Emerging public spaces in rural Laos

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Abstract: While urban settings stand at the forefront in discussions about public spaces in socialist East- and Southeast Asia, rural public spaces in the region have been hitherto largely unexplored. Drawing on two different upland cases from the northern part of Laos, this contribution identifies local vernacular public spaces on the one hand, and emerging state-connected public spaces on the other. The latter will be argued to comprise: (1) state-controlled public places, (2) public as opposed to private land, and (3) spaces in which the collective identity of the village in relation to the nation-state is displayed. We compare the sociality in vernacular public spaces with the sociality in state-connected public spaces, giving emphasis to socio-spatial practices and sonic dimensions. The contemporary transformation of public spaces in rural upland Laos can eventually be approached through the lens of the "fragmentation of space", to quote Lefebvre's felicitous expression, and allows original insights into spatial state-making practices and local efforts (with varying success) to relate to the state.

Keywords: Public space, Laos, state, rurality, Tai Vat, Khmu.

Résumé : La ville est le lieu de prédilection des recherches sur les espaces publics en Asie orientale socialiste. Au départ de deux études de cas dans des villages des hautes terres du Laos, nous montrons qu'il est possible de distinguer au sein de ceux-ci des espaces publics vernaculaires et des espaces publics émergents liés à l'Etat. Ces seconds sont soit des lieux publics directement contrôlés par l'Etat et ses agents, soit des espaces publics définis par opposition aux espaces privés, soit enfin des espaces où l'identité collective du village s'affiche en lien avec l'Etat-nation. En mettant l'accent sur les pratiques socio-spatiales et leur dimension sonore, nous comparons la socialité dans les espaces publics vernaculaires et dans ceux liés à l'Etat. Les mutations spatiales en cours dans le haut Laos rural gagnent à être abordées à travers le concept de « fragmentation de l'espace » forgé par Lefebvre. Elles permettent d'appréhender les pratiques de présentification de l'Etat tout comme les tentatives locales de relation avec celui-ci.

Mots-clés : espace public, Laos, état, ruralité, Tai Vat, Khmou.

Introduction: Considering non-urban public spaces

Although the notion of the public space is deeply rooted in debates on urban contexts, rural locales rarely come to one's mind when discussing the concept. This also holds true for socialist East- and Southeast Asia: indeed, all the contributions to this special issue focus on social interaction in urban public spaces. A review of the literature would confirm the overwhelmingly urban appraisal of the very notion of public space, with studies devoted —to cite a few examples— to public parks in China (Farquhar 2009; Richaud 2018), squares (Kurfürst 2012), urban markets (Endres 2019), streets (Drummond 2000; Geertman *et al.* 2016) and sidewalks (Harms 2009; Kim 2015) in Vietnam. In this article, we argue that there is a heuristic benefit from using the concept of public space in the countryside rather than to discard it from the start. For this reason, we follow the editors of this special issue who propose a pragmatic definition of public spaces as spaces that are assumed to be openly accessible, where actions and events are visible and where social interactions beyond mere co-presence take place. Village paths, log fires, countryside fairs or communal village buildings clearly fall within this definition. Yet, why are they so rarely discussed or studied as public spaces? While a detailed exploration of this question is beyond the scope of this article, we wish to suggest that this deflection has perhaps less to do with the features of rural societies than with the traditions of different disciplines. The concept of public space has been developed by urbanists, sociologists and philosophers who rarely venture into rural settings.

Indeed, at first sight, public spaces are not discernible in the rural highlands of Laos. There is a seeming lack of central plazas, temples or markets that could easily indicate where to search for public spaces. Roxana Waterson (2006 [1993]: 228–229) points out that a stable distinction of public and private in the context of Southeast Asia's built environment does not lead very far. Rather than classifying types of buildings, for instance as private or public, attention should be paid to the distribution of functions over buildings. In addition, we will often show, for example, that houses or village paths can assume different characteristics depending on the context. Furthermore, there is no explicit word in Lao to refer to public spaces in rural settings. The word *saathaalana* (L.[1], "common", "collective", "public" – Reinhorn 2001: 583–584) that is used in Lao cities to refer to public spaces is seldom heard in rural areas. According to the elected village head (L.: *naai baan*) of Houay Yong, one of the two villages used as case studies, the local expressions that come closest to the concept of public space are *boon laai khôn sum sèèo* (L.: "a place where many people gather and enjoy") or, better, *boon sumsôn* (L.: "a place where people gather").[2] However, our main aim here is not to address public space through semantics; its phenomenality is even more relevant. The

1 For the transliteration of Lao (L.) and Khmu (K.), see Petit 2020, and Svantesson *et al.* 2014.

2 Interestingly, these local glosses emphasise interactions between villagers rather than relations to politics, a component of the concept of "public" from its Latin origins (as illustrated by the notion of *Res Publica)* to Habermas' (1978) theory on critical communication in the public sphere. Below in the article, we will relate to the topic of communication in public spaces.

absence of local vocabulary does not preclude the fact that public spaces exist and, what is more, are currently emerging.

Based on research carried out in two different villages of upland Laos, we apply the concept of "public space" to rural settings, considering, (1) vernacular spaces where collective action has taken place for many decades such as vernacular public buildings and open spaces. As we will show, the idea of public or communal spaces is nothing new, nor is it impervious to rural locales. Furthermore, we explore (2) new public spaces characterised by markers, buildings and regulations that have modified the villagers' social relations since the start of this century. We argue that the concept is instrumental for tracking the transformations of the rural space, where new forms and artefacts of public space are emerging with largely understudied implications. More specifically, we seek to highlight the role of the state —and to a lesser extent, due to a lack of space, of new technologies— in this process. Ultimately, the study of the everyday production of public space in rural contexts of socialist Southeast Asia contributes to the endeavour of analysing the ways in which the state is engrained into the "minutiae of daily life" of uplanders (High & Petit 2013: 419).

This contribution thus unpacks the increasing inscription of the state into the village space and the subsequent reordering and "fragmentation" (Lefebvre [1974] 1991, 2000) of space more generally. This last concept has been coined by Henri Lefebvre (1991 [1974], 2000), whose analysis concentrates on the social production of space, and on the way the spatial order reflects and engenders social and power relations.

> The illusory clarity of space is in the last analysis the illusory clarity of a power that may be glimpsed in the reality that it governs, but which at the same time uses that reality as a veil. Such is the action of political power, which creates fragmentation and so controls it —which creates it, indeed, *in order* to control it. But fragmented reality (dispersion, segregation, separation, localisation) may on occasion overwhelm political power, which for its part depends for sustenance on continual reinforcement (Lefebvre 1991: 320–321, 2000: 369).[3]

In this article, we will present a variety of rural vernacular and new public spaces, such as workhouses, schools and village meeting halls. Alongside these tangible public spaces with their material and architectural features, we will also discuss spatial technologies such as land-use planning and cartography, and will bring to view an underestimated topic, namely the sonic dimension of public space. When delineating these spaces, we do not aim to present an exhaustive or clear-cut typology of public spaces but to illuminate certain dimensions of spaces and the increasing inscription of the state in spatial terms. By comparing the modes of communicating and relating in a workhouse, on the one hand, and a village meeting hall on the other, we aim to give attention to the importance of considering the socio-spatial practices co-shaped by the public spaces in which they take place.

3 On this fragmentation of space, see also the (untranslated) Preface (Lefebvre 2000: xvii–xxviii).

Drawing on our two respective case studies,[4] we will highlight the commonalities but also the differences underlying the transformations of public space in the context of the rural highlands of Laos, which are home to a variety of mostly non-Buddhist population groups.

Pierre Petit has been working since 2009 in Houay Yong, a Tai Vat[5] village located in a small valley of Houaphan Province (Petit 2017b, 2020). The village is concentrated along a dust road (with little traffic) at the bottom of the valley, with tiny winding paths leading to houses further away. Houay Yong sheltered, in 2019, 531 inhabitants who make their living from cultivating paddy rice in the valley and cash crops, mostly maize, in the swiddens. A significant part of the population has left the village during the last two decades, especially among the youth who head toward the capital, Vientiane. The village clearly sided with the communist government during the civil war. It is home to some political elites of the area and has developed a sense of centrality among the neighbouring villages.

The other upland setting is the Khmu Yuan village of Pliya,[6] located in the Vieng Phoukha district in Luang Namtha Province, where Rosalie Stolz has been working since 2013. The main focus of Stolz's long-term ethnographic fieldwork has been local concepts and practices of kinship and sociality and the transformation of houses more recently (Stolz 2018, 2019, 2021). In 1985, the village was relocated under harsh circumstances from its original locale close to a mountain top to the present site, about a two-hour hike away from the former location. The Khmu of Pliya understand themselves as primarily shifting cultivators yet they also cultivate an increasing range of cash crops in addition to animal husbandry, gathering and hunting as well as temporary labour migration (Evrard 2006; Tayanin 1994; Tayanin *et al.* 2012 [1991]). The population of the village, which had 548 inhabitants in 2015, remains stable. In contrast to Houay Yong, Pliya, torn between the two sides during the war, has an ambivalent history which, in the memory of the district, is primarily connected with its involvement in anti-communist fighting.

Locating vernacular public spaces in rural Laos

In the lowlands inhabited by the Lao Buddhists, villages typically shelter one or more temples (L: *vat*). The *vat* was, before the 1975 Revolution, much more than a religious space: it was also linked to education, medicine, or festivals; there, travellers were hosted and the symbols of the communal identity were stored, such as the village's racing boat (Condominas & Gaudillot 2000: 95–100). Given its age-old function as a gathering place, and given the continuing presence of

4 As ethnographers, our research methods (although not wholly similar) involve repeated stays in the villages, participative observation in everyday contexts, informal exchanges, and interviews. They are presented *in* Petit 2020: 18–28 and *in* Stolz 2020.

5 For convenience, the Tai Vat can be considered as a subgroup of the Tai Dam, or Black Tai, originating from the district of Yên Châu in Vietnam. The issue of ethnic taxonomy is, however, more complex (Petit 2020: 33–40).

6 Please note that all Khmu names, including the village name, have been changed.

elements of Buddhist statecraft in socialist Laos (Ladwig 2015), the *vat* has often been used by state officers and employees to gather the population and transfer information, in a remarkable continuity from the monarchic regime to the present day (Condominas & Gaudillot 2000: 99; High 2014: 45).

There is nothing similar in Houay Yong or Pliya. The village shrines for the collective spirits in Houay Yong are used exclusively for religious purposes and are frequented by only a fraction of the village population, mostly elders and ritual specialists; they are not *boon sumsôn* to refer to the category of "gathering place" as mentioned above. In Pliya, while during the annual "making of the village (spirits)" all villagers are involved in one way or other, the specific ritual acts at the ritual house are conducted by specialists only.

When searching for public spaces in the non-Buddhist highlands, houses cannot be fully ruled out as part of the category, given the occasional or regular openness of houses for public uses (Carsten 2004: 43). Sketches of houses, also commonly used in ethnographies, make the walls appear firmer than they are (Allerton 2013). Rather than granting privacy, sounds, smells and souls easily diffuse through the cracks and spaces of the timber boards or bamboo mats (Allerton 2013; Helliwell 2006). Thus, to demarcate an enwalled private space and contrast it to public verandas obscures the porous boundary that the walls, in fact, often constitute.

In the village of Houay Yong, cement houses (L.: *heuan*) have nowadays become much more common than those made of wood. They often host large parties related to domestic rituals (see **Figure 1**), and there are many occasions when a medium or an elder is hired to address the house ancestors. Such ceremonies always involve sharing food and drinks with relatives, neighbours, friends and acquaintances. It is not rare to see as many as thirty or forty people gathered in the main room. There is a shrine for the house spirits on one side of the room, and the people sitting in that corner are usually male elders, or female mediums. The opposite side of the house with the kitchen is reserved for women. Despite this ritual dichotomy, people have a rather casual relation to such prescriptive rules, and the atmosphere of those common large gatherings is good-natured. At some point during most ceremonies, there is an exchange of blessing with people tying cotton strings around the wrists of other participants, which merges closely the attendance. The houses hosting such rituals can in some way be qualified as *boon sumsôn* (see above), although the house owners would frown on the use of that expression, for it gives the impression that anyone can enter their house. In fact, no one can come in without the owners' tacit approval. So, despite the collective dimension of such ritual events, their "public" dimension can be debated.

In Pliya, houses (K: *kaaŋ*) are far from neutral spaces, given their association with spirits and position in the local web of kin. Accessibility and movement in houses are very much predicated upon kinship and spiritual considerations. Accordingly, unless an important ritual occasion demands it, strangers and distantly related kin are either not supposed to enter houses, or prefer not to do so but rather to sit outside. Generally speaking, and by comparison with Houay Yong, outside spaces play a prominent role in everyday sociality. Not only verandas and other

open platforms of buildings, but also the village paths are places bustling with activity, brief information exchange and gossip especially in the early mornings and evenings, the time for going to the fields, or coming back from work.[7]



Figure 1. A celebration in a house in Houay Yong. © Pierre Petit 2009.

A celebration with a meal taking place in a house in Houay Yong. Hidden by the character on the left is a jar where guests are invited in groups of two to drink rice beer (L.: *lao hai*) with a straw.

Given the intricacies of movement in houses in Pliya, various kinds of social interaction take place on more "neutral" grounds. At workhouses (K: *cɔɔŋ*), members of different houses, kin groups, or neighbourhoods can come together (see **Figure 2**). No house spirit is there to watch, and visitors take no position vis-a-vis any kin group. The workhouse is a neutral, vernacular public space within Khmu villages like Pliya. Communal feasts and rituals, at least in part, take place at the workhouses. If visitors go to another neighbourhood without intending to enter a specific house, they head to a workhouse. This holds true especially also for strangers who enter the village: government officials who come for a meeting might engage in small talk at the workhouse, itinerant doctors might turn the workhouse into an *ad hoc* clinic while mobile vendors might turn it into a shop.

What we term the "workhouse" here is a building associated with a neighbourhood but open to the wider public;[8] it is a vernacular public space. The majority of the workhouses of Pliya are slightly elevated and quadrangular, with the newer ones

7 This observation applies to Houay Yong as well, but the hotspot of social life is the parties that transform the house into an animated collective space for a few hours, and sometimes a few days.

8 For more information about the workhouses see Évrard 2006: 125; Tayanin 1994: 17–18; Stolz 2021; for the neighbouring Rmeet see Izikowitz [1943] 1985 and Sprenger 2006: 212. The distribution and

being made of timber instead of bamboo. Next to the unfurnished interior, their outside space to the front entails a hearth, a seating-platform and a smithy (K: *rtyuut*) protected by an elongated roof. Exterior seating platforms also exist beneath family houses; they are more accessible than the house interior for occasional guests, as a place for hanging around in the shade during the hot season, for small talk and instant information exchange with neighbours and close kin. While commonly the vast majority of villagers spend their days away from the village in field and forest, those who have to stay in the village due to ritual prohibitions, care obligations, old age or sickness enjoy spending part of the day at workhouses where they will meet others and where time goes by more sociably and quickly. Also, the tiring task of looking after toddlers can become livelier when sitting outside and possibly meeting others. In contrast, keeping to oneself and "hiding" in one's house is frowned upon.



Figure 2. Ordinary scene of the workhouse. © Rosalie Stolz 2020.

An ordinary scene of the workhouse where neighbours, who for different reasons do not spend their daytime in field of forest, meet while doing handicrafts, comforting infants, or simply having a chat.

The nature of the public space created by the workhouse but also by the open log fires in front of the houses is shaped by local patterns of sociality. Especially during the cold season, neighbours regularly sit together at a fireplace, frequently meeting, sharing information, and perhaps going on gathering or hunting trips together. While sitting outside, kin relations do not need to be foregrounded,

use of workhouses varies according to region and locale, as well as through time. For instance, the larger common houses among the Khmu that housed the young, unmarried males have ceased to exist.

as they inevitably are inside houses; what has to be left out due to politeness inside, can be disclosed outside under the cover of darkness and in a hushed tone. The mode and tone of communication is different when sitting beside the fire outside, under the black sky, as compared to sitting inside with electric lighting and the occasional flickering tv-screen. The public that is assembled around the workhouse, and around a log fire as well, is not an undifferentiated collective subject devoid of kinship-based differences; instead, the workhouse is a space that allows for engaging them.

As these descriptions demonstrate, Houay Yong and Pliya have lively, albeit different, vernacular public spaces. In Houay Yong, domestic spaces can become the setting for huge parties open to many villagers having a connection to the home's occupants, meaning the space could be labelled as "semi-public" in consequence; in Pliya, under usual circumstances access to houses is more restricted, while workhouses offer a space to engage interactions across kinship-based and social differences. In both cases, meeting in those vernacular public spaces triggers a profuse flow of discussions on various topics, sustained by meals, alcohol, and humour. People tend to group together by age and gender although intermingling between these groups is not uncommon.

Emerging public spaces

After the core revolutionary period of the 1970s and early 1980s, Laos has taken the "road to development", under the twin injunctions of international cooperation and of the Lao socialist conception of progress. This is all the more visible since the turn of the millennium.

The landscape of the village changed under the leitmotivs of "development" (L: *kaan phatthanaa*), "escaping poverty", becoming "civilised" (L: *siivilai*) and "prosperous" (L: *chaleuun*). The circulating ideas of development and prosperity are closely tied to the state. The promise of prosperity is a source of the state's power: "By having the potential to bring prosperity, the Lao state gains social recognition and legitimacy as a rightful authority", Sarinda Singh argues (2011; cf. High 2014: 24ff.). Government policies triggered changes in the houses themselves, such as the civic obligation to have mosquito nets, toilets, soap, etc. Another major impact was the introduction of new structures, new buildings and new regulations that materialised the national urge for development. As we will show in this second part, exploring public spaces and their transformations in rural Laos entails exploring the changing relations to the state. We thus contribute to the endeavour of a "relational analysis of state control over space and territory" that Simon Creak and Keith Barney (2018) emphasised as one point of departure when studying contemporary Lao statecraft.

Boards of achievements

Let us begin with the boards of achievement (L.: *bai baan*), usually posted in the middle of the village, or at its entrance. These boards are based on official certificates provided by the district authorities, on behalf of the state, to testify

the village's accomplishment of socio-politico-economic goals promoted by the government (see **Figure 3**).



Figure 3. Board of achievements in Houay Yong. © Pierre Petit 2020.

In January 2020, fourteen such official titles were displayed in Houay Yong: cultural village, developed village, model health village (awarded for two different levels); the village hosts a qualified cell of the Party, the Youth Union, the Women Union, and the Lao Front for National Edification (the last three are mass organisations); the village is free from problems of criminality and drugs; it has achieved gender equality; it has a competent village militia (awarded twice successively); it has reduced the surface devoted to swidden cultivation. The boards are nailed to a panel in the central part of the village, which is simply an area where the dust road widens and where celebrations are hosted. Pliya, in contrast, has a far more modest number of achievements to display, numbering five in total until now; the village has not yet achieved the status of a "cultural village" but is still striving for it.

Through the award of such boards, the state expresses its "power to name" (Anagnost 1997: 100) and has managed to create an emulation linking together the thousands of villages of Laos along a shared representation of progress. The village authorities, on the other hand, express their "power to relate" to the state by having accomplished the rise in the national hierarchy of achievements: the village achievement board of Houay Yong is a prominent backdrop of pictures taken during official ceremonies, and is posted on Facebook accounts by the administration or local elites (see **Figure 4**). Let us come back to the argument about the ongoing fragmentation of space —the production of new categories of space, based on sectors and functions. According to Henri Lefebvre, this process typical of "modern" societies goes together —and this might seem paradoxical at first glance— with an homogenisation of space, in terms of "materials (…), management, control, surveillance, communication"; and with a third process: hierarchisation (Lefebvre 2000: xxiii, 1991: 282, 311 and 320–321). Indeed, as the board system is replicated from one village to another (like other emerging

forms of public space), all villages of the country become formally commutable, and comparable in terms of status achievement. The state appears here as "the great enframer of (the people's) lives" (Hansen & Stepputat 2001: 37). This system of boards, as well as the house tags affixed on each and every house in the country (see **Figure 5**), are all instrumental in creating, through their replicability and visuality, a "banal nationalism" (Billig 1995), a nationalism that does not appear through blatant assertions or collective pride, but rather through casual, unremarkable enactments that make people take the national "We" for granted.



Figure 4. A post on the Facebook wall of Muang Et's district administration publicises the renewal of the status of "developed village" awarded to Houay Yong.
Facebook post 2018.

On the left, authorities pose in front of the village's boards of achievements; on the right, the village head receives the award from a district authority in the village hall; on top are listed socioeconomic data about the village. This post illustrates the intermingling of the spatial and virtual public spaces.



Figure 5. A house tag in Houay Yong. © Pierre Petit 2020.

It reports, from top to bottom, the district, the village, the section of the village and the house number.

The village school

The government want this national "We" to be fostered among school children in the today ubiquitous village schools. School buildings, often surrounded by a large yard, exhibit the same structural form across the country. They are easily recognisable and certainly marked as nation-state buildings by the presence of the flag, at least as a painted symbol on the school sign, and by the use of the national language in teaching.[9] The school grounds are often located at a distance from the centre of the village and comprise the school building and its yard, the teachers' dormitory, kitchen building and a *pétanque* court.[10] What is of particular interest here is the fact school grounds are the largest public space that the state has instilled in the villages across the country.

School buildings and their surrounding areas are public spaces that extend in relevance and use beyond education: they can also be used as a venue for larger state ceremonies. It was at the village school yard that Pliya and a neighbouring village received their village awards (as crime-free villages) in March 2014 (see **Figure 6**). The school yard in Pliya also provides the setting for the celebration of the annual national teachers' day, accompanied by a Lao-style wrist-tying ceremony, a typical Lao dance in a circle (*lamvong*) and a feast, during which the villagers and teachers take turns to sponsor crates of (national) Beer Lao. In Houay Yong, where the school is quite distant from the village's centre, the communal hall can accommodate most events. Indeed, the school has also been used for a new purpose: in both villages, concerts targeting an audience of younger people also took place in the school yard —a clear sign of "modern society" (L.: *sangkhôm nyuk mai*).

9 With varying informal use of the local language (Cincotta-Segi 2011).

10 *Pétanque* is a highly popular game in Laos and, though initially banned due to its French-ness, is now a confirmed element in bureaucratic and official culture (Zuckerman 2018).



Figure 6. Ceremony in the village of Pliya. © Georg Mertens 2014.

A new status is awarded to the village in a ceremony on the grounds of the schoolyard in March 2014. On the left, the authorities sit at a decorated table facing the public. The boards that were temporarily fixed to the school wall for this occasion announce the aim of the event, the award of the status of a "crime-free" village.

Land-use planning

Elements like village boards, schools, and village halls (to be discussed later on) create new physical places related to the state. But beyond these, the people's relation to space is also transformed through land policies of various kinds that have been implemented throughout Laos since the early 1990s, in the countryside as in the cities.[11] Land-use planning is supposed to define the licit and illicit use of land around the villages, while the policy on land certification aims to guarantee access to land for farmers through temporary land use certificates. Although both policies have been tentatively implemented in most lowland villages of Laos since the first decade of this century, they are still in their initial stages in both regions featured in this research.

Land-use planning was implemented in 2014 in both Houay Yong and Pliya. According to the *naai baan* of Houay Yong, the definition of land-use in the different areas results from discussions which the village authorities and the villagers had with district officers. After their survey, the latter drew a map presently hanging with the village achievement boards in the central square of Houay Yong (see **Figure** 7). The total surface of the village territory (about 773 ha)

11 On land-use planning in Laos see, for instance, Ducourtieux *et al.* 2005, Évrard 2004, and Lestrelin *et al.* 2012.

has been divided into different zones, each associated with a function (village area, paddy fields, forests of different categories, etc.) and represented by a specific colour on the map. The zoning was practically implemented in the whole area with GPS technology. Five years later, in 2019, district employees came again to check if the zoning had been respected, using the same technology.

Whereas the village territory of Houay Yong does not comprise a fully protected area, almost half of the territory of Pliya (almost 2,500 ha out of just over 5,000 ha total) is part of the protected forest area of Nam Ha. This became the subject of debate during meetings with NGO-staff on the potential for establishing a production forest in early 2015, albeit without success. In terms of space control, the relation between villagers, local administration and staff of development agencies has been shown to be asymmetric. Parties' power for negotiating varies not only between upland and lowland villages, but also within the uplands depending on the general success of the villagers in relating to the state and on the political pedigrees of the local elites (Evrard 2007; Petit 2020: 42f.). This apparently explains why the villagers of Houay Yong were eventually able to shun the demand of the district officers for a fully protected area, whereas those of Pliya could not.

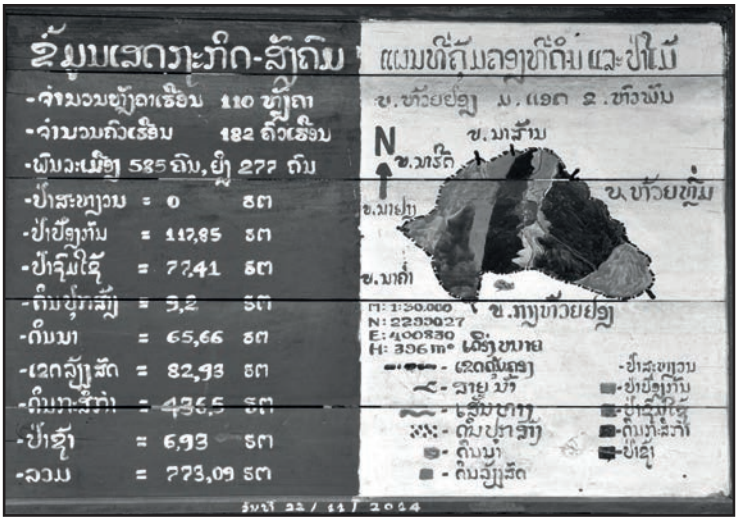


Figure 7. Map of the village territory of Houay Yong. © Pierre Petit 2017.

Land certification

Land certification is a related but different process which is conducted at the household level (Evrard 2004; Hall *et al.* 2011: 37–43; Prime Minister's Office 2008). In the countryside, this policy is supposed to guarantee access to land for the farmers through temporary land use certificates that in theory are valid for three years. However, in Houay Yong, only the building area has been concerned with certification up to now —and this has not yet happened in Pliya. The initial step was taken by the district authorities, who informed the village authorities in

2015 that land certification would be implemented for the building areas.[12] The village committee of Houay Yong organised a meeting with all the villagers to explain the process and the consequences of this change. Among the changes was the fact that people would no longer be able to extend their houses as they did in the past but could only do it on their own area, and that house taxes would from then on be calculated according to the surface one owned.

Cartographers drew precise maps of the areas attached to each house (see **Figure 8**), which was sometimes difficult. Neighbours could disagree on the limit between their respective areas, which prompted arbitrations by the village head. There was also a recurring problem about access to the houses that were not along the main road of the village, but further up, or down: the access paths (L: *thaang sooi*) were supposed to remain collective space despite the will of the owners living along the road who wanted to privatise as much space as possible around their houses. A final problem in Houay Yong was fencing. There was a village meeting dedicated to this issue and the decision was made that in no case should fencing impede access to the nearby houses. The property certificates have not been issued by the administration until now, but small cement landmarks (L: *lak*) have been sold to the villagers to delineate their properties (see **Figure 9**). They are sunk into the ground, usually at the corners of each property. The number appearing on the top of the marker refers to its position on the map of the land parcels (**Figure 8**). Note here the entanglement of state policies with specific technologies and materials (cartography, GPS, geometry, cement, colour maps, photocopy), which concretely impact the relation villagers have with their everyday living space.

The *naai baan* of Houay Yong said that defining domestic land boundaries has been time-consuming: he faced many disagreements due to owners trying to maximize their property. Interestingly, when he faced such disagreements, his main argument referred to the state: he explained that land is the land of the government (L: *din lattabaan*); "we are able to live thanks to the help of the government, so we must be able to share; we are all Lao people; if you don't want to share, where will you live?" This argument was well accepted, and all problems have been eventually resolved.

This process of certification has created an unprecedented distinction between private and public land in the village, which replaced the former casual distinction between houses and their outside area. Interestingly, despite the pretences that such measures aim to protect the rights of villagers, their practical implementation performatively makes the state the owner by default of all lands. For years, the Constitution and Land Law have certainly held the view that the state is the owner of all lands, but without the concrete delimitation between private and public land in the village, this statement would remain wishful state-thinking. Now, having a house in a specific place has become a kind of temporary right entrusted to a given family by the almighty owner.

12 The certification process is supposed to apply to agricultural land in the future. However, no schedule has been fixed up to now. These changes could drastically affect the present situation.



Figure 8. Map of the parcels of land of the houses, Houay Yong village. © Pierre Petit 2017.

Map of the parcels of land of each house within the central district of Houay Yong village. The access paths appear in-between the properties.

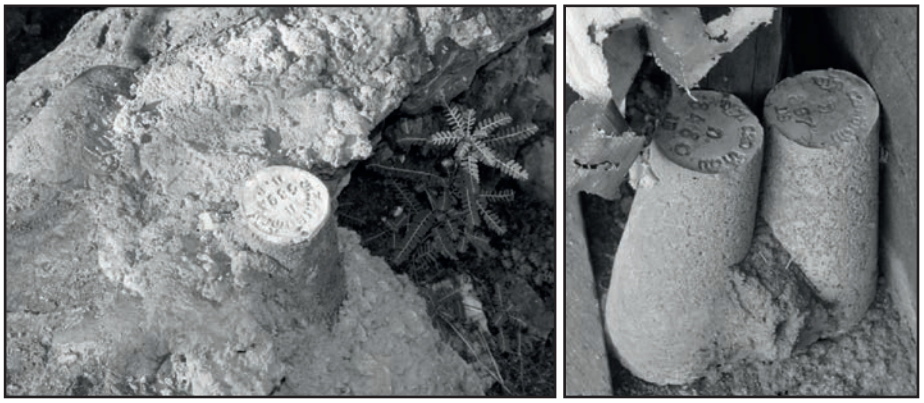


Figure 9. Cement landmarks in Houay Yong. © Pierre Petit 2017.

Soundscapes

The state has not only held sway over new public buildings and tangible artefacts such as maps and fences but has also found its way into the villages' soundscapes. Soundscapes in the countryside include a wide array of components, from cowbells ringing to Lao pop songs blasting from sound systems. Of relevance for our discussion on public space is the deployment of a system of loudspeakers strictly controlled by the local authorities across the whole country. This system of communication is, as we shall see, at odds with the very notion of public sphere developed by Habermas (1978) to describe the rise of institutions where political and social issues can be debated and criticised. Rather, sound appears, in Laos as elsewhere in Southeast Asia (Porath 2019), as a performative dimension in the implementation of hierarchy.

After the 1975 revolution in Laos, public loudspeakers "were one of the first things installed by the new regime" (Evans 1998: 18, n5). They fell into disrepair over time and appeared to be replaced by radio and television programs. However, the public address system continues to exist and is part of the transformation and experience of public space in rural Laos. In Luang Namtha Province, where Pliya is located, every morning at 6:30 the sounding of the national anthem through the public address system marks the beginning of the daily news and announcements, including local, regional news as well as national good news of increased harvests and notifications of the visits of state officials.[13] The news is, as Nathan Badenoch (2018) shows, "delivered in the official-sounding language that the Lao government uses in formal situations, but the announcers may use any number of local varieties of Lao pronunciation". The use of the Lao language in this public context is not questioned while in upland provinces Lao is a second language for the vast majority of the population. The case is slightly different when it comes to rural contexts. While loudspeakers are also a common sight in upland villages, they are not connected to the regional network, but are used on occasion by the village head or the person in charge of news announcements. In Houay Yong, until 2014, a public crier used to make announcements in about ten different spots of the village, sharing demands and news on behalf of the village head. In 2014, a sound system (L.: *alô*, from the French "Allo") was installed and the village head now speaks directly from his house. The announcements concern meetings, warnings against prohibited activities, wandering cattle, agriculture, training courses. There are also general announcements, such as when a trader wants to buy cattle, or when meat is available in the village. The system can also be used for broadcasting news about a death in the village or about ceremonies to be held at the village shrine, but family ceremonies are never announced in this way: only the former are of "collective" (L.: *luam*) concern.

This system, like the *dispositifs* mentioned in the former sections, is a very efficient way to address the villagers as subjects of the state. This clearly appears in the

13 Regional differences are noticeable: this well-organised system has not been observed in Houaphan Province.

announcement made by the village head on the eve of the New Year *kinchiang* ceremonies of 2012.[14] A sound system was rented for the occasion, and the village head addressed the population before the cultural performances that would launch the festival:

> On behalf of the village authorities, I announce that from this minute on, we invite all the villagers (L.: *phoo mèè phii noong*; that is, father and mothers, elder and younger siblings) to participate. If there is any weak point or good point reported, we shall consider it and take it into consideration; this is the first point. The second point is that tomorrow, all the households should wake up early and clean the space around their house. The third point is that every household owning a national flag should display it to celebrate our festival and to welcome guests. The vice governor of the province of Houaphan will come to celebrate and enjoy with us. All households have heard this announcement and should behave accordingly. Thank you.

This speech is interesting for different reasons. The village head publicly addresses the villagers with a generic term for kinsmen and kinswomen (L: *phoo mèè phii noong*) that does not contradict their identity as subjects of the nation-state. The announcement replicates elements of bureaucratic talk, as in the first point mentioned (the good and bad points to report) and in the final sentence asking everyone to comply. The point about the obligation for householders to clean the space around the houses is revealing in the way state authorities feel they are allowed to interfere with the village public space, and gain control of it through command. As for the request to display the national flag, this is pure wishful thinking, for no villager —even the village head himself— has such a flag. But it is very revealing of the way the village space and individual houses are imagined as a component of the Lao nation. In Pliya, the local public address system is used on occasion in order to summarise governmental notifications in the Khmu language. These notifications are addressed to the village head first, who informs the official in charge of the public address system (K: *talɛɛŋ* or *pkaat khao*, lit. to announce news). Ta Kham, who holds this office perpetually, is one of the best educated local villagers, a former village head and party member who is well versed in understanding the Lao language used in bureaucratic writings. Ta Kham is also a much sought-after singer of traditional Khmu songs, and during announcements he speaks eloquently to let his Khmu sound particularly officially while still keeping his main message understandable to the village's public. In this way his task is no more nor less than, to use Badenoch's expression (2018), "translating the state".

Although the loudspeaker system is not directly controlled outside the village, the use of it is quite disciplined. Announcements are almost exclusively official notifications, issued in the district, that reach the village, often informing the villagers about an upcoming visit of officials and even the names of the

14 *Kinchiang* is a three-day festival taking place among the Tai Vat at the same time as the *Têt*, the Vietnamese New Year. After the opening ceremonies organised by the village authorities, the celebration includes entertainment like traditional games, singing, dancing (all taking place in the central street of the village), and meals (a communal meal in the village hall, and family meals taking place in houses). It is followed by a yearly ritual devoted to the guardian spirits of the village (Petit 2020).

persons who should be present during a meeting are called out. Common to the announcements is that they entail a specific order, and that they almost never have anything to do with local affairs, unlike the situation in Houay Yong.

Interestingly, when persons are called out to participate during a meeting, their full names, both first and last names, are given. Khmu names are comprise the person's name and that of their father. To call someone by the proper name would be utterly impolite and often, rather, the personal name is omitted while the kin term of address suffices. In the announcements of Ta Kham, who uses the proper terms of address in other circumstances, specific kin relations are omitted. The use of personal names in public addresses creates an official public space, strongly related to the state, that appears disconnected from the kinship-based sociality that otherwise shapes everyday behaviour in Pliya. Although the public address system could also be used to announce an upcoming taboo day, ritual proceedings etc., it is explicitly not used on such occasions. Here, vernacular modes are used instead to spread information in the early morning, often before dawn. What underlies the selective and self-disciplined use of the loudspeakers is a demarcation of state-centred public acoustic space, apparently devoid of kinship and the socio-ritual nitty-gritty of daily life one the one hand, and the publicly unacknowledged vernacular modes of disseminating information on the other.

Communicating in public spaces: The workhouse *vs* the village hall

The above discussion of the soundscape produced by the village loudspeakers highlighted that communication is central to the topic of public space. To further explore this dimension, we now turn to the difference between the mode of communication in two radically different public spaces: the workhouse on the one hand, and the communal hall on the other. The contrast of vernacular and emerging public spaces in both presented cases exemplifies the spatial imprints on sociality. As mentioned above, Khmu workhouses are inclusive buildings; the common workhouses do not have elevations or seats which mean people sit at different heights when sitting together. This translates into communicative practice as well: rather than one's kin– or other position being important it is the entertaining character of one's words, the persuasive force of one's suggestions and comments alone that attract other people's attention. The public space of the workhouse is, thereby, larger than the building and includes the external and surrounding areas as well. During ritual occasions, the ritual centre is the circular arrangement of the elders and most important the (mainly male) guests —important in terms of kinship not office— who are assembled around the jar of rice beer (see **Figure 10**). However, numerous further guests, in particular women, sit close to entrance of the workhouse at the bench or around the log fire in front of the workhouse. While during everyday interaction at workhouses, gender does not play any major role, on ritual occasions the male connotation of the workhouse, which according to local accounts was characteristic of the past before resettlement, is relatively more foregrounded. Yet the boundaries are highly permeable: what happens inside can be easily seen and, more easily, heard outside. The workhouse as public space does not stop at its outer walls; instead, many guests will not find their place inside

the workhouse but will crowd around the edges, outer benches and surroundings and contribute their musings and deliberations from outside.



Figure 10. A glimpse of a lively scene in front of a workhouse (*to the right*) during a wedding in Pliya. © Rosalie Stolz 2014.

The close kin of wife and groom and invited elders sit in and at the workhouse, drink, sing and chat. What receives the attention of the bystanders of different ages are the attempts of the bride's kin to sabotage the preparation of a meal which is the responsibility of the groom's side: the bride's kin successfully stole the cooking pot and extinguished the fire. Although these acts of sabotage are conducted in a playful mood, for each successful act the groom is fined.

This is one of the major differences between the workhouse and the communal hall. The communal hall in Pliya does not have a transitional space between the inside and the other village spaces. There is no attached space to gather outside for those who do not wish to enter it. Although the gaps between the narrow, vertical timber boards in the upper part of the wall provide the outside spectators with glimpses and sounds of what happens inside, the spectators remain silent.

A specific feature of the communal halls in Pliya, Houay Yong and elsewhere, is the spatial organisation of its rectangular, interior space. In Houay Yong, the authorities speak from the side of the room hosting the table of honour, under the portraits of the fathers of the Lao revolution (Kaysone and Souphanouvong), surrounded by a map of the world, certificates of village achievements, and posters showing the subdivisions of the national army and the different national flags of the world. When it is used, the microphone circulates around this side of the room only. Facing the authorities, the villagers sit on benches, like pupils in a classroom, many of them writing in notebooks during the meetings (Petit 2020: 43–45). This is also exactly the case in Pliya —albeit with less furniture and without writing utensils (see **Figure 11**). The lack of an adequate number of tables and benches in Pliya further exacerbates the social dichotomy performed by the concrete organisation of this public space: the visiting officials sit at the front on

benches while the villagers either squat or sit on low stools. The communication is clearly marked by lectures of officials and, only if prompted, brief responses by men who are most often also local office holders.



Figure 11. The former deputy of the province's governor visits the village.
© Rosalie Stolz 2015.

The officials from his entourage sit at the tables in front of the villagers, which can be guessed from the water bottles. The village audience squats at a distance or sits on low stools. The lecture is given in Lao which is more or less understood by mainly the male and younger parts of the audience.

There is a certain ambivalence involved: the socio-spatial organisation of the communal hall makes the state and officials appear as external and hierarchically superior, while at the same time the layout places these external guests right in the midst of the village. Mitchell (2006: 184) duly argues that perceiving the state as an institution external to society and opposed to it, is itself a "state effect" and "a defining characteristic of the modern political order". The village meetings in the communal hall showcase how this kind of representation can be created through spatialised performances in everyday life. The dichotomy and hierarchy between people (L: *pasaasôn*) and the representatives of the state are properly actualised in the visual and the sonic properties of the meeting. This building could be described as a Foucauldian *dispositif* to materialise the state and to make the state's subjects embody the discipline expected from them.

Conclusion: New public spaces in rural Laos?

The concept of public space turns out to be heuristically relevant in rural settings. It encourages thinking about relations between dimensions usually broached separately by researchers: rituals, district cartographers, merrymaking, village boards, national identity, or loudspeakers. It also highlights the transforming nature of public spaces in this context. Although an older casual relation to communal

space has not vanished and was not replaced by the new regulations, the processes and innovations described above make clear that something new has been added, and mediates the relation between the people and "their" land. From now on, new technologies, state regulations, a new lexicon and bureaucrats of the district are part of their relation to land. To phrase it differently, the state has entered into people's relation with their everyday space, and its representatives claim the state as the ultimate authority on such issues (Petit 2017a). This echoes what Henri Lefebvre (2009: 228) points to in his often quoted saying, "Is not the secret of the state, hidden because it is so obvious, to be found in space?"

The modern state is obviously much more present in the village now than it was in the past. This statement rests on three sets of observations. First, there is a series of public places that fall entirely into the domain of the state, such as the school for example. These places are under the direct control of the local state representatives, like the village authorities and the schoolteachers. Second, there are places that have become public by contrast to the newly acknowledged "private" land; that notion is a recent introduction because in the past there was simply no such characterisation of the road and other places which had been left unappropriated. From now on, it is manifest that such space cannot be appropriated because it falls under the domain of the state. Third, some places have become emblematic of the village's collective identity in relation to the nation-state, as the area hosting the map of the village and the achievement boards. Here, the public dimension derives from the fact that these places are devoted to the public display of the nation-state's message —indeed, a similar view could be developed about the village's soundscape. If state-making appeared front and centre in our discussion, we should stress in this concluding section that an approach phrased in terms of public spaces reveals other processes going on in the countryside of Laos. We shall here mention three dimensions left unexplored in this article, due to limited space. First, the two villages have recently seen the emergence of public places related to youth and leisure. We have already mentioned the transformation of the school into a concert hall; we noticed also in both villages the recent emergence of restaurants/drinking halls where customers —mostly teenagers and young adults— consume Lao city food and beer. Second, we have discussed only incidentally the way new materials and technologies influence public spaces. The village broadcast system and the GPS of the cartographers are a clear evidence of this influence, but there is much more to say: new building materials, like cement, have an impact on the village's texture and social relations; barbed wire can trigger the privatisation of land; while the internet and social networks like Facebook have created a totally new social space that has become very popular, in Houay Yong and increasingly also in Pliya. There is much more to say on the way technologies and materialities influence the social construction of space and public space. Third, "heritagisation" is another emerging vector of transformation of the public space in Houay Yong: in February 2020, a cultural house was built in the style of the older wooden houses that have disappeared during the last decade (see **Figure 12**). The aim of this local initiative is not clear yet, but it is supposed to showcase the culture of the past. The very design of the house brings to the fore the issue of the visuality and semiotics

of public space, another dimension that certainly deserves more attention if we continue the research.

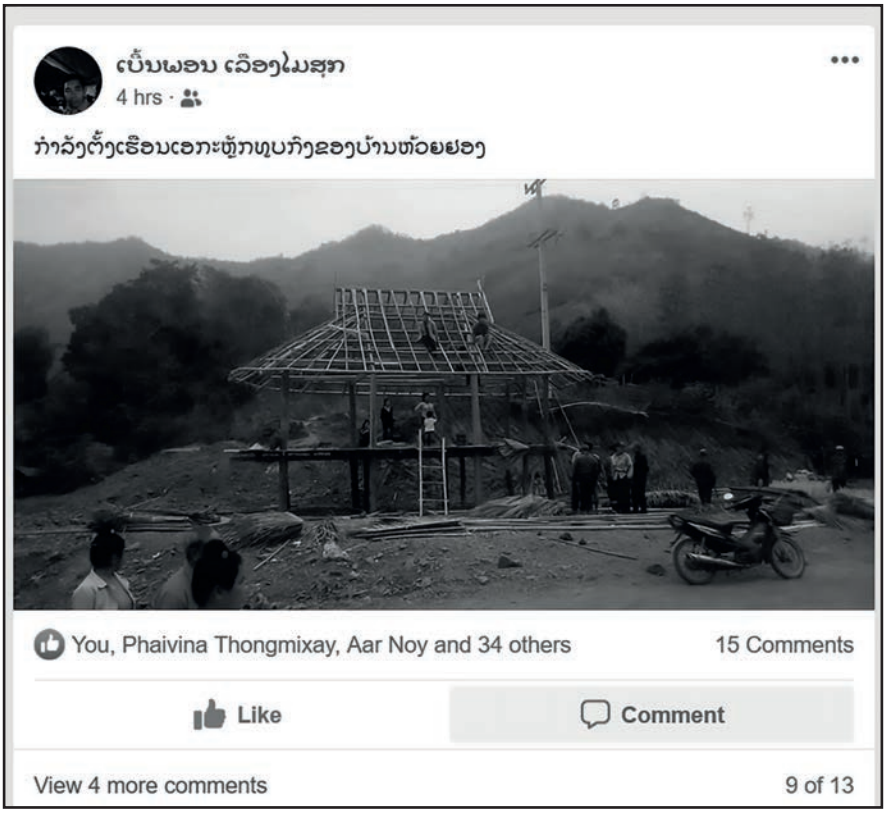


Figure 12. A Facebook post related to the building of a cultural house in Houay Yong.
Courtesy of Beunphone Leuangmaisuk 2020.

Applying the concept of public space to rural settings makes very visible the increasing subdivision of the village space into different categories: some buildings are linked directly to the state; the village territory is zoned; and a clear distinction between public and domestic/private spaces appears on the maps related to land certification. These are all steps towards the fragmentation of the village space, a process described by Henri Lefebvre in his seminal book on the production of space. He noted that the present era is characterised by a

> dominant trend towards fragmentation, separation, and disintegration, a trend subordinated to a centre or to a centralised power and advanced by a knowledge which works as power's proxy (Lefebvre 1991 [1974]: 9).

This is exactly what is going on in Houay Yong and Pliya, where technical and structural measures (in the two senses of the term "measure") change the local appraisal of space and create a distinction between a domestic/private and a still unnamed residual space that falls into the domain of the state. Yet as the example of the public address system has indicated, this public space is not only restricted

to tangible structures, but also includes the sonic sphere as well as a range of performative behaviours and interactions that are part of the enactment of public space. The fragmentation of space, in other words, produces also a fragmentation of sociality.

Finally, the comparison of the cases of Houay Yong and Pliya shows that the emergence of public spaces in upland villages does occur, and along similar lines, although neither in entirely similar ways nor at a similar pace in the two villages. The number of boards of achievements that a village can accumulate, the outcome of land-use planning and registration procedures, and the state of the communal hall and the school are not only a function of the state's efforts to incorporate the rural upland areas into its larger web: it also exemplifies the differing success of the villagers' attempts to actively relate to the state. The presence or absence of influential local elites and of a local history that fits into the present-day retellings of the past shape the conditions under which villages can relate to the state. But despite these differences, and despite the resilience of vernacular spaces of collective sociality, local subjectivities toward the village space are undergoing a major change, with an unprecedented acknowledgement of the state's physical presence in the immediate, everyday environment. The multiform emergence of public space in the village context certainly shapes the inclusion of the rural uplands into the socialist nation-state of today, and even more of tomorrow.

Acknowledgements

We thank the anonymous reviewers and editors of this volume for their inspiring comments, and the editorial assistant Isabelle Renneson for her work. Rosalie Stolz's recent fieldwork was made possible by a postdoctoral research stipend from the Fritz Thyssen Foundation; Pierre Petit's research stays in Houay Yong were funded by the FNRS. Our heartfelt thanks go to our interlocutors and friends in Laos.

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