The Lao American Archive Project: Opening up Lao American History

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Abstract

The Lao American Archive Project (LAAP) collects, organizes, and archives Lao and other language materials (e.g., archival documents, photos, cassette and video tapes, periodicals) produced by Lao Americans since 1975. The project also records videos of oral histories with Lao Americans in the Lao language. LAAP was launched in October 2022, with the support of the Henry Luce Foundation, the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and the Wisconsin Historical Society. Although this is a community project, the Wisconsin Historical Society, a state institution, agreed to become the national repository for Lao American archival materials from all over the United States. As no other archival collection solely focused on Lao Americans exists in the United States, our largely Lao American steering committee sought to pursue the endeavor. The project contributes to a larger effort to decolonize histories of marginal peoples in the United States and to offer voice to those quieted by circumstances beyond their control. A key question that arises from this initiative is: How does the LAAP empower Lao Americans? In this paper, we argue that the project 1) opens up Lao American history by making available alternate, contradictory and competing narratives about the politics and lived experiences of Lao Americans; 2) intentionally distinguishes itself from other archival projects by its exclusive focus on Lao Americans; and 3) contaminates—or rather, disrupts and calls into question—other historical narratives about Lao American politics. Examples in this paper are from the LAAP's two largest collections—the Khamchong Luangpraseut and the Khamphoui Sisavatdy collections—to demonstrate the varying ideas that first generation Lao leaders in the United States had about re-engaging with their country of birth, Laos. In this paper, we also consider where Lao Americans have been able to tell their stories in the past and how this project contributes to expanding those spaces.

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Large numbers of ethnic Lao people started coming to the United States as political refugees in 1975. There are now approximately 250,000 Lao Americans in the country—including first generation immigrants born in Laos, or in refugee camps in Thailand and the Philippines, and those born in the United States. These Lao Americans live throughout the United States, with particularly large communities being found in California, Oregon, Washington state, Virginia, New York, Minnesota, Illinois, Texas, Nevada, and Arizona.

In 2022, we started developing a new initiative, the Lao American Archive Project (LAAP), one that should have been started many years ago. This was an attempt to document Lao American history by collecting Lao American archival materials, particularly documents, correspondence, photographs, audio and video recordings, newsletters, newspapers, magazines, and other materials created since large numbers of ethnic Lao political refugees started settling in the United States in 1975. We, the authors of this article, are two of the six members of the LAAP steering committee.

We first secured support from the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, who is hosting the initiative, and the Wisconsin Historical Society, which agreed to become the repository of Lao American archival materials from within the state of Wisconsin and across the country. We then applied for and received funding for a three-year pilot project from the Henry Luce Foundation.

Apart from collecting Lao American archival materials, we have also been conducting and recording Lao language, oral-history interviews with first-generation Lao Americans to create a digital repository of Lao American oral histories, which will also be deposited at the Wisconsin Historical Society.

This pursuit follows other Southeast Asian/Asian American archives established throughout the United States in recent decades to decolonize the archives. LAAP is also inspired by recent ethnic studies scholarship associated with Southeast Asian critical refugee studies, some of which has observed how refugee narratives in the United States have often positioned refugees from Southeast Asia as being indebted to the empire of the United States (Espiritu 2006; Nguyen 2012). We want to give Lao Americans agency by collecting and preserving their own ideas through various kinds of archival materials and oral histories that are centered around Lao American narratives articulated in their own first languages and in ways that make sense to them.

According to Michelle Casswell and colleagues (2016), critical archival studies scholars are only beginning to explore the impact of archives that document the history of U.S. communities that have been misrepresented or elided by mainstream institutions. Here, we mobilize Casswell's (2014) idea of "symbolic annihilation," or the absence or misrepresentation of communities in mainstream archives, as an impetus for our archive. We engage in this ongoing project with the intent to work closely with Lao American communities throughout the United States on the appraisal, description, and use of various archival materials.

In this paper, we introduce the LAAP, explaining how it works and the motivations for starting the project. We argue that the project 1) opens up Lao American history by making available alternate, contradictory and competing narratives about the politics and lived experiences of Lao Americans available; 2) intentionally distinguishes itself from other archival projects by its exclusive focus on Lao Americans; and 3) contaminates—or rather, disrupts and calls into question—other historical narratives

about Lao American politics. We believe that more projects like this are needed in order to narrow the present gap in historical documentation efforts among underrepresented groups in the United States, including Lao Americans and others.

We start by providing some basic background about Laos and the political crisis that resulted in large numbers of ethnic Lao people coming to the United States as political refugees between 1975 and the 1990s. We then consider the rationale for the LAAP. Next, we consider some of the early results of the project before discussing the importance of the LAAP and providing some concluding results.

Laos and Lao Americans' History and Identities

In 1959, the communist Pathet Lao (Lao People's Liberation Army) and their close allies and mentors, the North Vietnamese, started fighting against the Royal Lao Army, which was supported by the United States. This followed Laos independence from France in 1954, after the decisive defeat of the French by the Viet Minh communists, led by Ho Chi Minh, at Dien Bien Phu in the far northwest of Vietnam. The first Geneva Accords of 1954 committed Laos to being a neutral country; in reality, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the United States, and France continued to heavily interfere in Lao internal affairs. However, in 1962, Laos reaffirmed its commitment to neutrality, and the second Geneva Accords required that no foreign militaries be allowed on Lao territory. Yet, after the Accords were signed, the Vietnamese did not withdraw from Laos, and the United States secretly returned to Laos to support the Royal Lao Government through the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). From 1962 until 1973, the US government secretly armed, trained, and otherwise supported the Royal Lao Army and Royal Lao Air Force and also the Special Guerilla Units set up with CIA support. The United States also provided extensive air support and heavily bombed parts of Laos. Because this war was not authorized by the US Congress or made public to the US public, it became known as the Secret War in Laos. However, in February 1973, under pressure from the US government, the Royal Lao Government signed the Vientiane Treaty with the Pathet Lao, leading to the establishment of a coalition government between communist and non-communist political groups. It was the third and final attempt at a coalition government in Laos (Conboy 1995; Ahern 2006).

Dramatic political change came to mainland Southeast Asia in 1975. In April, the right-wing governments in South Vietnam and Cambodia dramatically and decisively fell to communist forces. Laos, however, was taken over much more gradually. Tanks did not roll into Vientiane in the same way as they did in Saigon and Phnom Penh. In fact, it is hard to pinpoint a particular date marking the Pathet Laos' takeover of the country. But in mid-1975, after the United States had largely withdrawn from Laos, political turmoil engulfed Laos as the communist Pathet Lao gradually assumed control. While the official day of transition is December 2, 1975, the date that the Lao PDR was established, the Pathet Lao actually took control in May 1975 (Goldston 2009).

Then, large numbers of Royal Lao government civilian officials and soldiers were sent away to "re-education" camps, where many were imprisoned under harsh conditions without trial. Some right-wing and neutralist political, civilian, and military leaders were initially encouraged by their leaders to not be overly concerned. Many even volunteered to travel to the former communist liberated province of Houaphanh to learn

how communist governments operate. However, they later found that they had been tricked into traveling to the province, where they were easily forced into harsh "re-education" camps that resembled harsh work camps or concentration camps. Food was poor quality, and medical care was limited. The most hated political and military leaders were shackled continuously. Within a few years, the vast majority of these senior leaders, including the former King of Laos and most of his family, had died of malnutrition and illness (Kremmer 2003).

Life in Laos was difficult even for those who were not arrested and imprisoned in one of the many remote camps. The government collectivized production and took control of most commerce. Political and civil rights were suspended. Economic conditions were poor (Evans 1990). Some people associated with military or political families linked to the Royal Lao Government faced discrimination when seeking educational and government-employment opportunities (Zasloff 1981).

In response, more than ten percent of Laos' estimated population (Thompson 2010) of 3.1 million people in 1973 (Abhay and Foran 1974) fled and became political refugees in Thailand. Many anti-communists had even fled to Thailand months before the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) was officially established on December 2, 1975. Refugee camps were established along the border in Thailand, with support from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), and other multilateral, bilateral and non-government organizations (Thompson 2010). Other people—mainly former Royal Lao Army soldiers—began fighting back against the new government, either from Thailand or from within Laos. This conflict—and generally difficult political and economic conditions in Laos—caused more people to flee the country during the second half of the 1970s (Van-es-Beeck 1982) and throughout the 1980s (Van Esterik 1992; Devoe 1996). Some joined the insurgency—for short periods or many years—while others became political refugees in so-called "third countries," including the United States, France, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and elsewhere. By the time the last official refugee camp was closed in the 1990s, hundreds of thousands of people had fled Laos and emigrated abroad.

The positions of this diaspora from Laos—including the ethnic Lao, but also other groups, especially the Hmong and also the Khmu, Iu Mien, Lahu, Tai Dam and Lue—and how their lives have gradually shifted over time (Baird 2024). For example, many people have transitioned from involvement in anti-Lao PDR politics to advocating more for Hmong and Lao veterans' recognition and support (Baird and Hillmer 2020). The idea of a Lao diaspora can vary and may depend on one's positionality. Lao represents an ethnic group, a language and various dialects, a culture, and a nation-state. But Lao identity, language, and culture certainly extend beyond the Lao nation state's geobody or national borders. The idea of Lao exists not only in Laos but also in parts of Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, and China, although language and identity politics differ from place to place.

There is, however, a dominant way in which Lao diaspora is imagined. This view relates more specifically to Laos as a nation state, rather than Lao as an ethnic group or a language, although they are frequently intertwined. Crucially, this understanding is specifically related to the dramatic change in political structure that the country of Laos underwent in 1975, when it became socialist. When the communist Pathet Lao—aligned with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the Soviet Union—took control of the country, they implemented draconian political change and collectivization reforms

(Evans 1990). Those people associated with the previous Royal Lao Government were marginalized.

Beginning in 1975 and continuing well into the 1990s and even the 2000s, hundreds of thousands of Laos political refugees who had been living in refugee camps in Thailand gradually immigrated to what became known as "third countries," since Thailand was unwilling to allow refugees from Laos to become Thai citizens (Thompson 2010). Many countries accepted refugees from Laos. The United States took the largest number, followed by France, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Smaller numbers ended up settling in Germany, Argentina, French Guiana, and elsewhere.

These diaspora groups are often referred to in Lao as the *Lao noke* (outside Lao). This understanding of Lao diaspora tends to emphasize the Lao nation state and considers the diaspora from Laos to include ethnic Lao people who fled Laos between 1975 and the early 1990s, as well as people from other ethnic groups, including the Hmong, Khmu, Iu Mien, Lahu, Tai Dam, and Lue. Thus, for the purposes of this paper, and in line with the understanding of the Lao diaspora outlined above, these groups are also included as members of the Lao diaspora—even though they typically do not identify as Lao, at least among those second and third generation immigrants. While some people consider the term "Laotian" to include people of all ethnic groups who originated from Laos—particularly in the United States—ethnic minorities from Laos in the United Staters tend to identify as Hmong, Iu Mien, etc., rather than Laotian.

Lao Americans are still not widely known and have not been widely studied in the United States. Some authors have written about the sometimes difficult, but eventually successful transition of ethnic Lao people in the United States (Phommasouvanh 1983; Strand and Jones 1985; Muir 1988; Scott 1989; Muecke 1998; Bankston and Hidalgo 2007; Phrasavath 2011). But the LAAP intervenes in this scholarly absence to create a space for Lao American history as documented by Lao Americans.

Project Rationale

The LAAP was officially launched in October 2022, with Professor Ian Baird as the Principal Investigator for the project and a steering committee of Lao Americans, including Akarath Soukhaphon, Saengmany Ratsabout, Mike Rattanasengchanh, and Lili Sisombath. Ryan Wolfson-Ford, from the Library of Congress, is also advising the project.

Lao/Lao American Studies itself is a relatively young and burgeoning field of inquiry. For example, there are very few academic positions in Lao or Lao American Studies. Furthermore, until recently, historical archives on the dispersed migrations and settlements of Lao people have been nearly non-existent. This near archival absence overlooks the more than 250,000 ethnic Lao people who have immigrated to the United States, mainly as political refugees, since Laos became a communist country in 1975. This is partly due to a history of colonialism and the resulting global Lao diaspora. It was out of this obvious need that we started LAAP. While there are two collections of Hmong American materials in St. Paul, Minnesota,[3] there were no specific Lao American archival collections in the United States before the advent of the LAAP in 2022.

[3] The first is the Hmong Archives, a non-profit, and the second is the Center for Hmong Studies at Concordia University in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Since the 1970s, representation of marginal communities and identities became central concerns in the humanities and social sciences. Within archival studies, growing concerns for representation and self-representation have led to the creation of community archives (Kaplan 2002). It has been nearly 50 years since Lao refugees first began to arrive in the United States, yet their histories have been underrepresented in the archives. The first large-scale attempt to record Lao American history was the Lao Oral History Archive (LOHA) by the Center for Lao Studies in 2009.[4] In 2020, the Southeast Asian Archive (SEAA) at the University of California-Irvine created a collection of Lao American oral histories called "Lao Stories: Laotian American Oral History Project."[5] While these projects served to provide voice to the Lao American communities, they have both not been continued. Currently, the SEAA at UC-Irvine is recommitting itself to the collection of Khmer, Laotian, and Hmong narratives, doing so in more collaborative and sustainable ways than previously (Beiser 2024). Other ethnic groups such as the Hmong have established archives, as mentioned above. In states where there are large concentrations of Southeast Asian or Asian American populations, community archives may exist. For smaller, more isolated communities, community archives may not be possible. The LAAP serves to incorporate the stories and documents from these communities, expanding on and providing a fuller history of the Lao American experience.

Lao Americans' near absence from the archives has been a concern for both scholars and the Lao American community. With first-generation Lao Americans passing away in greater numbers, their documents and stories are at greater risk of being lost, to the dismay of scholars and second- and third-generation Lao Americans. Adapting the term "symbolic annihilation" from media studies, Casswell (2014) uses the term to denote how marginalized communities may feel about their absence or misrepresentation in the archives. The LAAP provides an avenue for the preservation of Lao American archival materials and oral histories. Of course, as Casswell and colleagues (2016) find, the impacts of archives can vary. As the LAAP is just in its first phase, some time will be needed to ascertain the full benefits of the project. However, so far, the response has been positive and encouraging.

The LAAP was constituted by a predominantly-Lao American steering committee and is housed at a state agency, factors that distinguish it from some other community archives. In our work, we draw on Andrew Flinn and colleagues' (2009) definition of community archive as the product of a group that has come together to document their shared commonality. While this archive project was not initiated by independent community members and will not be located within a community space, the fact that most on the project steering committee are Lao Americans means that we are particularly attentive to the appraisal, acquisition, description, translation, and use of the material collections. Indeed, in their research on the impact of community archives, Casswell and colleagues (2016) found no significant distinction between community archives and those located within "mainstream" university collections in which

[4] Lao Oral History Archive, Center for Lao Studies, https://www.laostudies.org/content/lao-oral-history-archive-loha

[5] Lao Stories: Laotian American Oral History Project, Southeast Asian Archive, University of California, Irvine, https://calisphere.org/collections/27810/

community members maintain some degree of control over the appraisal, description, and use of materials. We acknowledge that impacts of archival collections like LAAP vary among communities based on the circumstances of their formation; therefore, assessing the impact of the LAAP will be a continuous process. While this project was initiated by scholars within academia, we consider the archive project to be a community archive project due to the composition of our steering committee and the growing support for and interest in the project from Lao community members throughout the United States. As a group of Lao diaspora scholars and those interested in these communities in the United States, the LAAP steering committee began the process of putting together a community archive. We draw on Flinn et al.'s (2009) definition of community archive as the product of a group that has come together to document their shared commonality.

LAAP distinguishes itself through its inclusion of Lao's diverse ethnic groups and its focus on collecting archival materials and oral histories. As a national archive, the LAAP recognizes the distinct Lao American communities throughout the United States. Because of the dispersed nature of these communities, these histories may otherwise be subsumed under the banner of Southeast Asian/Asian American Archives, which can hinder the presence-making work that community archives intend. Another important way that the LAAP differs from other Lao American archives is that its primary goal has been to collect original archival materials and not published books or articles. Documented opinions, experiences, and positions in the Lao language can offer historical insight unencumbered by collaborators' potential fears of embarrassment or repercussions, such as social ostracism. Both the archival materials and oral histories complement one another and help Lao American communities to self-represent for the first time in ways that other archives in the past have not been able.

Project Methodology

The LAAP is committed to welcoming Lao community members to the collection process. While critical archival studies scholars have no methodological consensus on the preferred model of creating community archival collections, including where collections are housed, there is agreement that community involvement is necessary. For instance, Casswell and colleagues (2016) reiterate that models of community archives and their impacts center the needs of those communities they intend to represent. Mainstream archives in the past have often overlooked the importance of community inclusion and, as a result, have silenced some communities and damaged others. Some critical archival studies scholars have turned their attention to reparative archival work, including corrective collecting, described by Casey (2024: 4-5) as seeking "to recognize and counter omissions in the historic record, address representation gaps, heighten the visibility of neglected stories, and enable the writing of more inclusive regional and topical histories by acknowledging the biases present in the creation of archives." In light of this work and others in critical archival studies, we take seriously the past damages to marginalized communities and seek to ensure that our project involves Lao community members at every stage.

After creating a governance structure for the project, the LAAP began advertising within the Lao American community to gain archival materials. Figures 1 and 2 are the English and Lao language posters created to advertise the project in early 2023. We

realized from the outset that our contacts and networks would mainly need to be developed through personal and community connections, and we have been disseminating these posters to our contacts since the project started. Moving forward, we plan to make better use of social media platforms to engage with audiences beyond our immediate personal reach.



Figure 1: Lao American Archive Project recruiting poster, 2023 (English language)



Figure 2: Lao American Archive Project recruiting poster, 2023 (Lao language)

In addition to the collection of standard archival material, LAAP is also collecting oral histories to provide depth and context to the archive. Since 2022, we have conducted interviews with collection donors and others to shed light on the varied experiences, views and migration chronologies of first-generation Lao Americans. Indeed, we have connected archival collection with video archive work by conducting interviews with people providing collections, including Khamphoui Sisavatdy, Ounkham Souriyavong and Khamking Souvannakane.[6] We also solicited oral history interviews through social media outlets and the personal networks of project steering committee members. In the initial 18 months of the project, we collected 24 interviews with participants from the states of Washington, California, Iowa, Illinois, and Wisconsin. Participants included Lao American men and women over the age of 60. This demographic was targeted, as their knowledges and memories face the highest risk of being irretrievably lost.

Work Completed and Future Work of the LAAP

To date, we have acquired, transported, organized, and catalogued archival collections from three donors: two large archival collections (each constituting dozens of boxes) and one small collection. Figure 3 shows steering committee member Akarath Soukhaphon and Gerry Duckitt, a volunteer on the project, outside the truck they used to transport Khamphoui Sisavatdy's collection from Vancouver, Washington to Madison, Wisconsin in April 2023. We are also working on two other moderately sized collections. Crucially, we seek to acquire Lao American collections from people with a wide range of roles and a diversity of political views in Laos and various areas of the United States, including collections related to both men and women. Two large collections and some smaller ones, have been deposited with the Wisconsin Historical Society and are now physically available for review. Figure 4 is a photo of Duckitt processing donated materials from the Khamphoui Sisavatdy collection.

Other collections, stored with the project's PI and steering committee members, are currently being organized and processed. Because collections are composed of various types of documents and manuscripts, as well as photos and other visual and audio material, it can take months to thoroughly process these materials. Adding to the challenge has been finding the individuals with the requisite skills, particular Lao language literacy, and the time necessary to complete this important archival work. As the project gains more recognition and as more donors come forward with collections, it is imperative that we build the capacity to keep apace of acquisitions.

Soon, and in line with our goal of making this project a true community archive, we hope to increase our utilization of social media for greater project promotion and fundraising. To date, responses on Lao-related Facebook group pages has been minimal. We will need to find better ways to engage with the public on these platforms, perhaps by recording short videos describing the work and utility of the archive. Furthermore, limited initial donations to date suggests there is still a reluctance among Lao Americans to donate due to a lack of understanding of the project. Better utilization of social media tools will also help to address such issues.

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[6] Audio recordings from Khamchong's collection can be accessed online from the Wisconsin Historical Society's website at https://whs.aviaryplatform.com/collections/2666.



Figure 3: Akarath Soukhaphon and Gerry Duckitt transporting Khamphoui Sisavatdy's collection from Vancouver, WA to Madison, WI, April 2023



Figure 4: Gerry Duckitt processing donated materials from the Khamphoui Sisavatdy collection, May 2023

The following are the profiles of the people whose three collections we have processed so far: Khamchong Luangpraseut (1941–1999), Khamphoui Sisavatdy (1936–2023), and Ounkham Souriyavong (1934–). All three men were born in Laos and eventually emigrated to the United States; all three played important roles during their time in Laos and in the United States. These collections each provide different materials and perspectives on Lao American perspectives. For example, Khamchong Luangpraseut's collection includes many audio recordings (now digitized) and photographs, as well as documents that demonstrate his efforts to reconcile with the Lao PDR government. Khamphoui Sisavatdy's collection, on the other hand, includes much political correspondence related to Laos and various kinds of documents from a wide range of members of the Lao diaspora, including the United States, France, Australia, Canada, and Thailand. Ounkham Souriyavong's collection, while smaller, provides information about advocacy efforts to promote democracy in Laos.

1) Khamchong Luangpraseut (1941–1999)



Figure 5: Khamchong Luangpraseut at his birthday celebration, nd.

Mr. Khamchong Luangpraseut (Figure 5) was born on April 22, 1941 to ethnically Chinese and Lao parents in Xieng Khouang province, in northeastern Laos. He was an only child, and his parents were important local traders in the area. After his parents were tragically killed when travelling, Khamchong finished high school in Vientiane and went to study in Poland in 1961. In 1971, he returned to Laos after completing a Master of Arts in Economics. In 1972, he went to work for the Royal Lao Government and eventually accepted a position as Director of Administrative Affairs in the Ministry of Information. Khamchong was also editor of the official government newspaper, *Lao Presse*, Lao edition. However, in May 1975, when the communist Pathet Lao took over the government and established the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Khamchong fled to Thailand with his Polish wife and two small children. He initially immigrated to France in 1976, but a few years later, he decided to move to the United States. Khamchong briefly worked for the World Bank in Washington DC as a research assistant, specializing in trade involving members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), while also pursuing a graduate degree at Georgetown University studying comparative government. Khamchong decided to move his family to Santa Ana, California, where he worked for Lao Family Community for a short period before taking up a position as coordinator of the Southeast Asian and Pacific Islander Student Programs for the Santa Ana Unified School District, where he worked for many years before retiring early. He spoke many languages, including Lao, Yunnanese, Vietnamese, Thai, Hmong, English, French, and Polish.

Khamchong was a well-known, public figure in the Lao and Southeast Asian American community. In 1988, he became the first elected, non-Vietnamese president of the National Association for the Education and Advancement of Cambodia, Laotian, and Vietnamese Americans. And he served on various committees and boards, spoke at many public events in the United States, and was frequently interviewed by the media. Khamchong was the founder and President of the Lao Mai Issara Institute, and he edited a Lao-language magazine called *Lao Mai Issara*. Khamchong also authored various articles and books, including *Laos Cultural Speaking: Introduction to the Lao Culture* (1987), *Laos and the Laotians* (1995), and Lao literacy textbooks *Dara Reads Lao volumes I-IV* (1984). In 1999, he decided to return to visit Laos for the first time since leaving the country in 1975. He wanted the Lao overseas to reconcile with the Lao PDR government. But Khamchong's return to Laos was public and controversial, and some in the Lao community in the United States criticized his decision. Upon returning to the United States, Khamchong died on December 1, 1999 at Western Medical Center Hospital in Santa Ana from a (second) brain hemorrhage. Later, his wife, Halinka, and his daughter and her family moved to Marshfield, Wisconsin, where Khamchong's collection was acquired after Halinka passed away in 2021.

2) Khamphoui Sisavatdy (1936–2023)



Figure 6: Khamphoui Sisavatdy giving a speech, Washington state, 1983.

On February 2, 1936, Khamphoui Sisavatdy (Figure 6) was born in Taopoung village, a small rural community in Khong District, Sithandone province (now Champasak

province). At the age of twenty, he was ordained as a Buddhist monk in 1956. Years later, Khamphoui studied in Pakse and Vientiane before continuing his studies in Bangkok, Thailand. He eventually graduated as a *Maha 9*, the highest level of Buddhist study, with a Bachelor of Arts in Education from the Buddhist University in Bangkok. Upon his return to Laos, Khamphoui taught at the Buddhist Institute at Vat Ongtue Buddhist temple in Vientiane. He also founded the Lao Young Buddhist Movement. Eventually, Khamphoui left the monkhood and married Thongsavanh Sananikone in Vientiane. From 1966 to 1967, he edited the bi-monthly magazine *Takoun Lao.* Then, from 1967 and 1972, he edited *Lao Samay*, a bi-monthly magazine, and *Lao Samay Daily News*. In 1972, he was elected to be a member of the National Assembly in Laos, representing his home province of Sithandone. From 1974 to 1976, Khamphoui taught Lao history at the Lao Administrative Institute in Vientiane and Lao literature at the Pedagogical Institute at Dongdok Teaching College. In 1976, after the communist Pathet Lao assumed control, Khamphoui fled Laos and ended up in Nong Khai refugee camp, where he became active in anti-Lao PDR politics through an organization he co-founded, *Samakhitham* (Justice for National Unity). However, in 1977 Khamphoui was arrested with seven other refugees from Laos for illegally establishing a political party in a refugee camp. He was beaten by the police and detained for months.

Finally, Khamphoui was able to leave Thailand in 1978 and become a political refugee and organizer in the United States. He initially lived in Amarillo, Texas before moving to Denver, Colorado in 1979 to become the editor of a Lao-language political newspaper he had established, *Attipatai Lao* (Lao Sovereignty). Khamphoui would later move to Spokane, Washington, and the *Attipatai Lao* would join with three other Lao political groups in the United States to create a new political organization, Lao Organizations in America (ULO). In 1986, Khamphoui became a leading figure in another new political organization, the Lao People's National Liberation Front (LPNLF). He was also involved in the Movement for Democracy in Laos (MDL) in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Furthermore, through the organization Free Elections in Laos (FEL) and other organizations, Khamphoui advocated for the adoption of a liberal, democratic, multi-party political system in Laos. In 1997, he was the President of the Royal Lao Conference in Seattle, for organizing the Council of Lao Representatives Abroad (*Sapha Lao Noke*). In 2003, at the age of sixty-seven, Khamphoui became the Prime Minister of the Royal Lao Government in Exile (RLGE), a position he continued to hold up to the time that he donated his collection in April 2023. In addition to his organizing work and leadership roles, Khamphoui was also a Lao historian, and he authored three Lao-language books: *The Heroism of Chao Anouvong, 1767-1829* (1994), *Laos When Under the Control of Siam* (2000), and *Lao History and Biography of Chao Fa-Ngum the Great* (2002). He has authored many other research documents, letters, and opinion pieces over the years. On October 15, 2023, at the age of 88, he passed away in Vancouver, Washington.

3) Ounkham Souriyavong (1934–)



Figure 7: Ounkham Souriyavong giving an oral history interview, April 5, 2023.

Ounkham Souriyavong (Figure 7), whose materials comprise the third LAAP collection, was born on December 5, 1934 in Houa Khong Tai village in Khong District, Sithandone province (now Champasak Province), southern Laos. After studying for many years in Khong District and later Pakse, Ounkham began studying to be a police officer in Khinak, Khong District, Sithandone province in 1953, and he worked in various places—including Pakse, Khong District, and Champassak. Three years later, Ounkham became a police officer in Vientiane before being transferred to Kengkoke, Champhone District, Savannakhet province, where he worked for seven years. Ounkham was politically right-wing and opposed the neutralist Captain Kong Le, who organized a successful coup d'état on August 10, 1960, before General Phoumi Nosavan's troops forced Kong Le to flee north from Vientiane at the end of the year. In 1962, Ounkham became a committee member in Vientiane for implementing the Geneva Accords in Laos. After receiving additional training in Singapore in 1965, Ounkham was stationed in Phonthong District, Champassak province before moving back Vientiane five years later. As a side job, he established a printing press for hire. Following additional police training at Done Tieu, outside of Vientiane, in 1973, Ounkham found work in the Ministry of Interior, where he was the head of the office for the protection of civilians. By 1975, he was a lieutenant colonel in the Royal Lao police.

Following the arrival of the Pathet Lao, Ounkham was sent for political re-education to Houaphanh province, in northeastern Laos, where he remained for twelve, long years. Without ever being charged or tried in a court of law, Ounkham was forced to live and work at concentration camps in Houaphanh province under extremely poor

conditions. A few months after his release and return to Vientiane, he and his wife and five children crossed the Mekong River to Thailand one night in 1987. There, they became political refugees at the Nong Seng temporary camp for a month before being admitted to the Napho refugee camp in Nakorn Phanom province. Two other children had already immigrated to the United States. Ounkham and the rest of his immediate family stayed at Napho. The rest of the family was eventually flown to the Philippines, where they stayed at a camp for six months. Ounkham finally immigrated to the United States with his wife and children in 1990. He settled in Vancouver, Washington, where his older children already lived. In 2000, Ounkham became the Secretary General of the organization Free Elections in Laos, and he worked on a voluntary basis with that organization until 2005. At the time of our 2023 interview with Ounkham, he was living in Vancouver, Washington. He also donated a small, personal collection to the LAAP at the same time.

Many of the oral histories took place in participants' homes and all were video-recorded (see Figure 8).



Figure 8: Khamphoui Sisavatdy giving an oral history interview with Ian Baird, April 6, 2023

To date, the individuals who have provided oral history interviews for LAAP are listed below:

Southep Thikeo, Milwaukee, WI
Ouane Dara, Franklin, WI

Kossarady Phimmasone, Fresno, CA (interviewed in Madison, WI)
Channoy Bounket, Milwaukee, WI
Bouathong Souvannarath, Milwaukee, WI
Onekeo Phongsavath, Milwaukee, WI
Sout Phakeovilay, Milwaukee, WI
Ounkham Souriyavong, Vancouver, WA
Khamphoui Sisavatdy, Vancouver, WA
Khamking Souvannakane, Vancouver, WA
Khamvanh Kanlagna, Des Moines, IA
Brady Chanhthy Anongdeth, Madison, WI
Jay Rasavongxay, Gilberts, IL
Korakanh Phimmasene, Joliet, IL
Vone Rasavongxay, Gilberts, IL
Singkeo & Thongkham Chomsisengphet, Oshkosh, WI
Bounyong Inthachith, Madison, WI
Khampheng Soukhaphon, Milwaukee, WI
Phatsanouk Soukhaphon, Milwaukee, WI
Vilavanh Inthavong, Milwaukee, WI
Bounnheua Bouakongxaya, Milwaukee, WI
Souksakhone Senebouttarath, Waukesha, WI
Bounkham Nathavong, Brookfield, WI

The Value of the LAAP and its Collections

The LAAP answers the call from critical archival studies scholars to combat the "symbolic annihilation" of marginalized communities in "mainstream" archival collections by creating permanent, long-term archival collections. Additionally, this national-scale repository of Lao American archival materials disrupts tired assumptions about what it means to be a Lao American and the types of political and social views held by those in the community.

The two large collections, from Khamchong Luangpraseut and Khamphoui Sisavatdy, are important for "contaminating," disrupting, or nuancing our understandings of post-1975 Lao diasporic politics. While both men supported the US Republican Party, an important contribution from the two collections is their divergent views on how best to engage with "homeland politics." For example, until his death, Khamphoui was adamantly opposed to the Lao PDR government, and he served for over two decades as the Prime Minister of the RLGE. (This interim democratic government is based in Oregon and Washington States but has members all over the United States and in other countries with former Lao refugees, such as France, Australia, and Canada.) Khamchong, on the other hand, was initially strongly opposed to the Lao PDR government; but by the 1980s, he was promoting a more peaceful and collaborative path for reconciliation between *Lao noke* (Lao outside Laos) and *Lao nai* (Lao inside Laos). This was especially clear after Khamchong visited Laos in 1999 for the first time since leaving the country in 1975 as a political refugee. His visit to Laos is documented via a large set of photographs that he took during the trip. In his collection, there are also important photos of Khamchong and other Lao Americans hosting high-level, Lao PDR

politician Khamphoui Keoboualapha during this same general period.[7] Rather than imagining that there was simply one view of Lao diasporic engagement with "the homeland," these two collections clearly indicate that there were different points of view and that robust debates were occurring in Lao American communities over this important issue.

The Khamchong Luangpraseut and Khamphoui Sisavatdy collections also demonstrate that even amongst Lao American community members staunchly opposed to the Lao PDR government, there were a wide range of viewpoints and political orientations. Khamphoui's collection, for example, includes documents prepared by right-wing groups; the Lao Socialist Party in France, which was opposed to the Lao PDR government; and Kong Le's Neutralist Party, which was opposed to the Lao PDR government but also wanted Laos to be a fully neutral, independent, and non-aligned nation. In the same collection, there is correspondence from well over one hundred different Lao American organizations, as well as Lao organizations from other parts of the world. Most documents are written in Lao, but there are also documents in English, French and Thai.[8]

These LAAP collections also highlight debates in Lao America about the place of Lao Americans in the United States, including questions related to assimilation and acculturation. These questions include: What is the danger of Lao language and culture being lost in the United States? How should the idea of being Lao, both culturally and nationally, be communicated with other Americans? Khamchong Luangpraseut's collection reflects his proposal that ethnic Lao people should just be referred to as "Lao" while people from other ethnic groups in Laos should be referred to as "Laotians"—as a way of differentiating these groups from each other while maintaining a shared national identity. Of course, not everyone agreed with or adopted this idea. Khamchong was also at the center of debates in the 1980s about language and cultural learning, especially for the Lao, Hmong, Vietnamese and Cambodia immigrant communities in the United States. Initially, a lot of effort was put into helping immigrants learn English. Some materials in Khamchong's collection were created for that purpose. Later, however, more emphasis has been put on helping Lao American children learn Lao and retain at least parts of their cultures. Khamchong's collection also includes a series of audio cassettes (digitized by the Wisconsin Historical Society) of public forums in which a range of issues pertinent to Lao Americans at the time were discussed and debated in Lao language. These and other materials represent an important record of discussions occurring amongst Lao Americans.

Historical written, photographic and audio materials at the LAAP are complemented by the oral histories collected from Lao Americans in Lao language as part of this project. These video recordings not only touch on the past experiences of Lao Americans, including when they first came to the United States, but also their present-day views on those experiences—since they have now had more time to reflect on those

[7] Khamphoui Keoboualapha visited the United States and spent a considerable amount of time with Khamchong and his colleagues. Khamphoui Keoboualapha was previously a member of the politburo and central committee of the Lao PDR; and in the 1990s, he was a Minister and later the deputy Prime Minister of the Lao PDR.

[8] It should be noted that these authors were largely opposed to using the simplified version of Lao presently in use today. As a form of protest against the present Lao PDR government, they used the pre-1975 official system to write Lao.

times and to assess them more deeply. These reflections, which are provided in their own first languages, are as valuable as the historical accounts that are provided during the interviews.

By prioritizing Lao-language materials, the LAAP takes seriously the materials created by first generation immigrants to the United States, as Lao language was the language that people thought, spoke, and communicated in print. To understand the nuances of the interactions and debates that occurred at the time, especially between Lao people, it is necessary to examine the Lao sources. Indeed, English translations generally fail to convey the important context and nuances that come with language.

Overall, the materials in the LAAP collections indicate that the first generation of Lao immigrants to the United States engaged in substantive debates that they were not often able to communicate in English, thus potentially giving some the impression that these debates were more superficial than they actually were. Indeed, collections representing divergent viewpoints like these are important for decolonizing the archives, as decolonization is partly about ensuring that archives represent the views of as wide a range of people as possible. The decolonial, archival perspective is also about ensuring that debates in the United States in other languages apart from English are not underemphasized or simply forgotten and excluded from official, primary sources of historical documentation.

This paper conveys subject matter that we have learned thus far from the materials collected and the interviews done; but there is no doubt that, as time passes, new societal interests and debates will undoubtedly lead people to view the materials in new ways and from new perspectives. This will reveal insights that we are not able to conceptualize at this time. Thus, the LAAP archival materials can be thought of as constituting an archive of the past *and* a vibrant, shifting repository that responds to societal interests and individual curiosities in the future.

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The LAAP is an effort to create a Lao American community archive and national repository within the Wisconsin state archives. The LAAP prioritizes standard archival materials (e.g., original documents, correspondence, video and audio tapes) mainly produced by Lao Americans—since large numbers of political refugees started leaving Laos for the United States in 1975. The LAAP also collects and archives Lao-language oral histories from first-generation Lao American immigrants. The goal is for Lao Americans and others to learn more about their past through the collections. The Wisconsin Idea, which is "that university research should be applied to solve problems and improve health, quality of life, the environment, and agriculture for all citizens of the state" is well exemplified through the Lao American Archive Project at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the Wisconsin Historical Society, as well. Furthermore, we hope that sometime in the future, people from Laos may also benefit from using these materials to understand past and present relations between Lao Americans and Lao in Laos.

Most importantly, the LAAP aims to give agency to Lao critical refugee narratives in their own first languages, and, more generally, contribute to decolonizing U.S. archives and public knowledge about Southeast Asian Americans—Lao Americans in particular. The LAAP maintains relationships with those who donate materials by listening to their

needs and making clear our intentions (e.g., acquisitions , access of materials) to center community in this community archive. In other words, we strive as Casey (2024: 8) claims, "…if you are aiming to create a community archives, one of the most effective ways is to create a community *around* the archives and to be in community *with* those documented." We are off to a good start *and* recognize much more work needs to be done in the future—considering the limited attention paid to collecting and archiving Lao American materials to date.

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