Memories of Chao Anou: New History and Post-Socialist Ideology

by Ryan Ford[1]

Abstract

This article follows the development and rise to prominence of the history of the last king of Vientiane, Chao Anouvong. The importance of this King to the Lao state was demonstrated last year when President Choummaly Sayasone presided over the official ceremony to consecrate the new statue in the city. The Lao PDR now officially endorses the history of four heroic kings; however, it was not always as comfortable with the subject of kings. In the historiography, Chao Anou has been seen as a king who upheld as many different kinds of values and politics as there were scholars to write about him. I pay particular attention to the work of Mayoury and Pheuiphan Ngaosrivathana, two Lao scholars who are most responsible for remolding Chao Anou for the present. Finally, I consider the space afforded for royal history in the nominally socialist state.

Introduction

Looking into the past is always a self-reflective moment. As the mind traces back over the struggles of the previous age, a double identification takes place as one sees oneself a part of that time even as the old conflict is renewed in the trials of the present. So it is with the history of the last king of pre-colonial Vientiane, Chao Anouvong, who fought a war against Bangkok in 1827-1828, which today holds particular resonance. In the words of the event's principal scholars, Mayoury and Pheuiphan Ngaosrivathana, the war "left lasting, vivid scars on the soul and spirit of the people in the region."[2] Both previous members of the Foreign Ministry of the Lao P.D.R., the Ngaosrivathanas still see the influence of a war, nearly two centuries old, in the relations of Laos and Thailand, whose politics are "still spoiled by miscues, misrepresentations, and conflicting assertions regarding the 1827 conflict."[3] Thus their history of Chao Anou is a splice in time they call, "moving backward and forward."[4] For them, the war represents an Ur-text for Lao-Thai relations as "virtually every book on Lao or Thai history covers the 1827 conflict to some extent."[5] Moreover, the Ngaosrivathanas' work on this period

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[2] Mayoury Ngaosrivathana and Pheuiphan Ngaosrivathana, *Paths to Conflagration: Fifty years of Diplomacy and Warfare in Laos*, *Thailand*, *and Vietnam*, *1778-1828* (Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1998) p. 13, (hereafter cited as *Paths*).

[3] ibid.

[4] ibid, p. 14.

[5] Mayoury Ngaosrivathan and Pheuiphan Ngaosrivathana, Vietnamese Source Materials concerning the 1827 Conflict between the Court of Siam and the Lao Principalities, vol. 1 (Tokyo: The Center for East Asian Cultural Studies for Unesco, 2001) p. 30, (hereafter cited as *VSM*).

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in Lao history has itself become the basis for a new kind of historiography in the nominally socialist state of Laos. Their work has gained wide acceptance in Laos and abroad. While in many cases other scholars have attenuated their most extreme points, the broad outlines have remained, being uncritically accepted by a surprising array of historians. The Ngaosrivathanas' level of scholarship certainly inspires confidence, as they have mastered a massive amount of sources in no less than six languages after decades of research. Yet this new Lao scholarship, which focuses on the war of Chao Anou, in its unique way of remembering, is, at its core, as much about forgetting the dismemberment of the old Lao kingdom of Lan Xang more than a century before. Along the way, in its vitriolic scorn of the Thai, it shapes a new ideology that I argue has since been accepted by the Lao P.D.R., as the state undergoes the turbulent transition to global integration into the world's capital markets. With a longer view of Lao historiography it becomes clear that the story of Chao Anou, which (in its modern form) has been prominent since Lao independence in 1953, is more often only a means to tell the story of the present.

This study will explore the issues of developing Lao scholarship and its relation to the state by focusing on the historical memory of Chao Anouvong. It will begin with a review of Lao historiography, surveying the field of modern nationalist history prior to 1975 and following with what came after the transition to a socialist state. From here we will move to consider the thought of Mayoury and Pheuiphan Ngaosrivathana in order to explain the rise to prominence of their historiography; many of the issues in modern Lao historiography and nationalism are present in their work. The discussion will begin with their claim to authoritative texts and disputes with other historians. Then we will explore the memories which anchor and define the history in the heroic character of Chao Anou and the cruelty of his enemies. Behind this striking violence is an alternate history of over a century of warfare among the dismembered Lan Xang *muang* which is antithetical to the nation. The study will close with a consideration of the interpretation's warm, if not halting reception by the Lao P.D.R. This investigation will suggest an additional dimension to a number of scholars' ongoing research into the Lao government's rehabilitation of tradition, as well as suggesting a quiet limit to that revival.

As a brief introduction to the subject, Chao Anouvong was born in 1769, the same year in which Ayutthaya was destroyed. In less than a decade Vientiane would be attacked and come under the suzerainty of a revitalized Siam. The youngest of three brothers, Prince Anou served in the Siamese army as a commander fighting against the Burmese. At the battle of Chiang Saen Prince Anou proved his military skill as he helped turn back the last major Burmese threat to Siam. In that same year of 1804, Anou succeed to the throne of Vientiane with the approval of the throne in Bangkok. He ruled in accordance with the kingly ideal of *chakravartin*, most notably by renewing the *sangha* and rebuilding religious structures around the city. He was said to have excellent relations with Rama II and that it was only when the latter died that conflict with Siam began. King Anou launched a full-scale war against Siam in early 1827 that led to his eventual defeat and capture. The surviving Lao kingdoms remained under the power of Siam until the arrival of the French in 1893.

Modern Lao Historiography

Before 1975, in the chaos of civil war less than five history books were published.[6] Dependent as the Royal Lao Government was on uninformed French teachers, no school curriculum was ever developed for teaching Lao history.[7] Given these grim circumstances, Bernard Gay has characterized the elite of the period, not to say the masses, as showing "only slight interest in the study of history."[8] This may be a result of the legacy of French colonial historians, who, as opposed to their special interest in Khmer history, saw Lao history as one of division and disorder. This claim on the Lao was incidentally the basis of French protectorate status.[9] Yet an early effort to alter this prejudice came shortly after independence with the publication of the scholarly volume *La Royaume du Laos*. The former Prime Minister Katay Don Sasorith's contribution offered a study of Lao history as a remedy to the anonymity imposed by the French. Rather he found evidence of a Lao kingdom with a long and glorious history which in sum was greater than its times of uncertainty:

> [A]lthough Lan Xang was divided up at certain periods of its history into several distinct Kingdoms, it never ceased to be unanimously considered, in the eyes at least of its populations, as forming in its entirety one single and same geographical moral entity, if not a political one.[10]

In his inclusion of the nation as an analytical category, Katay wrote of the monarchy, patriarchy and a single ethnic identity as essential aspects. Few scholars to come after him would escape this act of selective memory. Yet, in many ways the individual who has cast his shadow longest over the historical writing of Laos has been the Isan-born scholar Maha Sila Viravong. His masterwork the *History of Laos*, first published in 1955, has been translated and updated many times; it was republished as recently as 2001. By default the study was not made obsolete until well into the socialist period.[11] The story of Chao Anouvong formed the conclusion of the work, which did not include the colonial era.[12] Sila's *History of Laos* presents Chao Anou as the tragic hero of Lao nationalism as

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[6] Mayoury Ngaosrivathana and Pheuiphan Ngaosrivathana, "Lao Historiography and Historians: Case Study of the War between Bangkok and the Lao in 1827," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 20, no. 1 (1989) p. 12-14, (hereafter cited as *LHH*).

[7] Bernard Gay, "Millenarian Movements in Laos, 1895-1936: Depictions by Modern Lao Historians," in *Breaking New Ground in Lao History: Essays on the Seventh to the Twentieth Centuries*, ed. Mayoury Ngaosrivathana and Kennon Breazeale (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2002) p. 281.

[8] Ibid. By this Gay is referring to western-style histories. There is no study of local history production, yet manuscripts continued to be copied well into the mid-20th century.

[9] Martin Stuart-Fox, "The Challenge for Lao Historiography," *Southeast Asia Research* 14, no. 3, (2006) p. 347.

[10] Katay Don Sasorith, "Historical Aspects of Laos," in *Kingdom of Laos* ed. Rene de Berval (Saigon: France-Asie, 1959) p. 28. This originally appeared as a special issue in French in 1956, but was translated into English three years later.

[11] The reviewers have noted their own archival research in Luang Phrabang has yielded some manuscripts specifically written about Chao Anou by local historians which may indicate a wider interest hitherto unknown.

[12] This discussion refers to his original edition, but he continued to update and amend the work every few years. In later editions, Sila advanced the history up to 1946.

he struggles for "national liberation."[13] However, because Chao Anou is ostensibly the hero in this story, he is also blamed for a number of critical mistakes, such as allowing the betrayal of the Lao *Oupharat*, Chao Titsa, and the resistance of the famed Grandma Mo.[14] Other Lao military commanders actually seem more heroic in comparison, such as Phraya Narind who fought valiantly, killed the enemy commander and refused to surrender, preferring death to subservience.[15] The Lao failed to achieve victory as unity was sorely missing; Luang Phrabang, Nan, Phrae, Chiang Mai and Lampang sent nearly 20,000 troops – although they did not assist the Siamese effectively.[16] Chao Ratsavong was betrayed by the elite families of Champassak as they closed the city gates and then hunted him down.[17]

Perhaps the most significant point is that the pathos of the work is readily apparent in its vivid depiction of torture of Anou at the hands of Siam and the razing of Vientiane. In the first post-colonial Lao state, the story of Chao Anou was ubiquitous in the few publications available such as a 1971 seminar on Lao history hosted by the Ministry of Education, which included in its proceedings a section on Chao Anou guided by nationalist interpretation.[18] Another volume from 1970 titled *The Most Important Kings of Laos* includes Chao Anou contemplating neutrality.[19]

In the revolutionary zones of Laos prior to 1975, the Pathet Lao had a historical consciousness almost entirely devoted to the struggle for independence. Thus, they primarily issued pamphlets which chronicled the efforts of the Party to liberate the country.[20] After the revolutionary government was installed in 1975, the history of insurrection remained a favorite subject. However, at the same time, new obligations of the state redefined the idea of the past; the history of a state cannot be solely concerned with the story of revolt.[21] Consequently, since 1975 the Lao P.D.R. has attempted to formulate a synthesis of all Lao history. In his 1980 book *La Revolution Lao,* Kaysone Phoumvihane provides a crucial link between the history of Lan Xang and the intrinsic values of uprisings and resistance to foreign domination:

> [S]ince the XVIII century, the feudal system declined, our divided country was invaded and dominated by the feudal Siamese. But our people strengthened their unity and never stopped fighting with courage. The most splendid struggle was the uprising of the whole country under the leadership of our national hero Tiao Anouvong (1827-1828). While not victorious, the insurrection has however written glorious pages in our

[13] Maha Sila Viravong, *The History of Laos* (New York: Paragon Book Reprint Corp., 1964) p. 115.
[14] Ibid, 117-118. Her husband is said to play a large role as well.
[15] Ibid, p. 120-121.
[16] Ibid, p. 123-125.
[17] Ibid, p. 127.
[18] LHH, p. 14.
[19] Grant Evans, "Different Paths: Lao Historiography in Historical Perspective," in *Contesting Visions of the Lao Past: Lao History at the Crossroads* ed. Christopher Goscha and Soren Ivarsson (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2003)
[20] Gay, p. 281; LHH, p. 14.
[21] Thus Mayoury and Pheuiphan significantly order the phases of the Lao revolution as firstly the "millennial leap," followed by the "nationalist phase," and then *finally* the "communist phase." LHH, p. 15.

> national defense and its heroic and indomitable spirit transmitted to this day among the people.[22]

However, in the production of an official history, the Lao P.D.R. has dealt with this feudal period in history with far more difficulty. A nine volume history was circulated in 1980 by a member of the former regime, Maha Kham Champakeomany. It was left "unfinished" and has never been released.[23] In the many drafts, reviews and revisions, the National Institute for Social Sciences in Laos demonstrated a distinct sense of uncertainty.[24] This is a crucial period that will be returned to in detail in the last section. Eventually, in 1989 the Ministry of Education and Sport did release a history which began only with the arrival of the French.[25] The release of the volume treating pre-colonial history would only appear over a decade later in the year 2000.[26] Bruce Lockhart's careful analysis of this edition begins by noting a new appreciation for the pre-colonial period's significance as it now accorded forty percent of the text.[27] What is immediately apparent in this edition of the text is the eschewing of Marxist analysis in order to validate the Lan Xang kingdom: there is no Marxist periodization (instead the history is pushed as far back as possible) or detailing of the kingdom's exploitation of its subjects.[28] Instead of Marxism, the history has been overtaken by a brand of cultural nationalism and a society driven by economics, which is entirely comprehensible to a reading public in the age of globalization. Thus, the key factors of Lao history in this new edition are comprised of Lao culture, the struggle against foreign domination and a political unity which engendered economic prosperity.[29] The clear purpose here is to create a genealogy which stresses the Party's role as the successor to the heroic kings of the ages.[30] The Lao P.D.R.'s new appreciation for antiquity is not without its uses, as such an appeal to the past effectively serves to stabilize the present social order. In order to account for this dramatic shift in approach to the history of Lan Xang, which occurred between the failure to produce such a history in 1989 and its release eleven years later, we must consider the scholarship of two researchers, Mayoury and Pheuiphan Ngaosrivathana.

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[22] Quoted in LHH, p.12.

[23] Ibid, p.14. The reviewers have suggested that Maha Kham Champakeomany continued to work and translate many ancient manuscripts; however, this does not alter the Nation Institute for Social Science's reticence approach to ever publishing his history. An interesting continuity is that Souneth Phothisane was a student of Maha Kham Champakeomany.

[24] The 1980 draft was 798 pages; the 1989 draft was cut down to 377 pages; the final version came to roughly 500 pages in 2000, see LHH, p. 14.

[25] Souneth Phothisane et. al, *Lao History: 1893 to the Present* (Vientiane: Ministry of Education and Sport, 1989).

[26] Souneth Phothisane and Nousai Phoummachan, *Lao History (Ancient Times to the Present)* (Vientiane: Ministry of Information and Culture, 2000).

[27] Bruce Lockhart, "Pavatsat Lao: Constructing a National Identity," *South East Asian Research* 14, no. 3, (2006) p. 362.

[28] Ibid, p. 364, 385.

[29] Ibid, p. 367, 374.

[30] Ibid, p. 386. This would explain the Lao P.D.R.'s recent valorizing of four heroic kings of Lan Xang: Fa Ngum, Setthathirat, Surinyavongsa, and Anouvong, see Souneth Phothisane, *King Anouvong's Heroic Battle*, (Vientiane: National University of Laos, 2002) p. 9.

The Thought of Mayoury and Pheuiphan Ngaosrivathana

In certain ways the field of Lao historiography was over-turned with the publication in 1988 of Mayoury and Pheuiphan's work *Chao Anou 1767-1829: Old Story, New Problems*.[31] In his review, Michael Vickery positively rated the work as "a new current of interpretation."[32] This was echoed ten years later in David Wyatt's assessment, which described how the work "completely opened up a field of historical study that previously had been closed."[33] According to the authors, a year before their work was published, they were invited to give a seven hour talk to an audience of Lao historians, who thereafter believed that they "would have to revise all their opinions in the field."[34] Moreover, at 160 pages, the 1988 book was one of the first major historical publications of the new government.[35] But it was also consciously seeking a break with previous historical interpretation, or in their words: "We Lao researchers are only beginning our recovery of the historical truth."[36]

In a discussion of the reception of their research, the Ngaosrivathanas noted that Maha Sila Viravong's work was still seen as stubbornly influential in the late 1980s since "other Lao have difficultly questioning the traditional analysis."[37] They criticized the work of Sila Viravong as having "indigenized" the Thai scholars' account of Anou and accepting the "orthodoxy [sic] Thai version," which they equated to importing a flawed model.[38] Later, they wrote in a more neutral tone, about mid-twentieth century Lao scholarship (an ambiguous reference to Sila), which "reshaped and diminished the figure of Chao Anou in an attempt to bring Lao history in line with the Thai version."[39] While they clearly wanted to bring about new views on Lao history they were also curiously linked to their predecessors as well:

> It is interesting to notice that before his death one year ago, Maha Sila Viravong told us that things did not happen in the fashion of the scenario he put forward in his "Lao history", and in a worthy endeavour, he succeeded in producing a new draft of his "Lao history", among the other masterpieces which this respected veteran historian has penned.[40]

With the above comment, the Ngaosrivathanas simultaneously cleared away the old analysis of Anou, which proved so intractable, while at the same time preserving the

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[31] This was published on the 160th anniversary of Chao Anou's death.

[32] Michael Vickery, "Review," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 21, no. 2 (1990), p. 443.

[33] Paths, p. 9. Wyatt oversaw the publication of this work for Cornell. In his preface to the book he noted some weaknesses, which he ultimately believed were outweighed by the positives.

[34] VSM, p. 42. In a long footnote here the authors' describe their works' reception in Laos during a presentation they gave to a number of Lao intellectuals.

[35] Mayoury and Pheuiphan Ngaosrivathana personal communication to the author, 4/25/10.

[36] Mayoury Ngaosrivathana and Pheuiphan Ngaosrivathana, "160 Years Ago: Lao Chronicles and Annals on Siam and the Lao," in *Proceedings of the International Conference on Thai Studies*, vol. 3, part 2, complied by Ann Buller (Canberra: Australian National University, 1987) p. 476, (hereafter cited as *160 Years*).

[37] LHH, p. 12.

[38] Ibid, p. 13-14.

[39] Paths, p. 29.

[40] LHH, p. 13, fn. 75.

revered figure of Maha Sila Viravong. By doing so, paradoxically, they perhaps even made a claim to take up his mantle.

In order to appreciate the Ngaosrivathanas' historical work it bears knowing a brief biographical background. Prior to 1975 they studied law in France. As has been mentioned they worked for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs during the Royal Lao Government period and after leaving the country for a time they returned to again take up their post in the spirit of patriotism. In the late 1960s and early 1970s the authors were part a small intellectual elite living in Laos who had been educated abroad. They had been exposed to the radicalism at Universities in France at the time.

The *oeuvre* of the Ngaosrivathanas has grown voluminously in the last two decades, with seventeen articles, conference papers and books in English alone.[41] The writing is marked by an overt nationalism and a normal historical mode of analysis, consisting of a twin concern for antiquarianism and "how it really happened," that subsequently reveals their preponderance for the reading and use of sources.[42] In the major works the use of sources is always the *a priori* issue. The voice of the document is seen as natural by the Ngaosrivathanas as they "allow the documents, the archives, and the testimonies to speak for themselves."[43] Deeply embedded in this methodology is a special concern for authoritative texts. Their publication in 2001 of a two volume translation of Vietnamese source material is exemplary as its significance lies in a presentation free of interpretations or rewriting, preferring instead to provide the reader with "plain, hard facts, and raw data."[44] Letting the document speak purportedly offered a window into the individual's "frame of thinking, their emotions and their innermost thoughts."[45] Their fidelity to the truth of the text may be shown by Thai documents which they charged as forgeries, having been "doctored."[46] Moreover, their impulses are mirrored in current ongoing efforts by the National University of Laos to produce a series of authoritative texts concerning "Traditional Lao Literature during the late Lan Sang period."[47] This has included the "San Lupphasun" (an enigmatic poem said to be written by Chao Anou), the "Kap Muang Phuan" and the "Pheun Viang" a document that "reflects real historical events and displays real characters."[48] The latter is a text which is carefully informed by the division between figural and literal genres as it stresses that it should not be confused with a legendary version and claims the author had "witnessed most of the events that he described."[49] The Ngaosrivathanas' efforts therefore stand as path-breaking work that exemplifies cutting-edge methods for Lao historians.

Along with a claim to new found authority, the Ngaosrivathanas have been involved in a number of disputes with other historians. Not only did they take issue

[41] Much but not all of the Ngaosrivathanas' work is listed in their bibliography of their *Paths to Conflagration*.

[42] Paths, p. 14.

[43] Ibid, p. 15.

[44] VSM, p. 17.

[45] Ibid, p. 19.

[46] Ibid, p. 18.

[47] Department of Lao Language and Literature, The Legend of Vientiane in the Time of Chao Anou (Vientiane: National University of Laos, 2004) p. iii.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Ibid.

with Maha Sila Viravong but other Lao views of the past as well. Thus they saw their later work as a contribution "to the quiet efforts of *Lao* and Thai to get their facts straight."[50] In particular, the Ngaosrivathanas' account of the role of foreign powers, such as the British and the Vietnamese, has not been accepted by other Lao scholars such as Souneth Photihsane and Phoummachan, authors of the most recent edition of the *Pavasat Lao*. The politicization of the history of Laos' foreign relations is clear as a result. Writing in 1989, the Ngaosrivathanas note another opponent in the government of the Lao P.D.R.:

> For the current vice-Minister of Culture, the Siamese invasion of Laos in 1827 was master-minded by the British, and Chao Anou was going to Bangkok to help Rama III against the expansion of capitalism.[51]

The evidence for the vice-minister's analysis relied on the tactic Chao Anou utilized to move his army within three days of Bangkok without alarming the Thai, by falsely warning of impending British attack. Yet the vice-minister took this event further, and his interpretation of an anti-capital vein in the conflict undoubtedly resulted from the Party's orthodox historiography on foreign intervention. The Ngaosrivathanas' own interpretation of Britain's role during the war is far different. They suggest the British were a possible friend of Chao Anou which has not been accepted over this other reading in the official history, the *Pavasat Lao*.[52] More significant may be the role the Ngaosrivathanas assign to the Vietnamese during the 1827 war. Although the royal brothers Nanthasen (r. 1782-1795), Inthavong (r. 1795-1804) and Anouvong (r. 1804-1828) all tried to establish a close alliance with the Vietnamese, in the end the latter proved fickle allies for the Lao, in the Ngaosrivathanas' account, as the Vietnamese court "showed that it would refuse to act in accord with or assist any challenges to the established order, for such challenges had been prohibited by heaven."[53] Rather, the Vietnamese "Mother" addressed Anou as a disobedient child who should ask for forgiveness from the Siamese "Father." At the moment of war, however, the Vietnamese were suggested to have gone even further as direct sponsors of Lao destruction, for the Ngaosrivathanas record a French explorer's claim that Siam "undertook their invasion only after clinching a preliminary accord with the court of Hue."[54] In the *Pavasat Lao,* these views of Vietnam are not present, instead "the Lao and Vietnamese 'peoples' enjoyed ties of mutual affection."[55]

In a 2001 speech, Mayoury Ngaosrivathana described the problem with the history of Chao Anou as being, at root, a problem stemming from the distortions which Thai scholarship has effected on the recorded history.[56] Mayoury argued this point based on the case of the Thai-Isan heroine Grandma Mo, and her role in the war. Instead

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[50] Paths, p. 13.
[51] LHH, p. 12.
[52] Lockhart, p. 374.
[53] Paths, p. 104.
[54] Ibid, p. 106. This may also be an example of an uncritical reading of French accounts by the Ngaosrivathanas who frequently do not take into account the colonial project behind such statements.
[55] Lockhart, p. 373.
[56] These proceedings are presented in Phothisane, *King Anouvong's Heroic Battle,* p. 108-109.

of enshrining her as the Thai have done, Mayoury suggested that the history be brought in line with the "truth" and that Grandma Mo be considered only as a mythical figure. At the same time, Mayoury argued that the maltreatment of Anou had been suppressed, especially the details of his horrific torture. The core of the Ngaosrivathanas' work is animated by a desire to correct perceived distortions of Thai scholarship. The autonomy of Lao principalities was one such subject of dispute, as even after the 1827 war, the Ngaosrivathanas accused Thai scholars of thinking these places were "an integral part of Siam."[57] Yet the Thai misunderstanding of Chao Anou as an individual may be the most crucial point of contention. The Ngaosrivathanas note that Rama III "depicted Chao Anou as a symbol of hate. For these rulers, Chao Anou was a rebel, and even worse, a loser…Chao Anou probably appeared like the doddering fool of his entourage."[58] Anou in their eyes became dehumanized by terms that described him as "rubbish" and "sputum."[59] This tendency to question Thai historiography has since become a significant component of analysis for other Lao scholars as well. Thus an article in the authoritative edition of the *Pheun Viang* text disputes the existence of Grandma Mo:

> It is interesting to note that – unlike some "purely" Siamese sources – Pheun Viang does not mention Thao Suranari…at all, let alone the role she played…This is a most important observation for historians of the Lao/Siamese war of 1827/1828.[60]

Similarly, the authors disassemble Prince Damrong's analysis of Anou's motivations as nothing more than an effort to disguise Thai failure and exaggerate Lao wickedness.[61] The prominent Lao historian Souneth Phothisane also questions Thai history more generally, calling attention to its hegemonic pretenses in its attempts to subsume Lao history within a sub-category.[62] Yet the ironies of Lao historiography are such that this trend must also ultimately be approached with circumspection even today, for the researchers compiling their authoritative edition of the *Pheun Viang* found that the oldest extant copy was housed in the Thai National Library – they were denied access for reasons that remain unsaid.[63]

It is difficult to abridge all of the meaning implied in the person of Chao Anouvong. His descriptions are fused with virtues as diverse as strength, courage, hope, self-sacrifice and a royal pride tempered by unity and common cause with his people. In this way, the historiography of the Ngaosrivathanas is fundamentally a call to remember in a unique way and with special attention to the moral lesson of history. In this study it will be important to ask why certain details are remembered and in what way they mold memory to meet a preconceived ideal. In the work of the

[57] Paths, p. 34.
[58] VSM, p. 19.
[59] Ibid, p. 6.
[60] Department of Lao Language and Literature, p. 231.
[61] It is important to note that this analysis is based on the English version of the book which was written by Volker Grabowsky, while the Lao version reflects influences from Maha Sila Viravong.
[62] Phothisane, *King Anouvong's Heroic Battle*, p. 21; see also Lockhart's analysis, p. 384.
[63] Department of Lao Language and Literature, p. 232.

Ngaosrivathanas, Chao Anou fights for freedom, justice and the nation. Thus, Chao Anou and his brothers Nanthasen and Inthavong are characterized as always subtly resisting Bangkok, even as they appear to be fulfilling the role of a tributary; as such their teleological struggle overshadows everything else about their lives.[64] Given this view, the Ngaosrivathanas happily recite the words of Rama III's great grandson, who accuses Chao Anou of "planning from the first to free his country from T'ai control."[65] It is this spirit of freedom and "will to assert independence" that is seen as the root cause of the war.[66] Yet this mentality was not just found among the royals – all the Lao were said to be fighting for the cause of independence:

> In the face of such threats, the Lao could not but rise up to save their identity, their nationality, and to recover their liberty lost in 1778. They faced losing everything by the total "siamicisation", the "provincialisation" of Muong Lao…the insurrection that followed was an "insurrection of the Lao", not the "revolt of Chao Anou"[67]

Underlying the Ngaosrivathanas' retelling of Anou's war as a popular war is a deeply-seeded contradiction between the royal past and the current regime. They present Chao Anou's cause in a unique fashion, describing this pan-Lao movement as having emerged from the search for justice and restitution from Siam for unfair treatment. Chao Anou's war was framed in terms of his demands, which included the return of the Emerald Buddha, the repatriation of Lao people and restitutions for the various affronts he and his son Chao Ratsavong suffered at the hands of the Bangkok elite:

> During his visit to the king (Bangkok), several great Thai lords, by their words and their behavior, had boundlessly insulted Chao Anou. And the princes…had plotted to humiliate and to exploit Chao Anou for the simple reason that he was Lao. Chao Anou who, for his part, considered himself a true offspring of the Lao king was therefore hurt by these personages whose nobility and age had no match with his own.[68]

It is noteworthy that this sense of inferiority in Lao-Thai relations is a feeling which continues to the present and so would be immediately identifiable to the audience. Chao Anou was said to consider stepping down from his position of superiority in society as he willingly offered to the Luang Phrabang king his abdication in order to unite the Lao.[69] In this act of homage to the nation the distant king also becomes someone to identify with for the audience. But the theme of unity runs deeper than just the hierarchical orders of the supreme leader. The Lao recruits who rallied to Chao Anou's banner made up diverse cross-sections of society that formed a cohesive identity in

[64] LHH, p. 5; for Nanthasen see Paths, p. 104.
[65] VSM, p. 5.
[66] 160 Years, p. 470; see also LHH, p. 7.
[67] LHH, p. 5.
[68] 160 Years, p. 472.
[69] LHH, p. 10.

battle as they were "struck down together with their generals."[70] Even military operations are seen by the Ngaosrivathanas as turning on this difference:

> The evacuation of the Khorat Plateau was accomplished ruthlessly. Lao soldiers bluntly asked, "Lao or Thai?" to determine whether inhabitants would live or die. They executed all Thai commoners summarily, while high-ranking Thai officials – totaling forty-two persons – were taken prisoner and beheaded on Don Chan Island opposite Vientiane. The remaining local elites…were asked one additional question: Would they relocate themselves to Vientiane or not? All recalcitrants were treated as Siamese; in short, they were killed.[71]

In this account, the war is brought to each individual person as they are categorized to create a macabre ethnic tally. Consequently, this nascent identity took on metaphysical conditions, as a "quasi-mystical attachment of the Lao to their native land" is said to have remained after the searing events of the war.[72] Thus the Ngaosrivathanas quote an old Lao maxim: "the fruit won't fall far from the tree."[73] Their examples come from what they consider a deep folk under-current of memory and resistance to the Thai, such as a prisoner's song which describes his being taken to Bangkok as a fall to hell and the injustices suffered there.[74] Yet if Maha Sila Viravong's account "diminished" Anou by pointing out his mistakes and recording other Lao heroes who performed more ably or acted more nobly, then the Ngaosrivathanas may equally be accused of their own de-centering of Chao Anou's place in history by their inclusion of a role for all social-classes in the war, which would be anachronistic to the period. At the time the Ngaosrivathanas wrote, they found the struggles of a monarchical ruler to be less compelling than a general insurrection led by the people, who struggled against foreign domination. The innovation of the Ngaosrivathanas' work was to overlay on top of the intrinsically royal qualities of Chao Anou another story in which all the Lao are marked by a sense of unity and duty among them to work together toward a common goal and the conceit that each is bounded together by a shared Lao-ness.

The other side of this unique case of remembrance is found in the Ngaosrivathanas' construction of the Siamese. If the Lao are virtuous and noble in their struggles, then the Thai are depicted as always intending evil, and nothing they do is interpreted as beneficent, much less neutral or accidental. As a result, the carefully formulated policies which the Ngaosrivathanas explore in depth to prove this – the "swallowing of Laos" by tattooing Lao with marks of service to the Thai in Isan, the Governor of Khorat's crooked initiatives or the importation of guns from the British – are juxtaposed with Bangkok's outright desire, which "has always found it in its national interest to annex the whole of Laos."[75] The war itself has been suggested to be an elaborate plot unfolded by the Thai to lure the Lao to their defeat, an "engineered

[70] LHH, p. 12.
[71] Paths, p. 157.
[72] LHH, p. 12.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Ibid, p. 8, 11-12; this story is also repeated in Paths, p. 21 and 160 Years, p. 473.
[75] Paths, p. 78.

outrage."[76] Underneath this aggressive duplicity lies a psychopathology attributed to the Thai royalty. The kings were said to adore portraits of Napoleon. They were driven by a fundamental lack, a psychological need to expand, to succeed, and to amass large sums of merit in order to assure their position as *cakravatin/dhamma-raja*. Taksin and Rama I were both usurpers to the throne while Rama III's "royal right encountered constant challenges."[77] The "paranoia" of the court at Bangkok then seized on the Lao who were seen as being "as dangerous as Burma" or Britain and consequently, they were deemed "a foe to be wiped out at the first opportunity."[78] This aggression took on cultural significance as regarding their wayward younger Lao brothers, the "Bangkok elite never doubted its manifest destiny, its *mission civilisatrice*."[79] This translated into the horrible violence of the early Chakri era: "Everywhere and always, it was by the sword and the gun that this strongman succeeded."[80] The pathos of the work is encapsulated perfectly in the tragedy at its core: the torture of Chao Anou and the destruction of Vientiane. In their descriptions of the torture suffered by Anou, the Ngaosrivathanas quote in minute detail the circumstances of his death:

> Chao Anou had his "eyes put out by the application of searing-irons…without food, with no protection from the fierce sultry heat at the noontide sun, with his brains racking and burning, and suffering from the acutest agonies that thirst can impart."[81]

This excerpt is, by far, the shortest version of the torture accounts that they include. As a result, it is clear that the authors intend for the reader to relive the details of Chao Anou's agony, witness every act and empathize with his suffering. The same can be said of the pillaging of the city, which was ordered by Rama III to face a similar fate, as he commanded his army "to return Vientiane to the wild animals and to leave nothing behind but weeds and water."[82] This made up the "genocide" or "holocaust" of the Lao, their own fall of Jerusalem or Carthage.[83] But words are not all that the Ngaosrivathanas offer to their audience, for pictures are reproduced in many works – on covers or within the pages – of the image of the ruin of Vientiane.[84]

The image of the heroic strength and courage of Chao Anou and the unity among the Lao people determined to fight for freedom – these powerful images over-lay a deeper historical experience cast into silence. The Ngaosrivathanas' demonizing of the Thai engages our ire and antipathy, representing a subtle shifting and refocusing of attention away from over a century of divisive warfare since the tri-partition of the old Lao kingdom of Lan Xang in 1707. Considering this process, the date for which the

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[76] Paths, p. 133, 138, 154; also VSM, p. 6, 8.
[77] Paths, p. 35.
[78] VSM, p. 5, 32, fn. 23-25.
[79] Paths, p. 21.
[80] Ibid, p. 36.
[81] Ibid, p. 23.
[82] 160 Years, p. 467; Paths, p. 60.
[83] Paths, p. 45, 50, 129; 160 Years, p. 467
[84] See for example, the covers of *Paths to Conflagration*, *The Legend of Vientiane in the Time of Chao Anou*, and *King Anouvong's Heroic Battle*.

Ngaosrivathanas' study begins, in 1778, takes on new meaning. Their story begins with the Siamese invasion of Champassak and Vientiane, while also implicitly leaving out the previous three-quarters of a century of intense warfare between Lao *muang* and ignoring the broader contexts of the 1707 tri-partition of the Lan Xang kingdom. Thus in their narration of the attack in 1778, the role of Luang Phrabang appears bewildering:

> [I]t took two trips for the Thai armies to break the Lao resistance and take over the Lao capital. Then, as the Royal Khmer Chronicles reported:
>
> > The order was given to confiscate all precious objects, all weapons, guns and flints, and the population. Afterward, the Luang Prabang troops received orders to attack the territory of Than and the territory of Moi…
>
> Only the survivors of these attacks went to live in the designated areas. However, fully two-thirds died during their journey to Siam. The Lao chronicles call this ordeal the *suk Thai* (Thai war).[85]

In the midst of this spilling of "Lao" blood by "Thai" armies – nomenclature that the Ngaosrivathanas stress – their own sources reveal the contradiction at the heart of their synthesis: "Lao" fought in supposedly "Thai" armies. The Ngaosrivathanas' usage of the terms "Lao" and "Thai" raises an important question: who exactly are "the Lao" in this period? Rather than a coherent identity spanning from Champassak to Luang Phrabang, most often the term referred to any ethnic Tai north of what is today central Thailand simply as "Lao."[86] The term "Lao" was a crude generalization, representing the view from central Siam, which was a blanket reference to a vast array of diverse groups of people, rather than actually referring to any politically-bounded unit at the time. What is noticeably missing from this account is any kind of analysis of the Luang Phrabang/Vientiane war that had been raging since 1707. But in fact, Luang Phrabang played an important role in sparking the 1778 war, as they had been urging Siam to invade Vientiane, accusing the latter of an alliance with Burma. Without acknowledging this context, the Ngaosrivathanas are free to construct Siam as seeking nothing but to devour Vientiane, with only aggressive expansion as the rationale. Furthermore, whenever violence among Lao *muang* inevitably comes up in their narration, it is always immediately followed by Thai brutality to keep the reader's attention locked on the real enemy, Siam:

> In the meantime, Luang Prabang attacked Vientiane, which apparently turned to the Burmese for help. Taksin assailed Cambodia and compelled the southern Lao kingdom of Champassak to accept Thai suzerainty. Then Taksin launched two campaigns to secure Chiang Mai, which he subdued

[85] Paths, p. 42.

[86] A source from "160 Years" demonstrates this: "Her neighbors (at Siam) too on the north, the Laos of Che-ung Mai and Lan Chang…," p. 470.

> by the end of 1774. As his expansion gathered momentum in the heart of Lan Na territories…Taksin had a letter delivered to the Vientiane king in January 1774. He emphasized that henceforth no one, not even the Burmese king, would be capable of hindering him.[87]

This potent refocusing is supported by the Ngaosrivathanas' narration of Vientiane as the center of the Lao, "the Lao political center,"[88] "the hub of Lao political power"[89] and even the successor to the empire of Lan Xang.[90] Therefore the struggle of Chao Anou synecdochically becomes the struggle of all the Lao.[91] This is a crucial point to establish in order to confer a modern relevancy upon the story of Chao Anou, otherwise the destruction of Vientiane remains a regional story, not yet a national tragedy. This position imputed to Vientiane is complicated by its warlike exchanges with its neighbors: the attacks on Luang Phrabang in 1765 and 1771 and the invasion of Xieng Khuang in 1787.[92] Prior to the 1760s the historical record is incredibly obscured, although there are hints of intermittent violence continuing since the division of 1707.[93] The climax came with a series of wars in 1787-1792 which left Vientiane holding power over Luang Phrabang, Xieng Khuang and Sam Nua. The Ngaosrivathanas address this conflict with a deft move, suggesting that, rather than there being any real division among the Lao, these wars were the result of a Bangkok strategy of manipulation that aimed to divide and conquer:

> Bangkok's policy toward the Lao and particularly Nanthasen was eminently sophisticated…In his military expeditions against Luang Prabang and Sam Nua, Nanthasen was accompanied by Siamese contingents dispatched from Bangkok…Siam spurred on this fratricidal war among the Lao, which resulted in the Laocization of a war in a country already moribund from endemic violence.[94]

While all of the guilt must be shouldered by the Thai, some good does come of all this war, for at the same time Nanthasen is still seen as realizing a dream to reconstitute the old empire of Lan Xang.[95] Thus, the later stories of Chao Anou's heroic battles all signify an effort to exorcise the ghost of 1707 by reunifying the country. Ultimately, Anou's war is seen by the Ngaosrivathanas as a "national" awakening among the Lao.[96] Vientiane

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[87] Paths, p. 39.
[88] Ibid, p. 44
[89] Ibid, p. 122.
[90] VSM, p. 27. This last statement ignores the fact that there were two other claimants to the mantle of Lan Xang, Luang Phrabang and Champassak.
[91] LHH, p. 5; Paths, p. 105, 139-140.
[92] David Wyatt, "Siam and Laos, 1767-1827" in *Studies in Thai History: Collected Articles* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1998) p. 184-186, 197-198.
[93] Martin Stuart-Fox, *The Lao Kingdom of Lan Xang: Rise and Decline* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1998) p. 102-106.
[94] Paths, p. 44, 66-67.
[95] Ibid, p.66; see also VSM, p. 3-4.
[96] Paths, p. 56.

consecrated this movement as it convened a pan-Lao war-council.[97] Luang Phrabang, Xieng Khuang and Champassak are each asserted to have assisted the war effort of Anou without more than symbolic mechanisms to suggest how their previous century of warfare had been overlooked or much less resolved.[98] Champassak was noted to have "swallowed its aversion until French Colonialism," but also important was the fact that Chao Anou's son had recently been appointed to the throne.[99] However, the degree of his popularity and influence in the region is seriously questionable considering that after the war the old elite were quickly reinstated.[100] For Luang Phrabang, the Ngaosrivathanas suggest that an alliance founded on symbolism was acceded to, but other scholars point to King Manthathourat's alerting Bangkok to its faithless vassal.[101] While the debate over Luang Phrabang's role seems intractable, it is more important to note that Luang Phrabang's actions suggest it remained neutral during the war. Xieng Khuang's role was also to "rally to Anou" whereas the actions of its monarch, Chao Noi, who sent hunting parties to capture Anou for Bangkok in 1828, has been vigorously denied.[102] What is important to this analysis is not what actually happened in the war, but how the Ngaosrivathanas reconstruct the event now; as such they claim that Anou's war represented a struggle against Bangkok aggression that spanned to Chiang Mai in the west and Kedah in the south.[103] Thereby Vientiane became a symbol for all victims of Siam as it "shin[ed] as a beacon for the oppressed."[104] Only as an aside do we learn that the event of 1707 had "torn apart" the "political and social fabric" but Anou would somehow unite this patchwork of disaffected Lao.[105] Yet the unresolved division of 1707 proved to be not so easily elided, for in 1795 Nanthasen was accused by Luang Phrabang of plotting against Bangkok and was taken to the capital and then executed. Chao Anou, captured by Chao Noi in Xieng Khuang, suffered a similar fate.

New Ideology of the Lao P.D.R.

On April 7, 2010 a news article appeared in *the Vientiane Times* on the progress of construction on the "new face" of the city.[106] The article discussed Chao Anouvong Park, which was designed to be a "recreational hub" and "the centre of Vientiane."[107] The spatial location at the heart of the capital is not a mistake, as the regime now officially endorses four kings from its feudal past.[108] The rise of this new ideology has

[97] VSM, p. 12; Paths, p. 155; LHH, p. 10.
[98] Paths, p. 128.
[99] Ibid, p. 65-66; VSM, p. 5.
[100] Ian Baird, "Contested History, Ethnicity, and Remembering the Past: The Case of the Ay Sa Rebellion in Southern Laos," *Crossroads* 18, no. 2 (2007) p. 131, fn. 12.
[101] See for example, Sila, p. 114, 137 – Sila also noted that Luang Phrabang committed 5000 troops to the war against Anou even as he urged them to "forgive and forget the past," ibid.
[102] LHH, p. 10; Paths, p. 57; VSM, p. 40, fn. 92.
[103] VSM, p. 33, fn. 28, 30.
[104] Ibid, p. 6, Paths, p. 148.
[105] Paths, p. 34, 69.
[106] Phonesavanh Sangsomboun, "'New Face' of Vientiane Progressing Well," *The Vientiane Times* April 7, 2010.
[107] Ibid.
[108] Souneth, *King Anouvong's Heroic Battle*, p. 9; see also Stuart-Fox, "The Challenge of Lao Historiography," p. 356.

pre-occupied much of recent Lao scholarship, which has attempted to explain the apparent contradictions of the nominally socialist state. Most scholars have considered this move to revive traditional culture as a reaction to the collapse of international communism in the early 1990s; the image of the grandiose, but empty Russian embassy completed in 1992 seems apt.[109] With the loss of support from the COMECON states, the Lao PDR seemed to retract deeper into isolation, and even experienced an episode of democratic protests.[110] The response to and eventual acceptance of the Ngaosrivathanas' work is inexorably caught up in these changes in two inter-related ways. The first of these issues appears in the Lao-Thai relations at the root of the Ngaosrivathanas' work. For even if we accept the government's turn to tradition as being inspired by recent global events, this does not account for the early work (mid-1980s) of the Ngaosrivathanas' that was undertaken well before such fissures appeared. The context for their writing then must be found elsewhere. In the sudden violent outbreak of the Lao-Thai border wars of 1984 and 1988 the Ngaosrivathanas found affirmation if not their cause, for the conflict was seen as a continuation of Chao Anou's war 160 years ago.[111] There may be no better example than Thailand's M.R. Kukrit Pramoj's comment on these conflicts – he said that troubles with Laos "will never be over unless Vientiane is burned to the ground," vividly recalling the destruction of the city in Anou's time.[112] In this context, the Ngaosrivathanas' work became infused with a strain of virulent anti-Thai vituperation, which quickly became a liability once a sizeable thaw in relations began later in the decade. As a result, their work was embargoed by Lao PDR censors for one day in 1988.[113] That it was published at all was due to their personal connections within the government, which enabled them circumvent the authority of the Ministry of Information and Culture and acquire permission to publish their work from higher party officials.[114] Nevertheless, their 1998 Cornell publication was banned in both Laos and Thailand.[115] At a 1996 conference, Grant Evans was told by Pheuiphan that "he pointedly remarked that he can only publish his views outside the country."[116] Yet the Lao rapprochement with the Thai was

[109] Stephan T. Johnson, "Laos in 1992: Succession and Consolidation," *Asian Survey* 33, no. 1 (1993) p. 79; see also Grant Evans, *The Politics and Ritual and Remembrance* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998) p. 172, (hereafter cited as *RR*).

[110] Geoffrey C. Gunn, "Laos in 1991: Winds of Change," *Asian Survey* 31, no. 1 (1991) p. 89-90.

[111] Paths, p. 32 gives the Ngaosrivathanas' view of these border wars. They were also probably influenced by the low-scale guerilla fighters the Thai government supported against the new Lao government during the 1970s and 1980s.

[112] Vickery, p. 444.

[113] VSM, p. 43, fn. 109; Mayoury and Pheuiphan Ngaosrivathana personal communication to the author, 5/3/10.

[114] Martin Stuart-Fox, personal communication to the author, 5/6/10; see also Stuart-Fox, "The Challenge of Lao Historiography," p. 357, fn. 41.

[115] Constance Wilson, "Review," *Pacific Affairs* 73, no. 2, (Summer 2002) p. 307. Today this book is for sale in an upscale bookstore in Vientiane along with Grant Evan's *The Last Century of Lao Royalty* and Nakhonkham Bouphanouvong's *Sixteen Years in the Land of Death.* However there has not been any translation of this work, which originally appeared in Lao in 1988. It is dubious whether this availability represents real access for any Lao, a case similar to the availability of books on the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, which would also be seditious, but for being in English only and highly expensive by local standards.

[116] RR, p. 180, fn. 10.

inevitable given the desire by both governments to expand trans-Mekong trade.[117] Additionally, the Lao PDR's finances approached insolvency in the early 1990s after short-falls in foreign aid were not covered by the remaining socialist powers. Thus, the Lao government was forced to open itself to capitalist forces and specifically the Thai – this trade at a point in the early '90s equaled nearly half of all exports. Yet this closer relationship was at the same time an unequal one seen by the Lao as a vaguely existential threat.[118] In an interview one year before his death in 1993, the chief ideologue of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, Phoumi Vongvichit, expressed the fear in terms of morality:

> The other subject that Phoumi was eager to discuss with Dr. Mayoury and myself [Martin Stuart-Fox] was the future of Lao culture and the moral state of Lao youth today, which caused him much concern. I asked him how he felt about the new Mittaphap bridge across the Mekong. It was not the bridge per se he was worried about, however, but the influence of Thailand in a much broader sense. The Thai economic stake in Laos is large and growing, and so is Thai cultural influence in general.
> Phoumi expressed concern over the transmission over Thai television of values that were harmful to Lao youth. He was particularly worried about the effect the culture of consumption and sexual permissiveness was having on young Lao, whom he saw as lacking in discipline and commitment to the country. Time and again in our discussion Phoumi referred to the alternative values taught by Buddhism, stressing the need for young Lao to take to heart the Buddha's message of self-control and mental discipline.[119]

Some Lao continue to see Thailand as a society in decline and lacking moral virtue as an orgy of capitalist consumption, prostitution, AIDS/HIV and an anarchy of ideas ensues. Thereafter, the Ngaosrivathanas were vindicated in 1997, for the first seminar on Chao Anouvong was held where discussions were described as having "uncharacter-istic vigor."[120] The malaise of the early 1990s broke down as the regime began to accept the Ngaosrivathanas' work as the center-piece of its revival of history:

> In January 1997 a three-day seminar at the National University of Laos drew a hundred participants "to study the struggles of the Lao people under the leadership of King Anouvong"; several important historical monuments are being restored; and seminars were held on protection of

[117] Martin Stuart-Fox, "Laos in 1988: In Pursuit of New Directions," *Asian Survey* 29, no. 1 (1989) p. 84. See also Vickery, p. 444.

[118] Grant Evans describes this difficulty as "cultural blurring," RR, p. 178-179.

[119] Martin Stuart-Fox, *Obituary: Phoumi Vongvichit (1909-1994).* http://home.vicent.net.au/~lao/laostudy/phoumi.htm, Accessed 2/3/2010.

[120] RR, p. 180, fn. 10.

> the national heritage and of minority cultures. In February, the Fifth National Games became a celebration of Lao culture.[121]

The location of this disruption in discourse may be pinpointed to the mid-1990s: in 1994 Evans noted that a statue of Sisavang Vong had been barricaded while another such statue mysteriously disappeared – yet, only three years later, the government reversed its position and planned a refurbishing of these statues with more to come.[122] The culmination of this culture-turn by the government could be seen three years later, in 2000, as a major public event was held in the new National Culture Hall. The Ngaosrivathanas presented their work before an audience of a thousand people, and the event was broadcast live on TV.[123] However, the spontaneous decision to set up a Chao Anou Foundation was stalled later by the government due to the projects' perceived threat to Lao-Thai relations. In recent scholarship from the National University of Laos, scholars note "Mayoury and Pheuiphan (1988, 1989, and 1998) present the modern Lao interpretation of events."[124] However, they are careful to attenuate the extreme form of nationalism and the anti-Thai bias. Even as the Lao P.D.R. seeks to legitimate its rule on the basis of cultural preservation, it must avoid a jingoist/xenophobic attitude as its economy is ever more tightly integrated into that of its neighbors.[125] Thus, the Chao Anouvong Park may be the perfect representation of the current government's posture as its reinforced embankment is designed to ward off flooding of the Mekong while at the same time subtly warding off the flood of Thai culture.

The second issue is more ephemeral and thus more speculative. The evidence is indirect at best and the conclusions remain dubious. But this may be related to the nature of the topic itself, for it is clear that certain issues about kings in the Lao P.D.R. remain dangerous subjects.[126] The important distinction is that the danger is entirely focused on King Savang Vatthana, the last monarch, and his death in a re-education camp around 1980. Evans has noted these issues are still "politically problematic" to

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[121] Martin Stuart-Fox, "Laos in 1997: Into ASEAN," *Asian Survey* 38, no. 1 (1998) p. 76. The reviewers note that at this conference the impact of the Ngaosrivathanas was actually marginal (based on no one having read their English work) even though the Ngaosrivathanas were present and had their work included in a later volume of the conference's proceedings (Dept. of Lao Language and Literature, 1997(for their contributions see pages 66, 73). The reviewers also suggest that while working at the National University of Laos they had to introduce the Ngaosrivathanas' work to their colleagues. The most concrete example of a connection between Lao historians in Laos and the Ngaosrivathanas is indeed Souneth Phothisane's work Virakam Chao Anouvong, which includes a round-table discussion with Mayoury and Pheuiphan Ngaosrivathana. This was released shortly after the Ngaosrivathanas presented their work at the National Culture Hall in Vientiane in 2000, which was televised live on TV. Even if one wishes to deny a direct lineage or there is a lack of interest in their work at the NUOL there is clearly a broader interest in Chao Anou which the Ngaosrivathanas have played a role in shaping with their 1988/1997 work published in Laos. Their presentation in 2000 also demonstrates the government sanctioning of their views after near censorship in 1988.

[122] Grant Evans, "Immobile Memories: Statues in Thailand and Laos," in *Cultural Crisis and Social Memory: Modernity and Identity in Thailand and Laos* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002) p. 165-167.

[123] VSM, p. 43, fn. 109; Stuart-Fox, "The Challenge of Lao Historiography," p. 357.

[124] Department of Lao Language and Literature, p. 287-288, fn. 62-63.

[125] RR, p. 179.

[126] RR, p. 180 explains the interest in Anou is due to the fact that he is a king which they cannot explicitly acknowledge.

publically discuss.[127] Even as Kaysone finally admitted this much in a 1989 interview in Paris, at the Luang Phrabang Museum (formerly the royal palace) the tour guides continued to say the King was "at seminar" as late as December 1996.[128] Yet the LPRP is not antagonistic to all royalty; in fact, their relationship to royal blood was crucial in gaining popular support. This is most exemplified by the fact that the LPRP were led by the "Red Prince" Souphanouvong during the war.[129] After 1975, the LPRP did not suppress the cult of Prince Phetsarath, given his central role in the 1945 independence movement of the Lao Issara, from which the party grew.[130] Also the LPRP worked comfortably with Prince Souvanna Phouma, who was given a large state funeral in 1984. It is often remarked that the revolution came late in Laos as the LPRP only assumed power on December 2, 1975 after forcing the abdication of the King. But it is important to note that the LPRP refused to acknowledge this as an act of abdication and continued to seek to work with King Savang Vatthana as evidenced in Phoumi Vongvichit's awkward announcement shortly following:

> Rumors spread by the enemy that we had dismissed the King…Realizing that the monarchy had blocked the progress of the country, the King abdicated and turned over power to the people. He abdicated intentionally…The King is still in his palace, and is now Supreme Adviser to the President of the country. He is still enjoying his daily life as before, and his monthly salary will be sent to him as usual. The only difference is that he is no longer called King.[131]

Rather than storm into a republican age, the Lao revolution came very near instituting what could only be called a socialist monarchy. It was King Savang Vatthana's refusal to be a figure head of the new regime that led to his being accused of supporting Hmong resistance fighters and being sent to "seminar."[132] After the King's death, the LPRP's initial unease with the history of kings first appeared. As we have seen already, Maha Kham Champakeomany produced a nine volume work of history that the regime deemed as "unfinished," significantly in the same year the last King is thought to have expired. This reaction against royal subjects continued. In 1982, Phueiphan attempted to obtain a translation of a Vietnamese text on the war of Chao Anouvong, but he was blocked:

> We had miserably failed in our previous attempts from 1982 to 1984 to desperately obtain through the Committee for Social Sciences (Hanoi) a copy of this document, while working on a political biography of Chao Anou. A Lao high-ranking official who had been given a typewritten copy of this document adamantly refused to lend it to us. The reason was (as

[127] Grant Evans, *The Last Century of Lao Royalty: A Documentary History* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2009) p. 421, (hereafter cited as *LCLR*).
[128] RR, p. 100.
[129] LCLR, p. 25-26.
[130] RR, p. 101.
[131] RR, p. 99.
[132] Ibid; LCLR, p. 25.

> we found out later) that the contents of this "feudal" document are considered to be highly subversive.[133]

This translation was eventually published in 1984, but it is unclear if it was subversive due to the negative light it shone on Vietnamese-Lao relations during the 1827 war or because it addressed the royal past while the LPRP was still uneasily negotiating the place of monarchy in Lao society. The Ngaosrivathanas' first book on Anou was published in 1988 through a series of maneuverings at the top levels of the party, and yet, significantly, this should be compared with the failure to publish volumes one and two of the official history a year later. In 1989, the official history that was published began only with the narrative of colonialism/anti-colonialism (1893), while remaining silent about the country's feudal past. In 1990, there was a version of the first two volumes of this history under review for publication, but at 377 pages it was deemed "too long…for use in secondary schools."[134] This history would not be published for another decade. The person overseeing the Lao P.D.R.'s production of an official history had been a major figure of the party, Phoumi Vongvichit. Martin Stuart-Fox interviewed him and reported his response on the issue:

> The first two volumes have not been published because Phoumi was not satisfied with them, and refused to give them his stamp of approval. He apparently had his own ideas about the vexed question of the origin of the Lao people, where they had come from and when, and wanted more research done. Also there were problems about how to deal with the history of the Kingdom of Lan Xang from a Marxist perspective, and about the historic relations between Laos and neighbouring states.[135]

It is this subtle discomfort that made the larger issue of kingship problematic to the regime. In the late 1980s when the Ngaosrivathanas published their history of Chao Anou, which was dependent on their connections within the party, their experience can only be seen as the exception to a general prohibition on such a subversive, dangerous subject as the throne. The last king's death is at the center of this regime of censorship. The ban seems only to have been lifted completely in 2000 with the publication of the pre-colonial history. This seems only possible after the old guard of the LPRP had retired or died. Yet problems with historical interpretation of the subject remain. As Martin Stuart-Fox and Grant Evans have suggested, the revival of historical interest in the Kings of Lan Xang implicitly questions the legitimacy of the revolution.[136] While glorifying the four kings is an obvious strategy to return to this history in a carefully delineated, circumscribed way, it has nevertheless raised issues about the empty throne today.

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[133] VSM, p. 42, fn. 109; this 1984 book was an earlier edition of the VSM (2001).
[134] LHH, p. 14.
[135] Stuart-Fox, *Obituary*.
[136] RR, p. 182; Stuart-Fox, "The Challenge of Lao Historiography," p. 357.

Conclusion

The history of Chao Anouvong as an Ur-Text for Lao-Thai relations may also be seen as the meta-narrative for how the Lao have regarded themselves since independence. From Maha Sila Viravong to Kaysone Phoumvihane and the Ngaosrivathanas, the hero Chao Anou has been enlisted to bring about a national consciousness among otherwise disaffected Lao. The revolutionary historiography concerned with struggle for independence against foreign aggression has undoubtedly marked recent scholarship on the history of Chao Anou, but the concerns from the opening of the post-colonial era remain as well; notably the martial skill of Lao heroes, the pathos of tragedy established in the torture of Chao Anou and the ruin of Vientiane. An analysis of the contributions of Mayoury and Pheuiphan Ngaosrivathana highlights the tendency of Lao historians to de-center Chao Anou from the story in order to bring to light other issues deemed more significant to the present. Yet rather than chastise the Ngaosrivathanas or other Lao historians for not looking at their past with an objective eye which sees all that is unsightly as well as noble, it is important to note that this blind-spot is at the root of all ideological consciousness, historical, communist, capitalist or otherwise.[137] It is this very blindness which animates the impulse of modern Lao nationalist analysis to carry on intractable disputes with Thai scholars, exorcise the ghost of Lao disunity from the past and numb the venomous memory of King Savang Vatthana.

[137] Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verson, 2008)

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