Vientiane, National Geographic Department, 2005.

Upland societies considered the French a new source of power, and colonial administrators had to deal with the strategies of competing local power brokers (for Northwest Vietnam, see the excellent studies by Davis 2011; Le Failler 2011, 2014).

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This paper offers a thick description of historical ethnography, based largely on colonial sources, and faces the epistemological challenge of trying to avoid filtering out local voices and agency.[1] I will discuss French perceptions of shifting local allegiances and enmities, local strategies of self-empowerment through relations with external powers and varying responses to administrative changes initiated by the colonialists. I follow Scott (2009) in stressing uplanders' historical and strategic choices vis-à-vis external powers. However, I am less inclined to see upland societies as merely 'designed to be as unappealing as possible as a site of appropriation' (Scott 2009, 327). Rather, I propose that we focus on how uplanders aimed at controlling processes of mutual appropriation—processes that included both risk and opportunity.

After giving a historical overview of Houaphan as a multi-ethnic polity between the Siamese/Lao and the Vietnamese worlds, I will analyse the complex local sociopolitical configurations under colonial rule at the end of the nineteenth century. In particular, I focus on the impact of a specific colonial technology of power, namely border demarcation. Conceived by the French as a way to deal with the alleged 'anarchy' in the uplands, this intervention inspired diverse responses that illuminate the specific interplay of indigenous sociopolitical dynamics and colonial administrative practices. The patterns of upland social relations involved positive and negative potentialities, entailing 'war, rebellion, persecution, flight, the imitation of customs, peaceful trade, and many other types of action' (Izikowitz 1969, 142).

Houaphan is a frontier region *par excellence*, a zone of contingent power relations where 'cultures interpenetrate in a dynamic manner' (Leach 1960, 50). Houaphan, as a historical frontier, constitutes 'a liminal space where cultural identities merged and shifted' (Perdue 2005, 41), a space of sociocultural creativity and transformation, characterised by dynamics of interaction and difference, allegiance and confrontation, and by the emergence of new social and political configurations. It is the task of historical anthropology to analyse the social dynamics and frictions evoked by 'interconnection across difference' (Tsing 2005, 4)—here in the context of imperialism and colonialism.

## Historical Outline: Houaphan Facing Siamese, Vietnamese and French Imperialism

Lao migration into the northeastern uplands dates back to the fifteenth century, when the king of Luang Prabang and later Vientiane encouraged Lao settlements in the eastern frontier region, namely around the Truong Son mountain chain which formed a natural boundary between the Lao and Vietnamese lowland kingdoms (Stuart-Fox 1998). Yet it was not until the mid-sixteenth century that the Lao king took control of Houaphan as a Lao upland *muang* (Boutin 1937, 71).[2] Even though a few Buddhist monasteries were established in the following centuries, the region remained a marginal part of Lao 'civilisation' (Lorrillard 2008, 157). Instead, as in other upland regions in Laos, political organisation relied on multi-layered

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interactions across diverse cultural boundaries (Badenoch & Shinsuke 2013). In 1895, Lao people still constituted less than half of the population (15,602 out of 32,990).[3]

The Lao political elites struggled to control the heterogeneous population through relations of tribute and trade. They considered the Khmu and other Mon-Khmer-speaking groups to be *kha* ('slave'; *xa* in other Tai languages), the lowest class in the *muang* hierarchy (Michaud 2006, 123; see Condominas 1980; Archaimbault 1964). However, in everyday social life this boundary was sometimes fluid, and intermarriage and shifts of categories occured. Arguably, differences were related to economic/ecological niches, with uplanders sometimes holding a certain economic power due to lowland demand for products from the uplands (Izikowitz 2001). As will be described below, Houaphan was characterised by constant re-negotiations of sociopolitical relations.

Given the rivalries between different lowland Lao principalities, in particular between Vientiane and Luang Prabang from the end of the seventeenth century, Houaphan witnessed a change of overlords while keeping a regular flow of tributes to the lowlands. The Lao notables sent tributes both to Bangkok, which claimed Luang Prabang and other Lao *muang* such as Houaphan as vassal states, and to the Vietnamese court in Hué. Even if administration of the upland frontier—despite occasional military campaigns by the Siamese—remained indirect, and political authority was largely left to upland elites, the expanding Nguyễn administration under Minh Mạng (who reigned from 1820 to 1841) involved considerable changes of local political organisation (see Davis 2015; Poisson 2004; Le Failler 2014).

During Minh Mạng's reign, the northern part of Houaphan—since the eighteenth century centred on the *muang* of Xieng Kho—became the Vietnamese province of Trấn Man, literally, 'savage territory'. The southern part, including Sam Tai, was named Trấn Biên—'frontier territory'.[4] Parallel to this incorporation of the upland frontier into a lowland administrative organisation, Lao and Tai notables received Vietnamese titles and thus entered the Confucian bureaucracy as 'mandarins', albeit with little impact on local political practice. This administrative shift became relevant only later, when the French colonialists took Vietnamese records to bolster 'Vietnamese claims' to the Lao regions vis-à-vis Siamese expansion (Lemire [1894] 2008; see Ivarsson 2008).

Throughout the nineteenth century, Houaphan was caught in the power struggle between Siam and Vietnam, forming part of a vast upland frontier region where the spheres of influence of both lowland empires overlapped. The 'Houaphan Thang Hoc'—'six Houaphans',[5] namely the *muang* of: Sam Neua; Sam Tai; Houamuang; Muang Son; Muang Soi; and Xieng Kho—entertained political relations with both sides, yet remained closer to the Thai/Lao world with regard to linguistic and cultural affinities, and also concerning their political and juridical organisation, which was modelled after lowland Lao systems. It is unclear to what extent the Lao notables in Houaphan were able to take advantage of this situation and foster their hegemony in this culturally heterogeneous context. The fact that a widespread violent uprising of

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the Khmu flared up in 1875—the 'Kha Cheuang' rebellion according to Siamese sources (Proschan 1998)—suggests considerable sociopolitical tensions.

Before the French arrived in the region (notably the Pavie Mission in the 1880s; see Dion 2010; Ivarsson 2008), Houaphan and other regions of northern Laos and Vietnam were unsettled by invasions of diverse heterogeneous groups from China—coined 'Ho Chinese' in the French sources—who formed various alliances with other local ethnic groups, including not only Khmu who resented Lao domination but also opportunistic upland Tai groups. In the 1870s, Lao settlements and temples were destroyed, and many Lao fled to the plains of Luang Prabang and Vientiane (Raquez 1902; Cupet [1900] 2000). While the Vietnamese had lost considerable influence in the uplands, the Siamese installed military posts to quell the unrest and to sustain Bangkok's imperial expansion and integration.

In 1886, Bangkok declared the region pacified, and reconstructed political order and local Lao authority on behalf of the king of Luang Prabang. The heads of the Lao towns Muang Et and Muang Ven—both relatively unscathed by the preceding warfare, and thus with intact sociopolitical structures—were elevated to the rank of *phaya* (the title for lower aristocrats and local rulers), and their respective territories officially declared the seventh and eighth 'Houaphan' at the territorial expense of Xieng Kho and Sam Neua (Boutin 1937, 71; see Figure 2). The system of local *phaya*

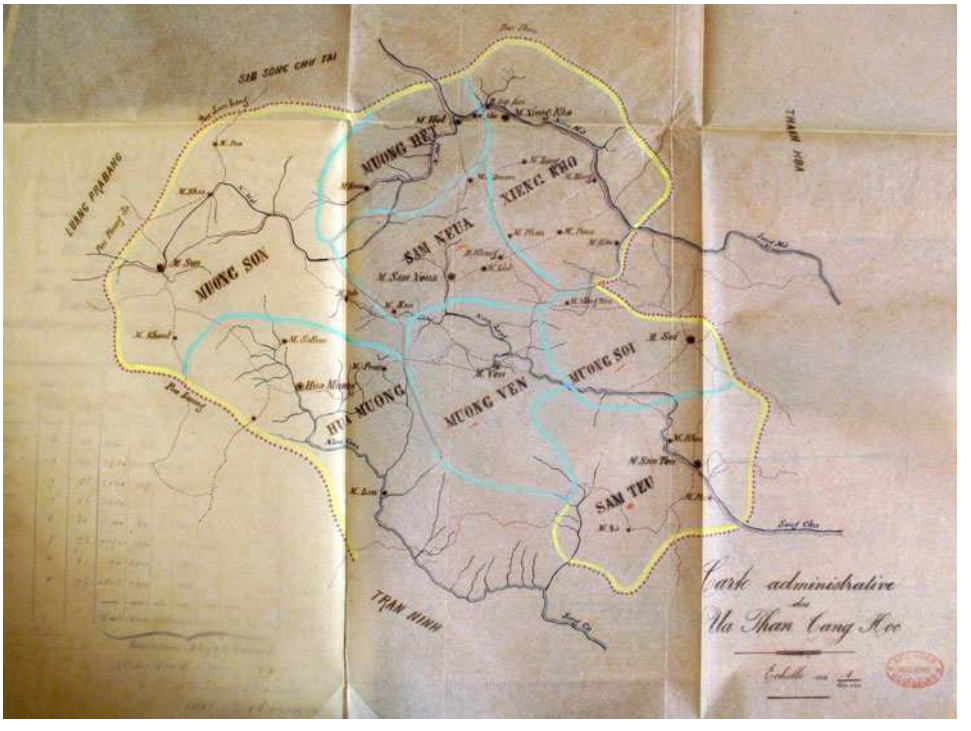


**Figure 2** Houaphan Still United in Early 1896.
*Source*: Monographie du territoire des Ua phan thang hoc, ANOM, GGI 26509.

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authority was later adopted by the French to strengthen Lao hegemony in Houaphan, with co-opted Lao elites acting as tax collectors for the French.

In 1893, the French replaced Siam as self-declared protector power in the uplands and claimed the Lao territories on the eastern bank of the Mekong—the river and main artery of the Lao now a border. Houaphan became an internal frontier space between the protectorates of Luang Prabang, Annam and Tonkin. As Stuart-Fox (1995) observed, French control of Lao territories was part of the colonial strategy to 'pacify' the kingdom of Annam and the unruly mountainous hinterlands. In particular, the upland regions of Thanh Hoá were notorious for insurrections against the colonial administration—the famous Cần Vương ('Aid the Emperor') movement during the 1880s and 90s—with the adjacent mountains of Houaphan impenetrable zones of refuge (Fourniau 2002; Robequain 1929).

To maintain peace and order in Houaphan, the French colonial administration discussed two solutions that represented two different strategic interests and loyalties. The French in Annam, concerned with the pacification of the upland frontier in Thanh Hoá province, preferred the integration of the eastern 'Houaphans' into Annam under the control of a strong military post. The French in Luang Prabang entertained close relations with the Lao king since Auguste Pavie had stood by his side when a combined Ho and Tai army attacked the city in 1887. They opted for a Lao solution, namely the integration of the entire territory of Houaphan into the kingdom of Luang Prabang. Both parties drew on alleged historical rights to Luang Prabang and Hué respectively.

The French perception of the complex sociocultural setting of Houaphan can be interpreted as a specific form of mimesis linked to divergent ideas and models of 'the state'. State-mimesis in colonial Indochina was a 'production of a world with relation to another world' (Gebauer & Wulf 1995, 9), definitely with recourse to European state principles, but also in relation to two other models of governance, namely the 'indigenous states' of the Lao and Vietnamese, with their specific forms of sociopolitical organisation. The result of this colonial hermeneutics (see Todorov 1984)—which seemed necessary in the context of colonial politics of association (Lanessan 1889; Betts 2005)—was 'a twilight zone of multiple, indeterminate configurations of power and authority' (Hansen & Stepputat 2006, 302), configurations that implied flexibility and inherent contradictions.

In Luang Prabang, the French Commissar Vacle suggested copying the Siamese model of upland governance in Houaphan. He argued that the authority of the king and viceroy of Luang Prabang was supported 'by their presence in the Siamese milieu', and by their ability to make the population believe that Bangkok operated on behalf of the Lao people. Although 'real authority' remained in the hands of the Siamese, the king of Luang Prabang held considerable prestige and authority in his kingdom, and the French would merely replace Bangkok in its role as protector.[6] In a similar vein, the French in Annam evoked the idea of the benevolent Vietnamese king caring for the 'uncivilised' people in the mountains (Lemire 1894).

However, for the French in the old Asian imperial cities the upland margins remained 'zones of unpredictability at the edges of discursive stability, where contradictory discourses overlap[ped], or where discrepant kinds of meaning-making converge[d]' (Tsing 1994, 279). The French struggled hard to make sense of the local sociopolitical configurations that included contingent—'anarchic', from the colonial perspective—factors like the remnants of the Cần Vương, the Black Flags, and local Khmu uprisings. For the French, most hostilities were associated with 'pirates', meaning 'bandits', categorised mainly with regard to either their non-Tai/Lao identity or to their geographical origin in China—'*pirates xa et des pirates chinois*'[7] according to French geographer Robequain (1929, 122).

## Trouble in Sam Tai: Interethnic Tensions and the Division of Houaphan (1894–96)

The Tai Deng ('Red Tai') from Thanh Hoá had taken advantage of the chaotic situation and occupied the rice fields that were left by Lao fleeing from the various aggressions towards the region of Luang Prabang. Muang Soi in particular became a stronghold of the Tai Deng, and remained closely linked to other upland Tai *muang* of Thanh Hoá (Boutin 1937, 93). Besides this, the region remained notorious within the French colonial administration as a zone of refuge for the remaining bands of Vietnamese and Tai militias associated with the remnants of the Cần Vương movement, notably represented by the scattered bands of the Tai leader Cầm Bá Thước (Fourniau 2002). Cầm Bá Thước supported Tôn Thất Thuyết and his anti-French movement and led active resistance in the valleys of upland rivers until the 1890s. Thus, Houaphan constituted an arena of both overlapping spheres of lowland civilisations and variegated sociopolitical entanglements at a local level.

In 1894, a Khmu village next to the Lao *muang* of Sam Tai demanded payment of a large sum of silver ingots from their neighbours—money that had been due for many years since those very Khmu were recruited by the Lao as mercenaries against unspecified 'Ho Chinese'. With the request being declined again and again, the *lasa quan*,[8] fourth-ranking notable of Sam Tai, yet of Khmu origin, turned his allegiance away from the Lao. Instead, he incited his fellow Khmu to attack the debtors. After recruiting some Hmong fighters from the surrounding mountains, the *lasa quan* attacked the combined Lao and Vietnamese militia—the *garde indigène* installed by the French—in Sam Tai. When the headman of a Hmong village died in the skirmishes, his followers called for revenge and instigated a general uprising of the local Hmong clans.[9]

The French, still wary of a potential upflaring of the Cần Vương, were alarmed. In the discussions about the situation in the upland frontier of 'Indochina' the divergent positions within the French administration became evident. In 1894 Léon Boulloche, Résident Supérieur of Annam (yet later one of the most influential advocates of the inclusion of Houaphan into Laos) suggested the attachment of Sam Tai to Thanh Hoá. This would enable the French authorities to have more efficient control of the upper Song Chu (Nam Sam in Laos).[10] To enable more efficient control of the

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mountains, parts of the former Trấn Man were attached to Thanh Hoá in 1894. Sam Tai became a military post under the direction of Jules Cuvelier—a military official with experience in counterinsurgency against the Cần Vương—in response to the mobilisation of the *lasa quan* and the subsequent quarrels between Lao and Hmong.

The dependence of the French commissar in Houaphan on Cuvelier's *garde indigène* was particularly evident when the latter withdrew his troops from Sam Tai after Gouverneur Général Rodier's decision to reunite Houaphan under Lao authority in January 1895 (Breazeale 2002, 316). What had started as a local dispute over due payment was now escalating along ethnic lines. After the Hmong had retaliated against the Lao for the killing of one of their headmen, the Lao of Sam Tai countered by burning down Hmong villages. Meanwhile, the Tai Deng remained suspicious of Lao claims for political hegemony and land control. In February 1895, a few Tai Deng notables stole French arms to fight against their Lao neighbours, the missionary Verbier becoming a tragic victim of the violent escalation provoked by 'several Tai and even Lao chiefs'.[11] In reaction to the death of the missionary, Cuvelier marched his troops back to Sam Tai and subdued the hostilities.

Adding another level to the colonial entanglements, the vicariate of 'Chau Laos' ('District Laos', then part of the *vicariat apostolique* of 'Tonkin Oriental'; see Degeorge 1926) straddled the border between Houaphan and Thanh Hoá. The French missionaries were particularly active among the Tai Deng population, thus aggravating the rivalries between them and the Buddhist Lao.[12] The Tai Deng stronghold of Muang Soi, in particular, was a target of missionary activity directed from the regional centre of the *Mission Étrangère* in Hoi Xuan (Thanh Hoá). Ironically, the very Tai Deng leader who had previously invited the French missionaries into his realm—perhaps as a strategy to strengthen his local prestige vis-à-vis Lao-Buddhist influence—had organised the attack on Verbier. The missionaries blamed Cầm Bá Thước for having incited the Tai Deng to steal weapons and money from the mission.[13]

The French administration feared that the regional sociopolitical tensions would inevitably result in large-scale rebellions and 'anarchy'. Therefore, in order to appease at least the Khmu population, Vacle suggested that the French—besides strengthening military presence in the upland region—take over the compensation of the Khmu as requested by the *lasa quan*. Actually, the *lasa quan* accepted an advance payment, and apparently the Khmu peaceably returned to their fields. The *lasa quan* even provided the French with information about the remnants of Cầm Bá Thước's band, with whose partisans he previously attempted to ally himself.[14] For the following years the sources remain silent about the *lasa quan*, and the Khmu only appear as rather passive *corvée* labour (Figure 3). A few sources suggest occasional resistance until 1901 (Robequain 1929, 121) but it is unclear whether in those cases the *lasa quan* was in charge again, or rather perhaps some internal rivals, who might have resented his compromises with the French and the Lao.[15]

Notwithstanding the co-optation of the *lasa quan* by the French, the situation in 1895–6 remained tense because of the alleged lack of order and the ongoing power abuses by Lao 'indigenous functionaries' against the 'Meos' and 'Khas'.[16] While



**Figure 3** Colonial Representation of the 'Tai-Kha' Hierarchy, here Tai Deng and Khmu in Early Twentieth-Century Sam Neua.
*Source*: Foropon 1927, 12.

Commissar Hardy ascertained Lao authority and the termination of Vietnamese rebel activity in the northern part of Houaphan (Muang Et and Xieng Kho), not least due to the collaboration of local Lao notables, he was still concerned about the situation in

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Sam Tai, where additional military forces would be required: 'At this moment, [the population] still challenge our authority'.[17]

Hardy was replaced in 1896 by the experienced administrator Jean Monpeyrat, who immediately started to install new Lao *phaya*, confirming the Lao-French collaboration with elaborate oaths of allegiance similar to the ones discussed by Salemink (2003) in the context of the *montagnards* of the Central Highlands. In his last report, Hardy summed up that the situation in Houaphan was favourable to French interests, with the exception of Muang Soi and Sam Tai, because of the remaining partisans of dispersed rebel groups who waited for an occasion to take up arms again.[18] Hardy's reports only confirmed the concerns of the French authorities in Annam that the hinterland of Thanh Hoá continued to be a security risk for the administration. They argued that the king of Luang Prabang had no control over the Lao *phaya* in Houaphan, who allegedly incited the peasants to violent resistance.

The general climate was thus in favour of the hardliners in Thanh Hoá, who argued for the urgency of military control of the Houaphan territories adjacent to Thanh Hoá under the command of the experienced Inspecteur Cuvelier and his predominantly Vietnamese *garde indigène*. Pursuing the interests of the French resident in Thanh Hoá, Gouverneur Général Rousseau, in an *arrêté* on 29 August 1896, declared the *muang* of Sam Tai, Sam Neua and Muang Soi to be part of Annam. This division of the Houaphan *muang* seemed easy on paper for the French administrators in Hanoi, who considered the single 'Houaphans' as distinct administrative units—as *huyên*—ignoring kinship and tributary entanglements.

Monpeyrat and Vacle were unable to convince the Gouverneur Général of the value of keeping Houaphan's territorial integrity and connection to Luang Prabang. Vacle argued that it was the very division of Houaphan which caused the local unrest in 1894 and that the region would remain unstable if not placed under the authority of the king of Luang Prabang but instead relegated under Vietnamese domination.[19] Monpeyrat indicated more than a year later that the people of Sam Tai and Sam Neua '*sont des Laos de même race, de même religion, parlant la même langue, en un mot les mêmes Laos que ceux qui habitent les bords du Mékong*'.[20] Vacle's successor in Luang Prabang, Luce, stated in 1898 that in spite of the 'multiplicity of races' and the Siamese invasions, 'Houaphan has been always forming a whole'.[21]

Here the French in Luang Prabang put forward the idea of a pluri-ethnic frontier people, united through historical experiences and a 'cultural' link to the Lao kingdom, where all the different 'races' live together under the benevolent authority of a Lao Buddhist king (see Archaimbault 1964; Jonsson 2014). However, in 1896 this position did not stand a chance against the French in Annam, who stressed the political and military requirements of the upland frontier, constantly recalling the recent history of revolt in the mountainous hinterland of Thanh Hoá. While Cuvelier indeed managed to initially 'pacify' the region, soon new sociopolitical dynamics among the population of Houaphan unsettled the French administration.

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## Houaphan Divided (1896–1903): French Frontier Politics and Local Responses

Even if there were divergent views about the political question of Houaphan among the French, one aspect was beyond discussion: the need for frontier demarcation between Laos and Annam, not least to clearly divide human and economic resources and the responsibilities and claims of the regional colonial authorities (Gay 1989, 205; Breazeale 2002).[22] Since ambiguous overlapping spheres of sovereignty were not acceptable to the Europeans (see Thongchai 1995), the question remained if Houaphan, in total, or in part, would be attached to the protectorate of Luang Prabang, to Annam or to Tonkin. While the French in Annam downplayed the cultural and economic relations between the Lao *muang* of Houaphan and Luang Prabang, the French in Laos overstated the 'Lao-ness' of Houaphan, ignoring the specific multi-ethnic configuration in the uplands.

Cuvelier pressed the résident supérieur of Annam to insist on the integration of at least Sam Tai and Muang Soi into Thanh Hoá, not least because of the relations among the Tai Deng communities in upland Thanh Hoá and eastern Houaphan. Cuvelier, together with his brother who ran a trading business in Haiphong, followed commercial interests, too: valuable forest goods such as rhinoceros horn were in great demand in the lowlands, and Cuvelier attempted to take control of this lucrative business, trying to push aside Chinese traders, and direct the flow of goods away from Bangkok. In his detailed historical account of the Lao-Vietnamese frontier, Bernard Gay (1989, 208) hints at certain 'machinations' by Cuvelier, who apparently convinced some notables—probably Tai Deng—in Sam Tai to take sides with Thanh Hoá instead of Luang Prabang.

In the following years, Cuvelier—elevated to the rank of *délégué* in 1898—established a strict regime and enforced tax and *corvée* regulations. Although in 1897–8 he encouraged Lao resettlement in Sam Tai and Muang Soi,[23] the Lao on both sides of the new border remained suspicious about his military rule, tax policy and close relations with the Tai Deng. Meanwhile, the new Commissar of the Lao part of Houaphan, Monpeyrat, warned against an impending alienation of the Lao population due to Cuvelier's rigid policy. Monpeyrat had worked in Son La (Tonkin) before and was considered by his superiors to be a far-sighted administrator who knew how to communicate with local powerbrokers to influence them in favour of the French cause.

After the first reports about large-scale migrations from the Annamese to the Lao part of Houaphan appeared in 1899, year by year several hundred families and sometimes even whole village communities moved across the Lao-Annamite frontier, crossing the old frontier region. While the French commissars in Muang Son, the *chef lieu* of the Lao Houaphan,[24] assigned rice fields to the newcomers, Cuvelier in Thanh Hoá protested against the loss of *inscrits* (taxable population) and demanded the return of the Lao refugees. Thus, instead of colonial cooperation, Houaphan witnessed a heated conflict between Cuvelier and his counterparts allegiant to Luang Prabang, with the latter using the Lao migrations as argument for resuming the

question of Houaphan's territorial integrity and eventual re-integration into Laos. Indeed, most Lao notables in the Annamese Houaphans resented Cuvelier's rigid administration and started to lobby for a general return of their *muang* to Laos (Boutin 1937; Gay 1989).

One reason for the migrations was obvious: Cuvelier had calculated the number of *inscrits* by himself, backed by a Vietnamese militia of 100 men, whereas the French commissars in Muang Son left this task to Lao notables—who gave lower numbers to reduce the general tax burden for the respective *muang*, not least to keep some scope for personal tax and *corvée* demands. Therefore, the population in Sam Tai, Sam Neua and Muang Soi endured a double burden since some notables insisted on 'traditional' services on top of those dedicated to the French *délégué*. One result was a mass exodus of Lao peasants westward, while numerous Khmu villages moved deeper into the forested mountains to escape demands from both the French and the Lao (Foropon 1927). For the Lao notables in the 'Houaphan Annamite' this meant the loss of their base of wealth and prestige.

Besides this strategy of voting with one's feet, another example of local agency was writing petitions to competing external powers. Indeed, this variant of negotiating with the outside world by addressing superior authorities formed part of the repertoire of Southeast Asian political ritual—and also included the spiritual realm (see Jonsson 2014). Upland powerbrokers perceived different French functionaries as having inconsistent interests, and tried to play them off against one another. As with the case of spontaneous migrations, petition writing constitutes a form of historical agency on the part of upland political individuals, and calls for closer attention to individual actors, their specific intentions and room to manoeuvre.

The years 1902 and 1903 witnessed a flood of complaints about the Cuvelier administration, sent to Cuvelier's counterparts in the Lao part of Houaphan. In a letter to the French commissar in Muang Son, the notables of Sam Neua questioned the decision to attach their realm to Annam, asked for Luang Prabang's protection and expressed their fear of Cuvelier. The notables of Muang Ven, for instance, complained about arbitrary fines and arrests ordered by the *délégué* of Sam Tai. In particular, they resented the penalties imposed for trading with Luang Prabang and Cho Bo (Tonkin) (apparently Cuvelier was eager to control the trade and direction of forest goods towards Annam) and for any contact with Muang Son. Another complaint referred to extra charges on the tax because of allegations that they had produced *piastres* with inadequate silver content, and because of heavy labour demands for the maintenance of the post of Sam Tai.[25]

The Deputy Commissar of Muang Son, Plunian, somewhat uncritically took up the content of these letters in order to attack Cuvelier's 'terror' in his correspondence with the Résident Supérieur in Luang Prabang. In a letter to the Résident Supérieur in Laos, Mahé, he summed up the aforementioned allegations, and accused the brother of Cuvelier's concubine—probably a notable of Sam Tai and beneficiary of this 'traditional' clientelist relationship—and his relatives of abusing their power and prompting the population to seek protection from Muang Son. In addition, he

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mentioned that Cuvelier's brother controlled upland-lowland trade and extracted goods from the people by misusing the title *commissaire de gouvernement* and taking advantage of the military presence of the *garde indigène*.[26]

The mass exodus of the population of the eastern territories of Houaphan troubled both the *résidents* in Laos and Annam. Already in December 1902, the Résident Supérieur in Annam, Auvergne, indicated his worries about the situation in Sam Tai and blamed the administrative differences between the two parts of Houaphan for the problems. In principle he shared the conclusion of his counterpart in Luang Prabang, saying that Houaphan must be united again under a single directorate. However, he opted for the inclusion of Houaphan into Annam.[27] Meanwhile, Cuvelier defended himself in a letter to Moulié, the Provincial Résident of Thanh Hoá, responding to the allegations, emphasising that the *piastres* of the local notables were indeed often of bad quality, and that his policy was consistent with colonial *and* local laws. He added that Lao notables of Muang Son—backed by the French commissar—had incited their fellowmen in the eastern *huyên* to migrate.[28]

Auvergne accused the Lao of being lazy, and insisted that Cuvelier's tax and *corvée* regime was justified. He suggested that the whole of Houaphan should be attached to Thanh Hoá, pointed out the recent violent history of the uplands, where 'the rebellious chiefs sought asylum', and added that the various enmities between different 'small chiefs' required a strong joint Franco-Vietnamese military control of the region.[29] However, Auvergne's arguments fell on deaf ears when received by Secrétaire Général Boulloche, right hand of the Gouverneur Général and a respected authority within the colonial administration. While he supported the idea of transferring Sam Tai to Thanh Hoá in 1894 while acting as Résident Supérieur of Annam (see above), he now argued that the full attachment of the whole of Houaphan to Annam would repeat the mistake of the incorporation into the Vietnamese kingdom of a people 'with different language, customs, and traditions, and still governed according to the Code of Vientiane'.[30] In this dissension within the colonial elite, the 'culturalist' arguments of Vacle and Luce had returned with a vengeance.

## Conclusion: French Functionaries, '*Chefs Indigènes*' and Frontier Frictions

The decision to return all *muang* of Houaphan to Laos was signed by the Gouverneur Général in an *arrêté* on 15 June 1903. Shortly afterwards, the new Commissar of Houaphan, Wartelle, reported that the (former) 'Houaphans of Annam' were still somehow unsettled but that the chaotic migrations had ceased. Wartelle concluded after his first trip through all eight *muang* of Houaphan: 'The incorporated Houaphans are in a state of happiness; I was cordially received wherever I passed by'.[31] The French had strengthened their relationship with the Lao *phaya*, who benefited from the colonial restoration of their authority and sources of wealth, including the privilege of tax collection.

During my oral history research in Houaphan in 2014, it was actually the *phaya* system that was highlighted by my interlocutors as a key aspect of that time. One Tai

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Deng elder pointed out that French backing had led to power abuses and excessive tax demands by some local notables. Here, the *phaya* system appears directly linked to the anti-colonial struggle that the older people in Houaphan remember well. Besides, the social unrest of the late nineteenth century is part of local collective memory, known as *sek cheuang* ('cheuang warfare') or—combined with the upheaval that originated in China—*sek cheuang sek hò*. About the division of Houaphan at the beginning of the French administration, however, my informants had only vague knowledge.

Ironically, the initial reason for the mass migrations towards Muang Son, namely exploitative power relations, ended up becoming a result of these migrations. As a side effect of the attachment of Houaphan to Laos, the Lao found themselves strongly backed by the French, who were determined to establish political order and economic development through *phaya* authority in a region that used to be 'a cosmopolitan space of cultural contention' (Badenoch & Shinsuke 2013, 60; see Evrard 2007 and Sprenger 2006 for Northwest Laos). A rigid power hierarchy prevailed that provoked various forms of local unrest in the decades to come, and, finally, contributed to the emergence of the fledgeling Communist movement of Laos in this very province (Evans 2002; Gunn 1990).[32]

We have seen how frontier encounters and interactions have triggered socio-political dynamics and shaped new configurations in the Lao-Vietnamese mountainous borderlands. French colonial functionaries experimented with indigenous forms of governance, thereby integrating and transforming elements of political ritual in Houaphan. Various upland societies perceived the French as new powerful actors and —rather than evading the emergent colonial state—tried to forge alliances in order to strengthen their own local authority. The integration of the French into the complex sociopolitical entanglements corresponded with the diffusion of European governmentality and, finally, administrative enclosure. Tapping external power was indeed a risky endeavour for local powerbrokers (see Leach 1954; Davis 2011).

It is James Scott's indisputable merit to have highlighted the historical agency of upland societies in Southeast Asia. Far more than merely the subjects of civilisational expansion and enclosure, uplanders developed various social, political, economic and cultural strategies to negotiate the waning influence of external powers or, in Scott's words, states. However, the preceding case studies from Houaphan demonstrate less a 'state repelling' (Scott 2009, 178) attitude by upland rulers than deliberate attempts to create new relations and/or to alter the oscillating local power configurations (as in the case of the *lasa quan* of Sam Tai). Negotiations and petitions constitute strategic alternatives to rebellion and flight. However, even if viable, they come at a certain cost.

My historical analysis focused mainly on local rulers facing the new set of options and constraints emerging through the French imperial expansion. This Lao/Tai elite perspective can be at least partially supplemented by discussions of the strategies of intermediaries like the *lasa quan* of Sam Tai, who attained a position 'founded on a combination of their own linguistic and administrative skills, and their ability to

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maintain relations in both the upland and the lowland worlds' (Badenoch & Shinsuke 2013, 47). The views and actions of social groups such as peasants from different ethnic backgrounds are more difficult to come by with regard to written sources. Only when their agency bothered the political elite and provoked administrative confusion (as in the case of the migration dynamics after the French border decision of 1896) did their actions generate a paper trail.

Yet we find a clear picture of a sociopolitical landscape inhabited by people who maintain their specific, locally rooted and culturally informed agency (see Michaud & Forsyth 2011) marked by strategies of rapprochement and appropriation. For the Lao notables in Houaphan, at first the French constituted merely a new power in the region—not fundamentally different from the former Siamese and Vietnamese rulers, yet apparently more powerful, technologically advanced and efficient. The Lao of Houaphan approached them as they had done previous powers: either looking for strategic alliances and advantages or refusing submission through armed resistance or flight.

These frontier encounters demonstrate how the colonial administration was not perceived as a monolithic state apparatus but as a collection of individual and unpredictable actors representing an external source of power and authority. It was possible to communicate and negotiate, and to shape local political configurations through strategic alliances with them. Mainly when the French ignored traditional clientelist conventions and did not reciprocate sufficiently in the eyes of notables on different levels of the local political hierarchy, local unrest emerged and often provoked violent responses.

In such situations the French were usually caught on the wrong foot when suddenly parts of the population were incited by displeased notables to defy colonial authority. Unlikely alliances such as that between the *lasa quan* of Sam Tai and the Hmong were established, and entailed a dynamic that threatened established political hierarchies. As soon as the French intervened with their *garde indigène* and took sides in such situations, new alliances emerged which tied the colonialists more closely to specific groups and/or drove other groups towards open anti-colonial resistance. Yet most frequently the people at the upland frontier opted for the strategy of migration, either deeper into the mountains or towards other regions with available land for agriculture.

The local responses to the new border cutting through Houaphan are particularly telling examples of how colonial subjects perceived and negotiated arbitrary administrative practices, sometimes even playing different actors within the colonial administration against one another. Intra-colonial power struggles correlated with competing indigenous elites and local powerbrokers. The resulting entanglements cannot be reduced to mere interethnic antagonism. Indeed, ethnicity seems to play only a subordinate role in the specific sociopolitical configurations of Houaphan at the beginning of French rule.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Acknowledgements

I thank the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology (Halle, Germany) for supporting my research in the Archives nationales d'outre-mer (ANOM) in Aix-en-Provence (France) in 2012, and for giving me the opportunity to organise a workshop on Asian borderlands in 2013. The Global South Studies Center at the University of Cologne (Germany) provided the facilities to write this article and, what is more, to manage this Special Issue. I would also like to thank the two anonymous *TAPJA* reviewers for their helpful comments.

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## Notes

[1] In the Archives nationales d'outre-mer (ANOM) in Aix-en-Provence, I consulted mainly documents from the Gouvernment Général de l'Indochine and the Résidence Supérieur du Laos (hereafter GGI and RSL).

[2] *Muang* is translated here as polity or principality (see Condominas 1980 and Grabowsky 2004 for discussions of this complex sociopolitical concept).

[3] Various non-Buddhist groups such as the Tai Deng (10,443), the Khmu (2422), and the Hmong (1284) constituted the majority in 1896 (*Monographie du territoire des Ua phan thang hoc*, ANOM, GGI 26509). This ratio remained stable up to the 1920s (17,500 Lao out of 40,000; see Foropon 1927, 95). During the Indochina Wars and after the communist revolution of 1975, however, a considerable part of the Lao population migrated either to the lowlands or abroad. According to the most recent census of Houaphan (2007), the Lao constitute only 26.7 per cent of the population (75,012 out of 280,938), less than the upland Tai category (80,782, including Tai Deng, Tai Dam, Tai Khao) and only slightly more than the Hmong (68,289). The populations of the Mon-Khmer-speaking groups number as follows: Khmu 28,879; Phong 13,517; and Xingmun 8140.

[4] *Trấn* is an old administrative unit of Chinese origin, which refers to a semi-autonomous peripheral territory or a military protectorate (Davis 2011, 19). The Lao *muang* of Houaphan were called *huyên* (district) according to Vietnamese convention. It should be mentioned that Houaphan is the only Lao province whose rivers are not tributaries of the Mekong and instead run towards the Vietnamese lowlands (Boutin 1937, 77).

[5] The name Houaphan ('head of a thousand') here refers both to the single administrative units constituting the confederation, and to the confederation of Houaphan itself—similar to the examples of Sipsong Panna ('twelve units of thousand ricefields') in Yunnan, and Sipsong Chau Tai ('twelve Tai polities') in Northwest Vietnam that formed upland Tai confederations as well (Rispaud 1937; Grabowsky 2004). Both the confederation of Houaphan and the single 'Houaphans' are called *muang*, referring to the different levels of Lao *muang* organisation.

[6] Letter by Vacle to the Gouverneur Général, 22 November 1894 (ANOM, GGI 20871).

[7] See also Michaud (2015) on French military ethnography.

[8] This title is a rare example of the combination of 'Indianised' and 'Sinicised' (Coedès 1968; Arnason 1997) politico-administrative terms, since *lasa* is derived from the Sankrit term *rājā*, and *quan* is the Chinese (and Vietnamese) word for 'mandarin'. In a similar vein, village chiefs in pre-colonial and colonial Houaphan held either the title '*nai ban*' or '*quan ban*', the latter term indicating the influence of Vietnamese bureaucratic organisation and terminology.

[9] Report by Vacle to the Gouverneur Général, 12 April 1895 (ANOM, GGI 20749).

[10] Letter by Boulloche to the Gouverneur Général, 23 August 1894 (ANOM, GGI 26509).

[11] Telegram by commissar Hardy to the Gouverneur Général, 3 April 1895 (ANOM, GGI 20749; see as well Degeorge 1926).

[12] One of them, Antoine Bourlet, provided insightful ethnographic material about the Tai and Lao of the region (see for example Bourlet 1906; Michaud 2007, 142–145).

[13] The archives of the Missions étrangères de Paris (MEP) hold a detailed account of the attack, written by Verbier's colleague Soubeyre who was able to escape (MEP archives, Dossier No. 2017, Jean André Soubeyre).

[14] Moreover, the *lasa quan* denounced some of the Lao responsible for the retaliatory assaults on the Hmong (Report by Vacle to the Gouverneur Général, 12 April 1895, ANOM, GGI 20749). Note the observation by Davis (2011, 20) that borderlands may generate both rebels and potential allies for counterinsurgency.

[15] Rivalry and dissension between ethnic communities—rather than within them—is a recurrent issue in the French colonial sources. However, decisions about alliances and oppositions with neighbouring ethnic groups are often a function of conflict internal to the elites of a given ethnic group. I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for this thoughtful comment.

[16] Political report by Commissar Grand, Luang Prabang, 10 August 1897 (ANOM, GGI 20721).

[17] Telegram by Commissar Hardy in Muang Et to the Résident Supérieur in Luang Prabang, 18 December 1895 (ANOM, GGI 20754).

[18] Letter by ex-Commissar Hardy to the Gouverneur Général, 26 February 1896 (ANOM, GGI 26509).

[19] Vacle mentioned that Pavie himself had successfully protested on behalf of the king of Luang Prabang against 'this mutilation of his kingdom' (Letter by Vacle to the Gouverneur Général, 24 June 1896, ANOM, GGI 26509).

[20] '…are Lao of the same race, the same religion, speaking the same language, in one word the same Lao as the ones who settle the Mekong banks'.

[21] Letter by Luce to the Commandant Supérieur in Luang Prabang, 11 February 1898 (ANOM, GGI 26509).

[22] See as well Grabowsky 2003 for the comparable case of the Lü *muang* of Chiang Khaeng—located in the borderlands of Laos, China, Burma and Siam—that constituted a bone of contention between the French and British colonial interests in the late nineteenth century.

[23] In fact Cuvelier granted titles to the Tai Deng chiefs and thus officially replaced the former Lao notables as *phaya*. Lao peasants were allowed to cultivate available land but their political influence was restricted.

[24] Namely Monpeyrat (1896–99); Macey (1899–1901); Wartelle (1901–10); and Wartelle's substitute, Plunian (1902–3). In 1905, the *chef lieu* was moved to the more centrally located Sam Neua, the present provincial capital of Houaphan.

[25] Letters of notables from Sam Neua (1 July 1902) ; Muang Ven (17 March 1902); and Houa Xieng (4 November 1902) to the commissariat in Muang Son. I also found letters in Tai script by Tai Deng notables, the *phaya* of Muang Soi and other Tai *muang* such as Muang Kaya and Muang Mine that adopted an intermediary position between the *délégué* and the Lao notables of Houaphan, yet were loyal to the French (all letters in ANOM, GGI 26507).

[26] Letter by Commissar Plunian to the Résident Supérieur of Laos, 30 April 1903 (ANOM, RSL E3)

[27] Letter by Résident Supérieur Auvergne to the Secretaire Général, 26 December 1902 (ANOM, GGI 26507).

[28] Letter by Cuvelier to Résident Moulié, 22 January 1903 (ANOM, GGI 26507).

[29] Letter by Auvergne to the Gouverneur Général, 24 April 1903 (ANOM, GGI 26507).

[30] Letter by Secrétaire Général Boulloche to the Gouverneur Général, 8 May 1903 (ANOM, GGI 26507).

[31] Political reports by Wartelle, June and August 1903 (ANOM, RSL F1).

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[32] Houaphan and Phongsaly (a Sino-Lao upland frontier) constituted the first 'liberated zones' in Laos during the First Indochina War (1946–54). Houaphan, in particular, was a keystone for the Việt Minh's strategies to connect and control the 'Indochinese' mountainous hinterlands (see Goscha 2003). Hundreds of Vietnamese cadres and soldiers helped build up the Lao Communist party and army under the leadership of Kaysone Phomvihane. Vietnamese propaganda denouncing the French colonialists and their local Lao 'feudal' collaborators appealed to marginalised ethnic groups. In official Lao historiography, Houaphan is today considered the 'birthplace of the Lao PDR' (see Tappe 2013).

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