


# CHANGING LIVES IN LAOS

## SOCIETY, POLITICS, AND CULTURE IN A POST-SOCIALIST STATE

Edited by
**Vanina Bouté** and **Vatthana Pholsena**

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# Contents

*List of Illustrations* ix

1. Introduction 1
*Vanina Bouté and Vatthana Pholsena*

**PART I: STATE FORMATION AND POLITICAL LEGITIMATION**

2. The History and Evolution of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party 19
*Martin Rathie*

3. Shaping the National Topography: The Party-State, National Imageries, and Questions of Political Authority in Lao PDR 56
*Oliver Tappe*

4. 'Special Operation Pagoda': Buddhism, Covert Operations, and the Politics of Religious Subversion in Cold-War Laos (1957–60) 81
*Patrice Ladwig*

5. War Generation: Youth Mobilization and Socialization in Revolutionary Laos 109
*Vatthana Pholsena*

6. Socialist Pathways of Education: The Lao in East Germany 135
*Nicole Reichert*

PART II: NATURAL RESOURCE GOVERNANCE AND AGRARIAN CHANGE

7. The Political Ecology of Upland/Lowland Relationships in Laos since 1975 165
*Olivier Évrard and Ian G. Baird*

8. The New 'New Battlefield': Capitalizing Security in Laos' Agribusiness Landscape 192
*Michael B. Dwyer*

9. Reaching the Cities: New Forms of Network and Social Differentiation in Northern Laos 221
*Vanina Bouté*

PART III: ETHNIC MINORITIES ENGAGING WITH MODERNITY

10. Ethnic Belonging in Laos: A Politico-Historical Perspective 251
*Grégoire Schlemmer*

11. Piglets Are Buffaloes: Buddhification and the Reduction of Sacrifices on the Boloven Plateau 281
*Guido Sprenger*

12. Rubber's Affective Economies: Seeding a Social Landscape in Northwest Laos 301
*Chris Lyttleton and Yunxia Li*

PART IV: IN SEARCH OF OPPORTUNITIES: MOVING ACROSS AND OUTSIDE THE COUNTRY

13. Migration and Mobility in Laos 327
*Sverre Molland*

14. Patterns and Consequences of Undocumented Migration from Lao PDR to Thailand 350
*Kabmanivanh Phouxay*

15. Textiles Economy in Laos: From the Household to the World 374
*Annabel Vallard*

*Bibliography* 392

*Contributors* 440

*Index* 444

CHAPTER 9

# Reaching the Cities: New Forms of Network and Social Differentiation in Northern Laos[1]

Vanina Bouté

## Introduction

One morning in January 1999, Itjeng set down her basket, which was piled so high that it was taller than her, took one last look at her village, and began to cry. Her two youngest sons, who were also struggling with heavy loads, prodded her gently: there was no time for dawdling if they were to arrive before nightfall, and the bundles containing their remaining possessions were not easy to carry. The next day they would load them onto the bus before embarking on a several-hundred-kilometer journey to the province of Luang Namtha, where Itjeng's husband, Tao, was finishing work on their future home. On the narrow mountain path that led to the town of Phongsaly, some eight hours away on foot, they were joined by a band of pupils returning to high school after a weekend in the village. Of her group of fellow travellers, none paid any attention to Itjeng's tears, or the fact that had left her native village of Thongpi behind—along with her parents, uncles, aunts, and cousins whom she might never see again. Were they simply indifferent, or was her plight unremarkable in a village whose families were upping and leaving every month?

At the time, departures like Itjeng's were very common in Thongpi, as with all other villages of the mountainous Phunoy district in the province of Phongsaly. This is a region that, since the 18th century, has been mainly occupied by a large Tibeto-Burman speaking popula-

tion of around 40,000 people (as of 2005). Once an important village and for several decades the main administrative center in the canton (*tasaeng*), the population of Thongpi had been slowly dwindling since the 1970s. When I began my research in 1999, only 40 of the 100 families who lived there 20 years earlier still remained. By 2005, 20 more had left, and the village completely disappeared in the next year. 30 other villages in the surrounding area shared a similar fate: some of their inhabitants were ordered to move by provincial authorities who were eager to place them closer to major roads and encourage them to plant cash crops (sugar cane and tea) sought by Chinese investors. Most of these villages had, like Thongpi, been marked by a long-drawn-out depopulation in the run-up to their definitive disappearance. Within just a few years, hundreds of peasants had left the district.

Following the migrants from Phunoy to cities in northern Laos, as well as small towns in the lowlands and district capitals where they were dispersed, I encountered many families from other provinces and from other ethnic groups, all of whom embarked on a similar path. According to the most recent national census (Steering Committee 2016: 53), some 18 percent of Laotians have moved away from their native districts over the last decade. In all likelihood, this figure, which is already very high, does not represent the full extent of migration because it does not take into account population movements within individual districts—where most of the forced displacements occur—nor much of the migration from villages to district and provincial capitals.

The current context of significant peasant mobility, which is not only linked to measures implemented on a national level, but also to the economic attractiveness of certain provinces, has been marked by two interrelated and emergent phenomena: (i) the development of new urban centers, (ii) and significant rural migration to these localities. Between 2005 and 2015, urban populations grew by 4 percent, significantly outpacing 1.45 percent growth in the overall population, and massively exceeding the rural population growth rate, which, at 0.6 percent, is in itself a telling illustration of the extent of rural–urban migration.[2]

The goal of this chapter is to present and contextualize both of these phenomena, which need to be considered in tandem, with an approach based on ethnographic investigation. Its starting point will

be the consideration of specific details of these contemporary migratory flows, their causes, and the multiple strategies established by migrants preparing for their departure. It will show how voluntary migration from contemporary rural communities is, on the one hand, closely linked to forced displacements that took place in the 1990s; and on the other, how this mobility has emerged from networks created by the first wave of migration in the 1970s, whereby a generation of subsistence farmers' sons moved to provincial towns to join the civil service of the young Lao People's Democratic Republic. Examining the links between today's rural migrants and the farmers' sons of 40 years ago, I will consider the history of the emergence of these towns and their sociological characteristics, as well as the difficulties faced by rural migrants from different periods and backgrounds with regard to their integration.

## Leaving the Villages: Why?

As Molland's chapter on the topic further explains, since the 2000s, the displacement of populations has mainly been driven by a rural development policy that centers on the creation of "priority development zones," which, in turn, involves the displacement and regrouping of villages onto road networks to facilitate the trade of cash crops (e.g. tea, rubber latex, coffee, corn). At the same time, other villages have been evacuated to make way for major infrastructure projects (e.g. dams, mines, agricultural concessions), often are linked to foreign investment. Along with this forced relocation,[3] voluntary migration flows marked by new processes have emerged on an unprecedented scale.[4] These migrations appear to have a massive impact on subsistence farming communities of all the ethnic groups[5] in the region, be they inhabitants of mountain villages or residents of displaced villages who migrate voluntarily.

In cases of spontaneous migration from the mountains to other rural areas, departures are motivated by the prospect of economic development (Bouté 2014). Laos' recent development policies have also been a major factor behind the departure of subsistence farmers their villages: in particular, measures such as the eradication of opium cultivation, banning of slash-and-burn agriculture, and the forced relocation of remote villages to promote flooded rice cultivation, and the production of other cash crops in areas accessible by road. Insofar



**Plate 9.1** The newly built village of Komen May, Phongsaly province, 2013. Three villages were supposed to be resettled here after the flooding of their village by a Chinese Company; half of the families decided not to go and left the province.

as policy can negatively impact living conditions, it can as well spur the "voluntary" migration of villagers seeking better living conditions elsewhere.[6] At times, just anticipating their impending forced relocation influences their decision to leave. For instance, in the Phongsaly district, following the announcement of the future relocation of their village, the richest families began to move on their own accord. Thereafter, between the relocation announcement and the actual implementation, the other families, who had been in a state of constant apprehension over the coming move, devised strategies to avoid being relocalized by the authorities. When the village was finally relocated, only a handful of families remained (Bouté 2005). Typically, the departure of large numbers from the mountains makes life even more difficult for those who remain, thereby impelling them to leave. In 1999, the successive departure of the district's young people notably resulted in a sharp increase in the median age in Phongsaly. Those who stayed had trouble finding spouses, were too few or too old to work the fields, and their mutual aid systems were undermined by the geographical dispersion of familial networks. Faced with such circumstances, almost every family in Phongsaly attempted to establish their own departure strategy.[7] In other cases, the slightest incident (e.g. a fire or poor harvest) would spur a significant number of families to relocate. Finally, most mountain farmers ultimately relocated

because a refusal to do so would be met with official disapproval—the authorities were opposed to isolated communities that refused to "develop" (*patthana*), and routinely condemned their "backward" agricultural practices.

Not everyone is equally able to leave, and family networks play an essential role both in making departure possible, and more critically in the choice of destination. Individuals—but not entire families—who migrate stand to benefit from the support of relatives who left before them. This is very often the case for poor elderly migrants, who wait for their migrant children to first achieve a certain standard of living that will enable them to provide a home for their parents.

Elderly people from the village of Samlang (in Phongsaly province), for example, found themselves dispersed in localities as diverse as Vientiane, Luang Phrabang, Xayabury, Bokeo, and other towns in northern Laos. After leaving their original villages, some continue to move repeatedly for such reasons as conflict with sons- or daughters-in-law, and difficulties adjusting to a different climate or urban environment. In some instances, elderly parents opt to stay for several months each at the respective homes of their various children living in different parts of country. This is the case for Taoteng, who regularly stays for six months with one of his sons in Vientiane, then spends the next six months with his other son residing in the lowlands in the province of Phongsaly, followed by another half-year stay with another son who lives in the town of Huay Xay (in Bokeo Province). In numerous cases, because the children prefer that their parents stay in a different locality from them, they would house them with distant cousins and send them money regularly. This sort of mobility also affects the very young: primary and secondary school students are occasionally sent to pursue their studies in the city and to live with aunts there, and thereafter go on to stay with cousins or older brothers in other areas, so as to avoid becoming a permanent burden on just one member of the family. In fact, only single young adults are able to migrate without the benefit of a network (e.g. seeking employment at garment factories in Vientiane, or joining the army), on condition that they have a sufficient command of Lao.

When the goal is to relocate an entire family, migratory strategies are somewhat different. In order to migrate, a family must not only benefit from a well-established network of relatives, but also from sufficient economic resources (until recently capitalized in livestock

or opium). They must effectively be able to take charge of the cost of relocating and setting up a new home, including the initial acquisition of a site, followed by the construction of a house, and lastly, in a best case scenario, the purchase of farm land. Networks of relatives who have already migrated—which may be quite small initially—play an essential role in enabling the progressive arrival of newcomers. Many relocating families thus adopt similar strategies in their quest to settle in a location with accessibly priced agricultural land, and where they have a sufficient number of relatives for mutual aid. Thitpan had a choice of three possible migration destinations where he had brothers and sisters, notably two in the lowlands where he had a good chance of acquiring a rice paddy. However, because his parents, who live with him, refused to put up with the hot climate of the plains, they finally settled in the town of Phongsaly, where he bought a clearing in which he plants tea, and has a rice paddy terrace. For Ina, a widow with seven children, when the last inhabitants of her village of Samlang finally left, she did not have the means to migrate to the city. Instead, she moved to a village that was closer to the road, but that was only accessible via a poor-quality dirt track—which meant that land could be had for next to nothing—and sent her children to live with different brothers and sisters in the towns of Phongsaly, Muang Khoa, and Xay.

On occasion, these regrouping dynamics can involve up to a dozen families. In the main town in the district of Boun Tai, a Khmu officer informed his close relatives of an opportunity to acquire rice fields in what was then a large village. These relatives passed the word on to others, who also alerted their kin, and as a result, in the space of a few years, some 50 families ended up moving to the new locality. Similarly, dozens of Ho families in Phongsaly have, for years, invested their opium revenues in shops staffed by their relatives, in preparation for an outright ban on poppy cultivation and their subsequent move to the city. They can be seen today on the main street of Oudomxay where they own most of the shops, or in the Talat Leng neighborhood, Vientiane's "night market."

## New Towns and Successive Waves of Farmer's Migration

Unlike previous migrations that have marked the history of Laos, rural to urban center migration is a recent phenomenon that is growing

rapidly. Towns and cities accounted for 17 percent of the country's population in 1995, 27 percent in 2005 (or 1,220,374 people) and, according to the last National Census, this figure increased to 32.9 percent in 2015.[8] Over the last decade, peasant populations have been increasingly concentrated in provincial capitals, district administrative centers in the lowlands, and also in booming country towns. This urban growth was already perceptible in 1995. Sisouphantong and Taillard (2000: 46) noted that population movements to and from towns accounted for more than two-thirds of migratory movements between districts and between provinces. In 2015, this trend was not only confirmed, but shown to have increased in scale: in 20 years, as the following table shows, some provincial capitals have virtually doubled in size.

**Table 9.1** Percentage/number of citizens in provincial capitals and district administrative centers in four provinces of northern Laos, 1995 and 2015.

| | *Phongsaly* | *Huaphan* | *Oudomxay* | *Luang Namtha* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1995 | 5.7% (8,658 hab.) | 5.9% (14,404 hab.) | 15.1% (31,678 hab.) | 17.1% (19,621 hab.) |
| 2015 | 19.1% (30,065 hab.) | 14.3% (41,482 hab.) | 24.1% (73,986 hab.) | 27.1% (47,583 hab.) |

*Source*: State Planning Committee, 1997; Steering Committee for Census of Population and Housing, 2016.

These migration flows cannot be properly understood without taking into account the networks that have been discreetly constructed between towns and villages in recent decades—networks that, from the 1990s on, have enabled peasants to arrive and establish homes. The large and small towns, which have been destinations for some 30 years, possess certain common characteristics in terms of their formation and sociological composition, and these should also be examined.

## Towns in Laos: A Recent Innovation

The notion of cities might even be considered surprising in Laos. It does not have any of the great metropolises that suggest the notion of an Asian city, and the modest towns and large villages in the country

appear to be very recent creations. This perhaps explains—along with the limited and fragmented information concerning them which is available—the relative lack of interest in the history of towns in Laos, notably the former royal capitals—Luang Phrabang, Vientiane, and Champasak from the 17th century. Of course, there also were small *muang*, that is to say power centers, which appeared and disappeared at the whim of regional political configurations and power struggles, acting as centers for individual principalities (Lorrillard 2010). In any case, it was only at the end of the 19th century that the development of the five major towns in the country really began. All of them were located on the banks of the Mekong: the two historical capitals—Luang Phrabang and Vientiane, which was partially reborn from its ruins in the wake of its destruction by the Siamese army—as well as Savannakhet, Pakse, and Thakhek. The development of these towns was linked to the establishment of the colonial administration, and the simultaneous arrival of Vietnamese (recruited as colonial civil servants) and Chinese (generally shopkeepers) in these new towns.

The demographic growth and the increase in surface area occupied by provincial capitals and district administrative centers in Laos are even more recent. The relative novelty of the urban phenomenon in Laos has notably been highlighted by official discussions on the criteria to be taken into account when defining what should be considered a town. In 2005, the Lao Statistics Bureau proposed a definition that retained five main criteria for "urban" villages; however, this definition was contested by experts who proposed other criteria in their turn (see Rabé et al. 2007).[9] Today's towns—provincial capitals and district administrative centers—have, for the most part, developed from villages that were already established at the beginning of the 20th century, and had a political function. For example, the capital of Oudomxay province in the lowlands was formed from two lowland Tai Lue villages, one of which was home to the rulers of the local muang ("Muang Xay"). Others, like the town of Phongsaly, were created in colonial times: Phongsaly emerged as a political center in the early 20th century when the colonial administration chose to establish the headquarters of the fifth military territory next to the large Phunoy village of Senpok. At the same time, a large Ho community, which specialized in trade, came to live there, creating another village that was contiguous with the first. However, for a long time, the development of these towns remained on a small scale. In the 1950s,

most of the provincial capitals (Sam Neua, Phongsaly, Namtha, Xieng Khuang, Sayabury, Saravane, Attapeu) were still large villages with populations whose inhabitants ranged between 2,000 and 3,000 in number.[10] Their rapid growth did not begin until the 1970s, when the government redivided the national territory into 16 provinces, each of which were granted a large degree of autonomy, notably to ensure food self-sufficiency. This deconcentration was promoted by the establishment of the first state companies in the provincial capitals and later reinforced in 1986: many branches of the civil service are located in the provincial capitals, and also in district administrative centers. The development of district administrative centers continued in the 1990s, notably with the 1993 abolition of the cantons (*tasaeng*), which were the administrative level between the provinces and the districts. The abolition of the cantons led to the regrouping of secondary schools in district administrative centers,[11] while the creation of new civil service posts on the level of districts brought about, for the holders of these jobs who could not live off the land, the emergence of businesses and services which in turn contributed to the growth of these urban localities. Between 1996 and 2000, the population of the town of Phongsaly virtually doubled, while Oudomxay grew by 30 percent; the population of Boun Tai increased by 60 percent, and Nateuil's rose by 120 percent.[12]

In a context where the history of these towns has been little studied and where their definition remains blurred, the absence of sociological data is even more glaring. Vientiane has been the subject of a number of publications (notably Sayarath 2005; and Clément-Charpentier et al. 2010), but these have approached the city from an urbanistic, geographical, and architectural point of view, which does not analyze the sociological processes that have led migrants from different localities and diverse ethnic groups to set up home and live side by side (or, in some cases, to avoid each other) in urban areas.[13] In 2003, G. Evans deplored the fact that ongoing research has failed to address change in urban areas: "while many researchers understandably have their sights set on the minorities in the mountains or the hinterland, some of them would also do well to look at the cities. The future ineluctably lies there" (Evans 2003a: 205). In a bid to understand the social environment and the economic context of towns that were the destinations for peasant migration in the 1990s, I would like to propose an initial outline of the populations of small

Lao towns that have developed over the last 30 years, which therefore sets aside the five oldest cities in the country mentioned above. As my point of departure, I will take the example of four towns of varying dimensions in North Laos—two provincial capitals, Phongsaly and Oudomxay, the administrative center of the Boun Tai district (in Phongsaly province), and the large village of Nateuil in Luang Namtha district which, in administrative terms, is in the process of becoming a small town (*muang nǭi*).[14] In my view, they provide a good illustration of similar processes at work in other towns in the country.[15]

## The Development of Provincial Capitals: The Example of Phongsaly and Oudomxay

Three different groups have chronologically occupied and constituted the populations of localities which were to become today's provincial capitals and district administrative centers: the initial inhabitants of existing villages; the civil servants and traders who began to move there from 1975; and the families of peasants who started to move to towns in the 1990s.

First and foremost, there were the inhabitants of the villages that existed in these locations before they were urbanized. For the most part, peasant farmers were the owners of the lands that, after 1975, were appropriated by the state for the creation of new administrative spaces (official buildings and accommodation for civil servants). Some of them opted to sell to the new arrivals, who were eager to acquire building and farmland. In most of the future urban localities, the initial occupants were Tai or Lao (the case of Phongsaly, with its original Phunoy and Ho, is an exception: along with the southern town of Sekong, it has the distinction of being the only provincial capital to have been mainly occupied by a population that did not speak a language of the Tai family). The fact that they were largely peopled by Tai language speakers is not surprising when you consider that almost all Laotian towns were former power centers (*muang*) controlled by Tai populations.

These initial inhabitants, either through their close contact with the colonial administration—which was the case of the Phunoy in Phongsaly (Bouté 2011)—or because their ethnic origin had given them a certain mastery of the Lao language, were often among the first to occupy administrative posts created in these localities. Another

characteristic of the initial inhabitants of provincial capitals is their mobility. Relatively few of them now live in their native towns: some have left to live abroad, and others have moved to big towns elsewhere in the country. This is the case for 49-year-old Sikeo, the head of the very recently established Phongsaly province land commission. Both he and his wife are Phunoy and from the oldest urban village in the town of Phongsaly. Sikeo's father signed up to join French troops, and was later active in the Center Party (Santiphab pen kang) until 1967; after that, he devoted himself to working in the fields with his farmer wife. All of his five children became civil servants, but only Sikeo opted to live in Phongsaly. The rest found work in Vientiane (one is a policeman, one as a teacher, and two as doctors), and all of them took Lao spouses. In 1991, the aging parents moved to live with their eldest son who is a doctor in Vientiane.

This is not the case for 56-year-old Nangli, who was born and continues to live in the oldest village in Phongsaly Town—and whose her father and younger brother still occupy the house where she was born. However, several members of her husband's family have moved to Australia, the United States,[16] or to the town of Oudomxay. Nangli, who comes from a relatively poor family, completed two years in secondary school before joining the army. While in the military, she was sent to the province of Luang Namtha where she met her husband, also a soldier and a native of the Ho neighborhood of Phongsaly. They married and returned to make their home in the town of Phongsaly, where he regularly traveled to neighboring Phunoy villages to collect opium, while she ran a shop in the old town. When a new market was built in Phongsaly, she obtained a lease for a stand with help from a distant relative of her in-laws. A few years later, the death of her husband marked the beginning of a difficult period for Nangli, even though she did not have to worry about the welfare of her children, who had already been well provided for by their father. Her eldest daughter had bought a stand in the market; her sons ran a car-hire business, and one of them also worked as a chauffeur for the provincial department of agriculture; and another daughter married and settled in Oudomxay, a town that was also home to her paternal uncles, and made a living raising pigs.

Notwithstanding the departure of some of the inhabitants of the original villages, starting in the 1980s, the provincial capitals were marked by real demographic growth, boosted by the arrival of

new civil servants. Today, civil servants account for 60 percent of Phongsaly's population and 30 percent of Oudomxay's population.[17] This influx of civil servants includes the children of peasant farmers. Therefore, it can be argued that the first wave of civil servants of the new regime also established the first wave of rural–urban migration. Moving from their villages to the provincial capitals of their native provinces or to district administrative centers, their initial trajectories had much in common: they left their villages at a relatively young age to join the civil service, either in response to a call from the revolutionary forces of the Pathet Lao (Pholsena, this volume), or in a bid to escape peasant life, encouraged by the example of young people from their villages who left before them. Thereafter, they worked in a succession of different jobs (for the most part as soldiers or nurses, often with the benefit of training or specialization that was gained in Vietnam), before definitively establishing their homes in urban localities to the north of the country. Here I would like to present two typical portraits from the second wave of migration to towns, which arrived in provincial capitals between 1975 and 1985, and in district administrative centers in the 1990s.

Nangpheng, aged 66, was born in the village of Thongpi, which is about eight hours by foot from the town of Phongsaly. In 1964, at the age of 14, she left her village. At the time, the province of Phongsaly had been "liberated." However, the war was still ongoing for the rest of the country, and because the revolutionary administration needed manpower, female workers were being recruited as weavers. So, along with three other teenagers from her village, Nangpheng left her village for work in a weaving company located in the lowland village of Boun Neua. Soon called on to perform other tasks, she was transferred to Phongsaly Town where she worked for three years as a nurse's aid, and at the same time learned to read so that she could later train to be a nurse in another district. In 1984, she returned to Phongsaly Town, where she met her husband, a native of a nearby Phunoy village who also worked as a nurse. Their first house was on the eastern edge of the town, close to the old villages, in the area where the hospital was built. However, during the building boom, they moved to two other locations, before building their current home at yet another site in the town. In 1987, they bought an abandoned rice terrace that had been built in the French colonial era, though due to a lack of sufficient irrigation, they were unable

to obtain a good crop yield. In 1999, Nangpheng, who had by then retired, earned a small amount of cash by selling medicines from the ground floor of her roadside house. However, in 2003, her husband, who was eager to obtain a field with a better return on investment so as to pay for their three children's studies, borrowed a large sum of money from the bank. Tragically, he died only a few months after. Since then, Nangpheng has had to pay €10 a month to the bank (from a monthly pension of only €45). As a result, she was forced to give up selling medicine ("I had no money to buy stocks"). She now grows vegetables that she sells at dawn in the town's market, and works in other people's fields: "I didn't want my children to be soldiers. I wanted them to study. It was a very difficult period, and no one was there to help me." Her three eldest children are now gainfully employed: as an electrician in Luang Phrabang, as a civil servant in the provincial health department, and as a soldier.

At age 45, Bouasi is younger, and, at the outset, her story seems slightly different from Nangpheng's. She was born to subsistence farmer parents in a rural village not far from the schools in Phongsaly Town, and this proximity enabled her to complete the first three years of secondary school. However, her maternal uncle, who was a civil servant in Namtha, proposed that she come to live with him so as to continue her education and learn to be a trader. After moving there, she enrolled in the state school of commerce, which was later transferred to the town of Oudomxay. She completed her studies in 1984 and became a civil servant in the provincial department of trade. Following the death of her father, who had remained in their home village, her younger brothers also went to live with the same uncle in Luang Namtha, and when they came of age, they too joined the civil service. Some years later, her eldest brother invited their aging mother, who was still living in the village, to come and live with him. Following the termination of aid from the USSR, between 1989 and 1990, many companies and departments that had been dependent on Soviet funding were forced to close. In 1991, wages were no longer paid, and some civil servants, like Bouasi, lost their jobs. Bouasi's husband, who was a native of the same village as his wife, faced a similar fate. After arriving in Oudomxay Town in 1983, he worked in the district department of trade until 1989, afterwhich he found employment at the recently privatized town petrol station for a few years, while Bouasi returned to working the land. The couple acquired

a rice paddy field some 20 kilometers from the town ("in the 1980s, when it was still not too expensive"), and numerous other plots of land on which they planted rubber trees and corn. At the same time, the family also benefited from income from the husband's second job as a *tuk-tuk* driver.

These two narratives are largely representative of the experience of those who migrated to provincial capitals in the 1980s. As such, they demonstrate the impact of wider change on the lives of young peasants who joined the civil service: in the first instance, Nangpheng's family benefited from civil service employment that lasted until retirement; while in the second, this employment came to a halt in the 1990s in the wake of the closure of state enterprises. In both cases, the family home was built on land provided by the provincial authorities, which granted private ownership of land to newly arrived civil servants when the provincial capitals were divided into administrative sectors. Employees of provincial education services built their homes close to their offices, accommodation for soldiers was provided in the vicinity of existing barracks, and nurses and doctors were housed close to hospitals, etc.—a planning scheme that also exists on a more modest scale in all of the district administrative centers.

As illustrated by Nangpheng's story, these civil servants often had to change locations several times in the course of their towns' development—for some, moving was motivated by the desire to acquire a home with street frontage in a new neighborhood where they aimed to start a business. However, in virtually every case, they benefited from free or very cheap building land, and also agricultural land in suburban areas—a point we will return to later in this chapter.

## The Weight of Networks

The demographic impact of the arrival of civil servants and their families brought about the transformation of large villages and small towns into multi-ethnic urban centers (the civil servants were from different ethnic groups). It also paved the way for the development of new businesses—trading and construction companies—linked to the influx of these wage-earning populations, which, unlike peasant communities, had money to spend.

Aylek and his wife were both the children of rice farmers in the lowlands of Phongsaly province.[18] Shortly after their marriage, Aylek

heard of the massive influx of civil servants in Phongsaly Town, and saw this as an opportunity to set up his own business. In 1990, the young couple sold all of their lands, and moved in with Aylek's parents in Phongsaly Town. According to their neighbors, the couple rapidly amassed a fortune trading in opium that they purchased from peasant farmers. Having built a guesthouse at a strategic location opposite the new market, they acquired a bus that provided transport services and, more importantly, enabled them to make regular trips to China to buy supplies for the grocer's stall that they had opened in the market. When their rapid economic ascension was momentarily slowed by the proliferation of competing hotels, Aylek bought a truck and specialized in selling building materials, which he imported from China. He also set up a shop to sell Chinese mopeds in the administrative center of a neighboring district, which he gave to his brother as a wedding gift, and sent two of his sons to study for a year in Simao (Yunnan, China) and another to Vientiane. Additionally, he paid what he described as "an indispensable bribe" to enable his youngest daughter to obtain a coveted civil service post in the Phongsaly district tax department.

Aylek's career was a precursor of the growth of trade in urban areas. The development of trade in provincial capitals had already begun in the 1990s—notably in North Laos with the 1996 governmental priority program for rural development which, paradoxically, resulted in the construction of new buildings, an influx of construction workers, and a boom in hotels and restaurants that catered to them. But it was only in the 2000s, with the upsurge in cross-border trade, that businesses really began to develop in these towns, giving them the appearance that they have today. Unlike Aylek, a large proportion of the new traders were civil servants, former civil servants, or pensioners—that is to say, active or former wage earners who had invested their savings in businesses. In the towns of northern Laos, opium money also enabled a certain number—civil servants or former peasants like Aylek—to establish businesses in one or several urban locations—as and when these developed and as opportunities became available—as was the case with Ho, who moved from Phongsaly Town to Oudomxay Town.

Regardless of the diversity of their careers, all of these civil servants, former civil servants, and traders were sons and daughters of the peasantry who had—where these still existed—family networks in

their native villages. Some civil servants living in towns close to their native villages often traveled back on weekends to help their relatives in the fields, while others visited their native communities at least once a month and returned with vegetables, rice, and corn alcohol. These individuals could count on the support of their village relatives for the supply of certain products, while the villagers in turn benefited from having family members in town who could offer them a place to stay and to whom they could send their children to continue their studies. Many of the villages were also home to aging couples whose children had moved away from the area; too old to obtain satisfactory harvests, these couples depended on money sent by their children for their sustenance, while waiting patiently for an invitation to live with one of them when circumstances permitted—or when this was made inevitable when they became too old to work the land. In other words, since as early as the 1990s, a large number of villages in Laos have progressively established networks with urban localities in the country, to the point where, it seems, it is no longer possible to consider that social organization in Laos is first and foremost determined on the level of villages, as Ireson claimed (1996: 219). Not only do these networks of relatives establish relations between villagers and city dwellers, they have also come to link the residents of different towns, civil servants, and traders from the same family who set up home in different towns to the north of the country (and occasionally in the cities of Vientiane and Luang Phrabang).

We now know more about how this "third wave" of city and town-dwellers came about, and that it involved families of the peasantry, who, starting from the 1990s, also tried their luck in urban areas, and whose choice of destination largely depended on networks of relatives who, several years earlier, had already settled in these localities to work as civil servants or small businessowners.

## Newcomers' Integration Issues in Suburban Areas

In 2010, I met up with Itjeng, a decade after her departure from the village of Thongpi. Itjeng had settled in the small town of Nateuil, which is situated at a crossroads between the provinces of Oudomxay and Namtha, and the road to China. In recent years, the flow of traffic has steadily increased on this main highway, which, according



**Plate 9.2** Houses of newcomers to Nateuil Village, Luang Namtha province, 2010.

to the Asian Development Bank, has become a "corridor for North–South development." Founded in the 1920s by a dozen Khmu families from the south of Phongsaly province seeking cropland, the village of Nateuil has grown considerably—its population has tripled between 2002 and 2009, and presently accounts for 347 families. Itjeng's house—which, thanks to the efforts of her son-in-law, has been rebuilt from breezeblocks—is located in an area back from the road, which the other residents of the town have dubbed "the Phunoy neighborhood." In the run-up to the tragic death of her husband, Tao, four years ago, Itjeng was forced to sell the two hectares, which the couple had bought shortly after their arrival in Nateuil, to pay for his hospital bills. Having let go of this land, which Tao had planted with rubber trees, all she is left with today is a clearing on which she grows a variety of corn from seeds sold by Vietnamese traders who also buy her harvest, and from which she earns a very small income. When I asked if she would like to live with her parents and her brother who is a schoolteacher in the Boun Tai lowlands, Itjeng replied that any such plan would be impossible. She has nothing to

sell that would enable her to buy land, and she still has a son in high school. She also explained that her oldest daughter, who is married to a young Phunoy truckdriver in Nateuil, has two small children whom she enjoys looking after. "I am not all that alone. I also have my husband's brothers who help me with small things, as well as all the Phunoy neighbors, who are like family to me." Indeed, in the few weeks that I spent in Nateuil, it was only with these two dozen Phunoy families and with those—originally from Thongpi—who live in Oudomxay or Namtha and who when they are travelling visit the handful of Ho families in the adjoining neighborhood ("they can speak Phunoy and are from Phongsaly district like us, we get on well"), that I saw Itjeng maintain any kind of social links. As for the other local residents, she does not know them: when I first went looking for Itjeng, I showed various people a passport-sized photo of her, but found that nobody—from the vendors on the main street and in the market, to the village authorities—knew who she was.

Itjeng's story seems no better (or worse) than the stories of most of the peasants who, over the last 15 years, have migrated from Thongpi and elsewhere. It might even be considered a success, as I was led to understand by her first cousins, who have made their homes in the town of Phongsaly or the district administrative center of Boun Tai in the same province. They only have secondhand news of her, but would tell whoever would listen, "Oh, Itjeng managed to settle in a developing province (*kamlang patthana*)." There are other more singular stories of integration in urban localities which I will not delve in here, as my focus is on the overall story of these peasants who account for 20 to 30 percent of the population of provincial capitals,[19] and 50 to 70 percent of the population of district administrative centers and towns like Nateuil. With this in mind, I will concentrate on the examination of two modalities of urban integration: their localization in urban space and their relationship to the land.

## The Logic of Reunification in Urban Space

The physical extension of towns, whether urban or rural, primarily takes place along the main roads that traverse them. Thus long-established villages act as reference points that enable communities to name the urban or semi-urban villages that emerge in their vicinity.

However, that does not mean that the most long-established urban villages are necessarily at the physical center of today's towns or large villages. In Phongsaly, the two oldest villages lost their advantageous position when a new covered market, built a few hundred meters away, put the neighborhoods occupied by civil servants at the heart of the town's trading and services area. The old Tai Lue villages in the small towns of Boun Tai and Boun Neua have also been displaced from their central position by a similar phenomenon: the construction of markets and new public buildings close to new residential villages that are home to civil servants. The same principle is at work in the large town of Oudomxay and the small town of Nateuil. Beyond these civil servant neighborhoods can be found the most recent neighborhoods (or villages) which have developed on roads out of provincial capitals, or, in smaller towns, on secondary roads to neighboring villages.

The most recent migrants do not necessarily all settle in the same place. The traders who began to arrive in the 1990s—like Aylek in Phongsaly—have mainly settled next to roads, preferring central neighborhoods that were home to civil servants. Some of them have also made their homes in new outlying villages, where peasants from the region stop over to see relatives and make purchases without visiting the town center. We noted that the oldest among the migrants from rural areas usually came to live with their children who had already settled in towns, either in civil service neighborhoods or in the most long-standing villages within the town (if a daughter, for example, married a man from one of these areas). Finally, the families of peasants who began to arrive in the 1990s generally settled on the edges of towns where property was more affordable.

In these new neighborhoods, migrants of similar geographical origins tended to group together. As previously mentioned, an influx of several families often followed the arrival of a pioneer migrant who set up home in an empty or largely empty locality, and set about "reserving" the surrounding land for the construction of homes for his relatives. In many cases, the first to arrive divided their building land so as to welcome relatives, which often explains the very dense aspect of their habitat and the rather small size of the houses in these neighborhoods. Geographical origins and family ties are therefore essential aspects making up the dynamics of urban space regrouping,

often taking precedence over ethnicity. For example in the small town of Nateuil, some 40 Khmu families, who are originally from Muang Khoa district in the province of Phongsaly, have regrouped in what is known as the "low" neighborhood behind the market. The "first inhabitants" of the "high" neighborhood—also Khmu—largely ignored them and did not invite them to celebrations and other social events, giving them the same status as Tai Dam, Ho, and Phunoy migrants. Similarly, there is no geographical proximity or social links between the Phunoy residents of Boun Tai—who settled there in the 1960s, and who live close to the old Tai Lue village—and the wave of Phunoy peasants who began to arrive in the 1990s, and who settled on the far side of this small town.

Finally the localization of a family's habitat in an urban space depends not only on the period of their arrival but also on their ability to pay for land: even in areas that are remote from town centers, roadside sites—as well as annual property taxes that have to be paid for them—are two to three times more expensive than other land. As is often the case in towns, it is when you explore the byroads that you find the neighborhoods to be home to the most recent or poorest immigrants.

The costs of moving to town and setting up home are very high and have a huge impact on a family's finances. Even in small towns like Boun Tai and Nateuil, the cost of moving a family can be as high as 20 million kips[20]—a considerable sum when you consider that it is equivalent to the annual income of a well-off family in Phongsaly Town.[21] This amount includes moving taxes due to village chiefs and authorities in the destination district (approximately 500,000 kips), transport costs for the family's belongings (from 700,000 to 2M kips), the purchase of building land (from 10M kips), and construction costs (from 3M kips for a wood and bamboo house). To put together a sum of this size, peasants usually liquidate all of their assets (mainly livestock). It thus follows that the finances of families moving to urban areas are often relatively fragile.

The purchase of building land is a critical step for migrants moving from rural areas; for some, their future home will be their only asset as they will have nothing left to invest in cropland. But as we will see, the competition to own land is even fiercer for farmland because it is coveted by almost everyone—from peasants, to civil servants and traders.

## Landless Farmers in Towns

Starting from the 2000s, the price of land rose steeply and, in towns, real estate became a factor of social differentiation. In the present chapter, I will not discuss the critical role of building plots (Bouté 2014), but of farmland that is supposed to provide the main source of income for rural migrants who more often than not establish, or at least hope to establish, themselves as farmers. It may at first seem surprising that farmland is such an issue in urban areas: a report on the management of real estate in urban areas remarked that from a socio-economic point of view, it was strange that areas where a majority of the population earned most of their income from the land are viewed as urban villages (Rabé et al. 2007: 28). However, as mentioned, the results of my surveys show that peasants account for 20 to 30 percent of the populations of provincial capitals, and a majority of the populations of other small urban localities. Even more importantly with regard to this agrarian dimension, the same surveys also brought to light the fact that a majority of civil servants are also the owners of fields that are often considerably bigger than those of their peasant neighbors: today the largest agricultural estates, both in terms of their dimensions and in terms of their production, belong to civil servants and traders.

This generalized enthusiasm for agriculture in the large and small towns of North Laos is relatively recent. Some of the civil servants of the 1980s farmed plots on the periphery of towns to complement their subsistence. At the time, civil service salaries were extremely low—initially they were only paid in the form of basic goods such as rice, soap, salt, and oil—and arable land was available or financially accessible in many localities that were still sparsely populated. These part-time farmers planted on kitchen gardens, rice paddies and forest clearings, which they cultivated in their spare time or more systematically when one member of a couple was not or was no longer a civil servant (often a woman who had already had her first child). Rice paddies could be bought for a modest sum, and clearings and other uncultivated land could be had for next to nothing to the point that they were often lent or exchanged for other goods (pigs or alcohol). In many cases, the absence of competition for land and the town-dwellers' lack of interest in working the fields enabled civil servants to appropriate areas of forest, which they cleared so that their spouses could cultivate them.

Beginning in the 2000s, with the change from subsistence farming to cash crops,[22] the way land was represented and its uses were transformed. The practice of agriculture was no longer viewed as a means to provide food for households, but as a source of income for a growing number of actors in the country. Large numbers of civil servants purchased land to plant tea and rubber. For their part, the richest traders and a majority of high-ranking civil servants (i.e. managers of provincial departments) invested in much larger properties, and engaged sharecroppers or, more often than not, paid laborers to work the land. The most attractive localities were even sought after by buyers that were not from the same province. This was the case in Oudomxay, where 80 percent of investors and buyers came from other provinces (Chantalasy et al. 2005: 9).

The consequences of this rush for "green gold" were the extensive privatization of land, a highly competitive real estate market, and its corollary, significant inflation of real estate prices.[23] In the small town of Boun Tai, which has recently been affected by the rubber boom, the price of land has multiplied by a factor of 10 in barely a decade: uncultivated plots which were worth nothing in the early 1990s began to be sold for between 30,000 and 100,000 kips per hectare in 1998, and by 2005 a hectare of ground that was suitable for rubber was worth more than a million. Similar levels of inflation have been observed in Oudomxay, Nateuil, Phongsaly, and other towns in the country.[24] Officially, land can only be sold when those who occupy it or work it have submitted a claim of ownership to the district land registry (*kom thadin*). However, this legislation is only now being applied in provincial capitals, while the real situation has moved forward at a much faster pace. Land has become property that is bought and sold, and a target for speculation, while the state is unable to exercise any real control: it is estimated that only 15 to 20 percent of holdings are officially registered (Chantalasy et al. 2005: 12).

The main victims of these changes are the peasants—especially those who arrived in towns during the 2000s when land prices were rising steeply. Those who migrated to towns before the 2000s (who account for one-third of the urbanized peasants that were surveyed) were able to obtain land relatively cheaply and to invest in the purchase of plants to develop it. In some cases, they also benefited from state aid. Since the 1990s, district authorities have responded to growing competition for land with numerous management measures

involving the ad hoc redistribution of plots that hitherto had been reserved or protected as property of the state. This land is generally located within a few kilometers of the nearest town and only occasionally planted. However, according to Laotian law, the peasants who now work these plots are not the official owners unless they are under permanent cultivation.[25] The urban village chiefs were responsible for registering applications, and the plots were thereafter distributed in random draws. However, these measures were too limited and too rare. For example, land was distributed to peasants in the town of Phongsaly on three occasions: in 1996 (civil servants who applied could also receive land); in 1999 to encourage families to cultivate tea; and in 2001. Those who arrived after did not benefit from aid even though the price of land continued to climb. In theory, peasants only have the usufruct of the lands that were distributed by the state, but in practice these are often sold and resold in transactions over which the authorities do not exercise any control.

The bid to obtain land is by no means guaranteed for families who have recently migrated to towns. A certain number of peasant families I met explained that they obtained land at one point following their relocation, but that they were forced to sell a few years later. Some of them, like Itjeng, were obliged to pay for expensive medical care, others sold in the wake of a death in the family, and the rest were simply unable to wait for a crop yield that might be several years in the making (tea requires at least four years before it can be harvested, while rubber at least seven). Finally, others fell victim to illegal maneuvers: for example, families in the small town of Nateuil, who were attributed land on which they were supposed to cultivate sugar cane, were swindled when the "sugar cane buyers" never returned to purchase their harvest. Afterward, the lands in question, which had been let run wild, were seized by a local official, who attributed them to a Chinese investor. In Boun Tai, several families, who did not have the resources to invest in the purchase of rubber plants, had their forest clearings confiscated and attributed to rich traders.

Peasant families without enough land to eke out a livelihood, or without any land at all, systematically account for the poorest margins of the populations in urban villages, i.e. an average of 5–10 percent of the families surveyed. Without land, they have few alternatives. In smaller towns, where the competition for land is not as intense as

in provincial capitals, some of them still manage to find uncultivated plots, which they rent to grow a little rice. Others find temporary work as laborers or cooks on construction sites that have sprung up in these rapidly developing towns. A majority are employed as agricultural workers in plantations owned by town-dwelling civil servants and traders. But almost all of them experience strong feelings of failure linked to the following: loss of land, no assets to leave their children, and the shame of having to work for others.

## Conclusion

It is certainly too early to speak of the deruralization of Laos, when 70 percent of its population still lives in rural areas. Having said that, however, the phenomenon of peasant migration to urban localities is certainly food for thought and raises a number of questions.

The post-socialist Laotian state's abandonment of certain forms of management of the economically weakest populations in the country is perhaps surprising. Previous migratory phenomena were very strictly controlled when populations were relocated by the state—though this did not imply that they were very closely supervised thereafter. Today, however, no plans have been made to deal with spontaneous migration and the problems that arise (e.g. economic fragility, the absence of social and legal safeguards, real estate issues). Apart from a few studies, the phenomenon of migration is not even being monitored by state authorities, while other forms of migration, and in particular rural–rural migration, are beginning to face similar problems. At the same time, the recent rapid increase in the number of commercial plantations (notably rubber plantations to the north of the country) will probably create further mountain-to-lowland migration flows. Having virtually no other economic options, the mountain populations will respond to the growing demand for labor at a time when the plantations are reaching maturity, and will soon be ready for harvesting.

Against this context, the phenomenon of landless peasants will likely become more extensive, and this will spread from urban localities to rural areas. The economic and social problems that will be engendered by increasingly prevalent forms of social differentiation are much to be feared as well. However, one hopes that certain members of these population will establish innovative coping strategies. The

examination of mobility networks between towns and villages, and between towns and other urban localities, has demonstrated that mobility can be viewed as a response to change brought about by national development policies—as illustrated by Olivier Évrard (2012). Although labor migration in this case is particular to a single population, it is clear that multiple forms of migration and mobility will affect a growing number of populations in Laos. In many cases, the move to a new locality may not be sustainable, and demographic pressure and competition for real estate, as well as the attractiveness of other destinations, could result in further relocations. Cross-border labor migration, especially from provinces adjoining Thailand (Rigg 2007), is notably on the rise and will be an increasingly important aspect of life for the populations concerned.

Present and future cross-border migration flows are obviously not unilateral. Although beyond the scope of this chapter, it is important to point out that the country is also home to highly "visible" minorities, such as the Chinese (in the North) and the Vietnamese (in the South). The development of towns therefore raises other questions, notably on the nature of sociocultural relationships in localities that are home to a diversity of ethnic groups.

## Notes

1. Since 2013, I have enjoyed the support of the European Research Programme SEATIDE in my fieldwork, including those conducted between January and February 2015 as part of this present volume. I would also like to thank Yves Goudineau, Vatthana Pholsena, and Grégoire Schlemmer for their stimulating comments on this chapter.
2. Using the data from the Population and Housing Census 2005 and the Housing Census 2015.
3. See Goudineau (1997), Vandergeest (2003), Évrard and Goudineau 2004, and Baird and Shoemaker 2007.
4. I use the denomination of "spontaneous migrant" as explained by Charras and Spain in their book on spontaneous migrations in Indonesia: "a spontaneous migrant is a person who chooses his destination and time of departure outside any institutionalized intervention" (1993: 21).
5. Of course, the cultural practices of a group can influence the ways in which people migrate and regroup, and the forms taken by mutual aid and solidarity need to be rethought in the town of destination; see Évrard (2012).

6. For these reasons, a number of population movements analyses stressed that it was difficult to distinguish between voluntary and forced migration in the context of an undemocratic state, both types of migration often resulting from the same causes, namely inadequate development policies that paid little attention to the concerned populations' lifestyles; see, among others, Goudineau (1997), and Évrard and Goudineau (2004).
7. For another example of the "snowball" effect of such migration, see Lyttleton et al. (2004: 58).
8. UN common database; UN Population Division estimates.
9. These five criteria are: proximity to the district or province administration; a population of over 100 houses; a road suitable for motor vehicles; the presence of a market; and a majority of houses with running water and electricity. About the problems of definition of urban space in Laos, see Bounthavy Sisouphanthong and Christian Taillard (2000), as well as Julie Vallée (2010: 308–309).
10. LeBar and Suddard (1960: 238).
11. On this reorganization, see C. Taillard (1992).
12. Figures provided by the Department of Statistics of Phongsaly, Oudomxay, Boun Tai, and Luang Namtha (for Nateuil) districts.
13. A few articles are exceptions to this: those of Barber (1974a, 1974b) as well as the aforementioned mentioned article by Evans (2003).
14. For the cities of Phongsaly and Oudomxay, the surveys were conducted between July and December 2007 and in January–February 2008; they are derived from interviews with various authorities in nine urban villages in the city of Phongsaly (village chiefs, deputies, and officials of the National Front Edification) and interviews with 50 families. Investigations in the administrative centers of Boun Tai district and the village of Nateuil were conducted respectively in January–March 2009 and July 2010 with village authorities and from interviews with 40 families.
15. See also the article by Laffont (1991) on urban evolution in Laos.
16. In the 1970s, many Ho families fled the new regime and went into exile in Australia and the United States.
17. These figures indicate the officials who are still active (according to the statistics of Oudomxay and Phongsaly districts, collected during surveys of heads of urban villages in the towns of Oudomxay and Phongsaly). A very large number of former city officials in Oudomxay have thus converted to trade and do not appear in these figures. In addition, these figures show an average: some urban villages in Phongsaly (such as Phonesahat) or Oudomxay (Longthana) are populated at 90 percent by families of officials.
18. It specifically concerned families of shifting cultivators who, in the 1960s, had answered the call of the new government of Phongsaly province to

help achieve rice self-sufficiency for the province by constructing rice paddies in lowland neighborhoods, then sparsely populated (Bouté 2005).

19. From 30 percent for the town of Phongsaly to 20 percent for the city of Oudomxay are counted as peasant only those families whose main source of income is agriculture, according to the statistics of the districts of Oudomxay and Phongsaly. The figures for district administrative centers are those of Boun Taï, Boun Neua (Phongsaly province), and Namo (Oudomxay Province) districts.
20. The equivalent of €2,300.
21. According to my investigations between 2007 and 2008 in the town of Phongsaly with a sample of 50 families.
22. About this agrarian transition, see, among others, Évrard (2003), Joseph (2007), Cohen (2009), and Ducourtieux (2009).
23. The increase in farmland prices is observable also in rural areas, especially in places where rubber can be planted (e.g. Joseph's dissertation, 2007).
24. Prices vary according to the distance between the field and the road, exposure, slope, etc. For other locations, see the report by Rabé et al. (2007: 28–30).
25. Hence the many conflicts between families who believe they own these lands and administrative authorities that consider the lands as belonging to the state.