



Phill Wilcox

Heritage and the Making of Political Legitimacy in Laos

The Past and Present
of the Lao Nation

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ASIAN HERITAGES 7

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
LAO PDR	Lao People's Democratic Republic
LDC	Least Developed Country
LPRP	Lao People's Revolutionary Party
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
RLG	Royal Lao Government
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization



Author's Note

Several variations of spellings exist in writing Lao words in Latin script as a consequence of several transcription systems. I have used the forms that, in my experience, are used most commonly.

The material presented here was gathered in both Lao and English. All translations from Lao are my own, unless otherwise stated. Translations directly from Hmong came almost entirely from Hmong-speaking friends, who were often themselves interlocutors in this research. Where a conversation was translated from Hmong, this is stated within the text.

All personal names of people in this book are pseudonyms, except for well-known people, such as Kaysone Phomvihane, for whom the real name and conventional spelling is used.



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The PhD process took me on numerous visits to Laos, starting informally from 2002, although I had no idea then of where it would lead. I returned yearly from around 2007 and after I registered for my doctorate in 2013, stayed for a much longer concentrated period of research lasting around fifteen months. The PhD journey also allowed me time to study Lao at the Southeast Asian Studies Summer Institute, University of Wisconsin at Madison in 2014, for which I was offered a very generous scholarship. I am very grateful to Dr Samlong Inthaly and those who studied with me for making such an intense language experience also such an enjoyable one.

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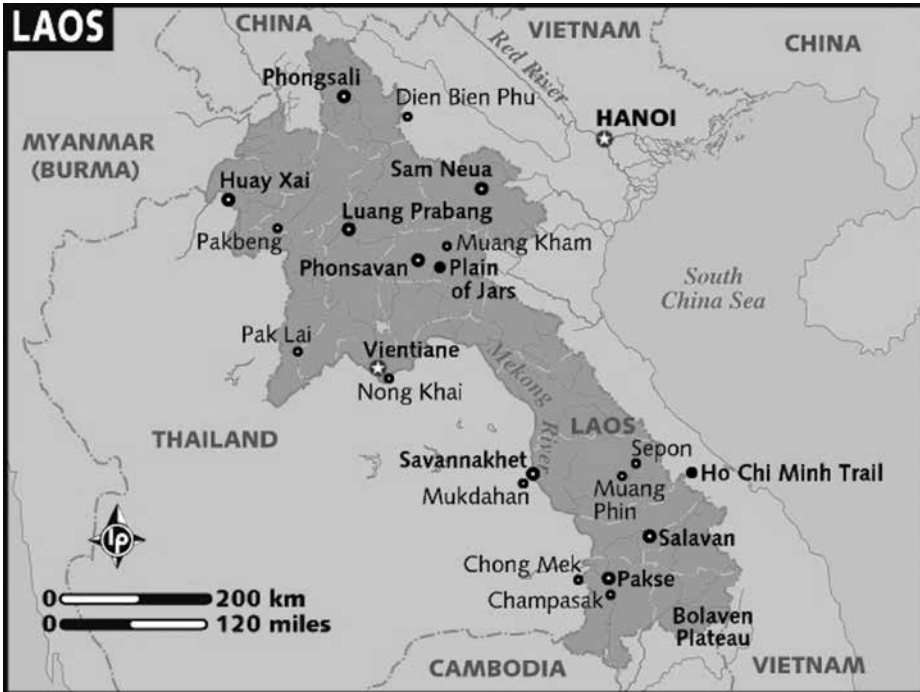
For their kind permission to reproduce a map, I send my sincere thanks to Lonely Planet. Thank you also to Amanda Silberling for allowing me to reproduce two of her photographs.

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Figure 1 Map of Laos



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1 Introduction – Heritage, State, and Politics

Abstract

While the one-party state in Laos is nearly fifty years old, how is it possible for people to still revere the former Lao royal family? What does this mean for understandings of political legitimacy, heritage, and national identity in contemporary Laos? This chapter covers critical points of Herzfeld's cultural intimacy model and shows that the Lao political system as it is today has become part of the fabric of Lao culture and society. The context of Luang Prabang, the former royal capital, is also introduced, as well as the justification for choosing Luang Prabang as an excellent place to consider how narratives of the past, present, and imagined futures intersect.

Keywords: Luang Prabang, political legitimacy, one-party state, national identity, transition

The Lao People's Democratic Republic celebrated its 45th birthday in December 2020. It is one of the very few surviving examples of a one-party socialist system left in the world. My aim in this book is to ask how the Lao political system, which I will refer to here as nominally socialist, has become part of everyday life in Laos. Several generations of the Lao population now live, work, and build futures under this system. In sum, I consider here how they live in and around the state.¹

At the time of writing in 2021, Laos is a different place from the country that established one-party socialism in 1975. Collectivization and central planning have given way to a market-based economy since the mid-1980s,

¹ The full title of the country is the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR). Here, I use Laos to refer to the country and Lao to refer to anyone who is a citizen of that country. This is important given the immense ethnic diversity in the country. When I refer to people who identify or are identified by the state as being from the lowland ethnic group, I use the term "lowland Lao" to distinguish them from citizens of the country but from the various ethnic minorities, such as the Hmong.

and the observation heard frequently from outsiders is that Laos, therefore, is no longer really socialist. Laos is now a country where growing inequality is very apparent. It is now a place where, as in much of the rest of the world, it is possible to become and be very rich but also very poor. In contrast to the days of strict socialism, it is possible to do things that would have been anathema to previous generations, for example, working and studying abroad in countries that epitomize capitalism. Yet for all that has changed – and the political rhetoric has changed over time – officially the country maintains socialism as a future political destination. According to the Lao government, Laos will arrive at socialism one day.² As the system heads towards its fifth decade with no real indication of how, when, or even why, socialism is desirable now, this is worthy of investigation. To think through how people live in, live around, and perpetuate the one-party political system with its outward statements celebrating socialism on the one hand and market economics on the other, is to consider the question of political legitimacy in Laos head-on.

The main focus of this investigation is Luang Prabang, the former royal capital of the country and the principal city of northern Laos. It is from here that the Lao royal family departed upon their deposition in 1975, to re-education camps on the Lao-Vietnamese border, never to return. A place of significant history, Luang Prabang is also referred to frequently by people all across the population as the centre of Lao culture. It is, therefore, an excellent place to get a flavour of 'Laoness', or what being Lao is about. The city's historic centre has been recognized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as a World Heritage site since 1995. Luang Prabang is a place where the recent history of French colonialism and the pre-revolutionary period is evident, which stands in stark contrast to other places in Laos, where this is largely sidelined, lambasted, or ignored. Luang Prabang as a contradictory space is not always clear to its many visitors, neither international or domestic ones, for whom Luang Prabang represents a splendid site of authentic Lao culture. Finally, the city is also a place of significant migration from the countryside, where most of the population still resides as subsistence rice farmers. This is a city people come to, and from where they move further still in pursuit of their aspirations for the future.

I first went to Luang Prabang in 2002 and, since 2013, have conducted research there. I met large numbers of young Hmong migrants from rural areas in the surrounding provinces who moved to the city to pursue dreams

2 This is analysed in detail by High and Petit (2013).

of better education, employment, or both. These are people whose parents have little direct memory of the revolution in 1975 and the civil war which preceded it. Consequently, they have never known any other political system first-hand, but as youth living in urban areas with increased and increasing access to technology far beyond what was possible in their villages, they are often very connected to the world outside Laos. Luang Prabang is where they dream of migrating further for employment or further education. They know that the political system in Laos is different from that of, for example, Thailand, and build their futures amid and around such a political landscape.

Being Revolutionary, Being Lao

The garden of the former royal palace in Luang Prabang contains a large statue of the last crowned Lao monarch, King Sisavang Vong, who ruled Laos after independence from France in 1953 until his death in 1959. At this point, his son, Sisavang Vatthana succeeded him. Vatthana was never formally crowned, owing to the onset of the civil war that engulfed the country and led to the revolution in 1975, which ultimately deposed the Lao monarchy. At the time of his accession to the throne, King Sisavang Vatthana commented ruefully that he would be the last King of Laos, and his fears were not ill-founded. Following the revolution, the King abdicated. He, his wife, and the Crown Prince perished in a re-education camp in a remote part of northeast Laos around 1980. No public statement about the circumstances of their demise has ever been made in Laos itself.³

The last home of the Lao royal family today is a National Museum. Visitors buy a ticket and are then free to enter but must remove their shoes and wear appropriate dress within the main building. Sometimes guided by official guides, visitors will walk a prescribed route around the museum, learn briefly about each room's uses, and see the King's personal effects, including his bedroom. Simultaneously, they will learn nothing of his fate from either the signs or the guides. This information is entirely absent. In sum, visitors will learn that Laos had a monarchy until 1975, but what happened after that, and why it does not have a monarchy anymore, is conspicuously absent. There is no explicit reference to the political system that deposed the monarchy and remains in power today.

3 For a detailed overview of general Lao history, see Evans (2002). For a specific overview of the founding of the modern Lao state and the two decades since the revolution in 1975 and subsequent reinvention of itself, see – amongst others – Evans (1998) and Stuart-Fox (1998).

Figure 2 Statue of King Sisavang Vong in the grounds of the National Museum (formerly the Royal Palace), Luang Prabang



Photograph taken by the author, January 2014

In what used to be his garden, King Sisavang Vong stands resplendent and alone. Following the revolution, the statue was spared destruction as it was a present from the Soviet Union and received during a particularly turbulent period of Lao history. It was then deemed insensitive to remove

it.⁴ Today the statue is a focal point of any visit to the former palace and, when I visited Luang Prabang in December 2013, I too was drawn to the statue. What caught my attention were the fresh offerings of flowers and incense placed daily at the foot of the statue. At the time, I never found out who left these offerings and my enquiries, both in English and Lao, were smiled away politely by the local officials, a strategy particularly common in Laos for deflecting difficult questions.⁵ I am aware that at least some of the officials are likely to be members of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP), although as party members are sometimes discouraged from disclosing this to foreigners, I will never know for certain.⁶ I only ever received one answer to my enquiry, when an official told me that the offerings were placed there 'for respect', but he looked decidedly uncomfortable and would say nothing further, even though the placing of offerings is actually commonplace in Laos.

This incident was one of the first occasions on which I had seen anything of the pre-revolutionary period as something visible in Laos. I wondered at the time what was being articulated by smiling away those enquiries? Was the smiling an attempt to deal with something too difficult to explain, both in substance and in form, or something else entirely? Leaving an offering out of respect is not particularly controversial in and of itself, perhaps unworthy of further discussion, but the location and the wider context of whom the statue stands for and where it is located is worth pausing over. This research journey has led me to consider why these expressions of 'respect' to King Sisavang Vong were made anyway when so much time had passed since the founding of the contemporary Lao state. Why were these offerings permitted and to what end? I also wondered what was left unspoken here, and whether that had anything at all to do with Luang Prabang's designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. This is an interesting dimension that raises implications about how people engage with their pre-revolutionary heritage in Luang Prabang, living and working around it while maintaining the dogmatic political legitimacy of one-party socialism.

The official story of the modern Lao nation is that the current political regime represents the will of the Lao people, and anything contradictory

4 Statues are a common theme throughout this book and this one is particularly relevant because it is one of very few public commemorations of the final decades of the Lao monarchy. See Tappe (2013) for further details about this particular statue.

5 See Baird and Le Billon (2012) for a commentary on this as a deflection strategy for difficult or controversial questions.

6 See especially, Baird (2014) and Stuart-Fox (2007) for background on how the Party appears and influences public life and interactions such as this one.



to this story is lambasted or ignored. Yet in Luang Prabang, the promotion of heritage conflicts with that narrative. Seemingly problematic parts of heritage are visible here, where they do not appear elsewhere in Laos. Browse the Luang Prabang night market, as most visitors do, and one will see the symbol of the ousted Royal Lao Government (RLG), traded openly on bags and other keepsakes sold as souvenirs to tourists. This symbol was on the national flag until 1975. Lao children who are learning the alphabet do so with each consonant assigned to a word, and 'flag' is one of these key words. Contemporary alphabet diagrams use the current flag. This is in contrast to diaspora communities abroad, who often use the RLG symbol instead, a potent reminder of the country they have lost. In Laos itself, I have never seen the RLG symbol outside this particular context of central, UNESCO-recognized Luang Prabang, and I have come to understand that its display here is possible in ways that would be frowned on elsewhere.⁷ Central Luang Prabang therefore assumes a paradoxical quality. I wanted to know how these contradictions play out in everyday life, and how discourses of heritage and political legitimacy intersect and diverge.

This is an apt departure point for the research puzzle that took me to Laos again and again. When I asked some of those who would come to participate in this research about what I had seen, they told me that Luang Prabang is about heritage, or as it is termed in Lao, *moladok*, itself a new word to describe a process of doing heritage.⁸ In Luang Prabang, as the ultimate centre of Lao culture, actions such as the open veneration of the ousted royalist regime are possible in ways that they would not be allowed elsewhere, for example, in the national capital of Vientiane. This then, is a rare example of the previous regime being visible in a country that retains one-party socialism, and as an embedded part of the cultural landscape. I believe that investigating discourses of who present themselves as the guardians of traditional culture, and to what end, are entirely relevant for claims that take us to the heart of political legitimacy in Laos.

In official terminology, the one-party regime in Laos is here to stay. This is why I reject the term post-socialist in relation to Laos and will not

7 Tappe (2013) examines this directly. I also return to this in the following chapter.

8 Berliner (2012) describes how his interlocutors in Luang Prabang largely viewed *moladok* as a process and something one is required to do by the authorities. This represents a top-down process of managing heritage, which is apparent in Luang Prabang as I will outline in the next chapter.



use it here. In contrast to most of the former USSR and Eastern European countries, Laos is, simply, not post-socialist. It may appear to be capitalist in all but name to outsiders, yet that is *not* what the state in Laos tells us about itself, and it is not accurate in describing the political landscape under which my interlocutors live. Instead, the official discourse maintains that socialism in Laos is still the intended political destination. No matter how curious that statement is to outsiders, my argument is that we must take what the Lao state says about itself seriously to be able to understand the political landscape.

My aim was to get behind the public face of what is presented as Lao culture and legitimate politics by listening to what the state says about itself, and what people say about the state. Luang Prabang, with its visible pre-revolutionary heritage, is a perfect place to do this. I suggest that by allowing some open interaction with the pre-revolutionary heritage in Luang Prabang a space for the past to be visible and interacted with in ways that do not threaten the overall legitimacy of the system can be created. This can be applied in broader terms. As we will see here, by allowing for space for people to complain about things that are fairly uncontentious, that everyone knows already, the state also allows for people to interact with the state in ways where some forms of dissent are tolerated, but only in ways that do not threaten the overall political system.

Constructing the People's Democratic Republic

At this point, it is important to take a step back into the past. For much of the current Lao population, French colonialism in Laos is now several generations past. Most young Lao do not study French anymore, and many have told me that this is no longer important for their futures. It is important, however, to recognize the significance of France in creating the modern Lao state, in both its post- and pre-1975 forms. Laos was finally consolidated as a nation in 1899. The first time the Lao population came together within the new borders was under French colonialism. The French also preserved the Lao monarchy, and the traditional Buddhist sangha system, in which the Lao King formed the central body.

Following independence from France in 1953, Laos, with a weak sense of national consciousness, increasingly became involved in the situation in neighbouring Vietnam. The RLG nominally retained control of the cities but had limited control of parts of the countryside, where a movement known



as the Pathet Lao (literally ‘Lao state’) calling for socialism in Laos, was growing. The RLG was perceived increasingly as corrupt and propped up by external aid. This is not particularly surprising as the US, desperate to stop the spread of communism to South Vietnam, believed that this would lead to a domino effect of revolutions around the region. Accordingly, they consolidated their resources into air strikes, and later, ground troops in Vietnam. US support for the RLG increased dramatically from humanitarian to military aid to combat the Pathet Lao.⁹

Between 1965 and 1973, the US government sanctioned a massive aerial bombing campaign of much of the Lao countryside, particularly along the border with Vietnam, where the Ho Chi Minh trail ran through parts of Eastern Laos.¹⁰ Banned by the Geneva Agreements of 1954 and 1962 from direct involvement in Laos, the CIA recruited fighters particularly from the Hmong to fight for them and against the RLG army, and found a leader in General Vang Pao to take on this task. This is an aspect of Lao history with resounding consequences today and on which I focus in Chapter 3. Many Hmong hoped for an independent state after the conflict and feared increasing levels of adverse control over their lives should the Pathet Lao succeed. They sided with the RLG and stood behind Vang Pao. Vang Pao’s name continues to hold significant power both in Laos and around the world and is not spoken openly amongst lowland Lao, except in derogatory terms.

Uncertainty gave way to coup after coup and by the early 1970s the RLG was incapable of continuing without US support, and its control over the rest of the country gradually weakened. In the countryside, people wished only for peace. When the US withdrew from Vietnam, its efforts in Laos also came to a close. This led to the Pathet Lao progressively taking a more prominent role in the political arena. Although the revolution in Laos was not particularly bloody, once US military support collapsed and neighbouring Phnom Penh and Saigon fell to the communists in April 1975, it was only a matter of time before events in Laos resolved similarly. Many Lao citizens, particularly those who had supported the RLG and/or American war efforts (including large numbers of Hmong, fearful of what would come next), fled across the Mekong River to Thailand, and were eventually resettled in third countries. The loss of these people, which included much of Laos’s educated population, made the eventual transfer to one-party socialism straightforward. King Vatthana wrote his letter of abdication at the start of

9 This is discussed at length by Phraxayavong (2009).

10 Laos is still dealing with a deadly legacy of this period, with large amounts of unexploded ordnance. See Russell (2013).



December 1975, and the LPRP, the successors of the Pathet Lao, were now the only remaining political force. The Lao People's Democratic Republic was founded on 2 December 1975. This date is celebrated each year as National Day in contemporary Laos.¹¹

The revolutionary birth then gave way to repression. For those still in Laos, those considered dubiously loyal to the new regime often faced internment in re-education camps. Monks were denounced as parasites for living on alms they collected from the population and were restricted in doing so.¹² Initially, the King, Queen, and the Crown Prince were allowed to remain behind in Luang Prabang, but were subsequently transported to a re-education camp in Houaphanh Province where they later starved to death.¹³ The Lao leadership remained notoriously tight-lipped about their fate for many years following the revolution, until much later when Kaysone Phomvihane, the first Prime Minister of socialist Laos, stated on a visit outside Laos that the King had died of old age sometime around 1980. No official statement has ever been made about the fate of the Queen and the Crown Prince, and the whereabouts of the remains of all three members of the Royal family are unknown. The last known photo of the King and Queen shows them kneeling in a re-education camp shortly before their deaths.¹⁴

Aside from political repression, there was also economic repression. The government began a programme of land collectivization, which proved deeply unpopular with the peasants.¹⁵ It took less than a decade before strict economic policy gave way to a loosening of the economic climate. Restrictions on private business were eased and the country began opening up to both foreign investment and tourism. This may look like a move away from socialism and was characterized as such in the title of a piece by Soukamneuth, who aptly terms this period a 'central march to socialism' and a 'local retreat to capitalism' (2006:47-50). Crucially, the regime retained socialist language. Yamada (2018) argues cogently that the relationship between economics and political ideology remains very tight in Laos, and that the change in economic direction could be marketed as something that

11 For more information about this very turbulent period in Lao history, see Evans (2002, 2009) and Baird (2015), amongst others.

12 See especially, Ladwig (2013) and two works from nearer the time period: Stuart-Fox (1983) and Stuart Fox and Bucknell (1982)

13 See Evans (2009). In relation to Luang Prabang specifically, Berliner notes that during this period it became 'a damned place' (2012: 778) because of its royalist associations.

14 This is addressed in more detail in the following chapter.

15 Detailed information about collectivization in Laos is available from Evans (1990).



would benefit the eventual establishment of socialism in Laos. Arguably, as levels of Chinese influence in Laos are also on the rise, amid fanfare statements from the Lao authorities about how closer ties with China are positive for Laos, this process of leading change rather than being a recipient of it is being deployed again. As we will see throughout the chapters which follow, leading from the front, and showing active leadership, is fundamental to political legitimacy in Laos. It allows for the Lao authorities to be active in processes of change, rather than passive recipients. For the Lao political establishment, this has proved a vital strategy for avoiding making oneself redundant.

Socialist Ideology – Capitalist Politics

This means, as High and Petit (2013) term it, Laos is not so much post-socialist as pre-socialist, at least in official discourse. The introduction and then rejection of certain tenets of strict socialism is couched mostly in terms of the Party doing what is best for the country. The rhetoric of hard work for developing the nation remains. Those who live outside this narrative, for example, the overseas Lao, are acknowledged for their economic power. Some now operate, or provide help to businesses in contemporary Laos, but the reasons they left remain largely unspoken.

The flexible use of socialist ideology and rhetoric, as a driver of political legitimacy and as a tool, allows people to make sense of the present through this same ideological lens. While the country maintains one-party socialism, and an authoritarian system of governance that stands in line with its neighbours, Vietnam and China, the official commitment to represent the people under the banner of socialism continues. Of course, Laos is not a democracy represented by a multiparty system, yet ‘democratic’ continues to appear in the full title of the country, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic. My point here is to highlight that the authorities continue to draw on claims of being the legitimate representatives of the population.

High (2014) asks why – if the country is only socialist in a nominal sense – is there not more opposition to the current political regime in Laos? She argues that one powerful reason for this is because, although the state is feared, people still believe it can deliver on its promises to their population and that they can succeed under this regime. For High, the state represents a beast which people feed in its current incarnation and must feed because of their expectations. She also argues that it is an object both of ridicule and desire. By feeding the state in this form, they imagine it into being



and make it an essential part of their own lives. For me, people resent it, complain about it, and resist it but simultaneously expect it to provide for them and complain when it does not. Perhaps this is because most of the population cannot conceive of an alternative for Laos itself at the present time. Their concerns are more mundane and immediate. Many people in Laos have told me of the need to reduce corruption and improve basic health care and education amenities. Nobody has expressed, in so many words, the need for radical political reform to do that.

Laos has a small population and small urban centres. Luang Prabang remains the principal city for northern Laos, along with the national capital in Vientiane and smaller cities. Overall, the population is spread mainly around the river valleys with the rest in the more remote, mountainous areas. This makes meaningful interaction with officials possible and speaks volumes about the importance of viewing the state in Laos as, first and foremost, a set of social relations. These officials reproduce the state at its most basic level. Even if everyone knows that socialism in Laos seems eternally delayed and may never actually arrive, or is no longer meaningful, how one understands and interacts with the state every day is more important. The state becomes real on a straightforward level in how it is maintained, interacted with, or both. One of my main interlocutors is Kou, a Hmong who teaches English at different private language schools. Kou lives with his family just outside Luang Prabang and offered to teach two children of a local policeman for free because he felt that this would help him avoid future problems with the state, which to him was personified by this local figure of authority. In a way that reproduced my Lao friends' behaviour, I also made strenuous attempts to make personal connections in my dealings with officials. To me, they were a literal personification of the state. This included being hyper-polite, apologizing profusely for my Lao, remembering their names, and enquiring after their families, health, and work.

One has only to open a Lao newspaper to see all manner of stories about the state and its representatives involved in every aspect of life. I will talk more in Chapter 4 about how many people made very thoughtful and insightful observations, when discussing China and the Chinese in Laos. They also became assertively Lao at the same time, and expected their government to do something about what they saw as unwelcome levels of Chinese influence, thereby conferring legitimacy on the Lao government to exist in its current form. Here, they transfer their expectations and demands on the state, and express disappointment with it when it falls short. This shows that there is no retreat of the state or socialist rhetoric in Laos, and that those who



set the state's public faces continue to see an increasingly important role for the state and its narratives in Lao society. The authoritarian system in Laos has changed shape considerably over the last forty years, and how it is experienced on the ground is still very varied, but the nature of the authoritarianism has not changed. Whatever else is receding, these aspects of the political landscape are not. This means a renewed role for the state in all aspects of public life. Moreover, even as people blame the state, they do not reject it outright. I have found some genuine support for it, even amongst the criticisms.

I pause here to recognize the diversity of Laos, which is particularly relevant for who represents whom. Laos is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world, with about half the population classified as lowland Lao. The remaining half comprises different ethnic groups, with the largest segments being the Hmong and the Khmu, comprising around 9% and 11% respectively.¹⁶ As with many other ethnic minorities, the Hmong remain disadvantaged at all levels in Lao society given their deemed adverse history of having opposed the establishment of Laos as a one-party state. While every citizen of Laos is, in theory, part of an ethnic group; in lived experience, ethnicity is defined as being in opposition to the lowland Lao majority. This has the effect that while everyone is part of the multi-ethnic peoples of Laos, not everyone has equal power of citizenship within the population. In relation to the Hmong of Laos, I would argue that their marginalization in Laos, and before that in China from where they migrated, has much to do with establishing contemporary nation-building and their resistance to these attempts by others to govern them. Scott (2009) termed this process as highlanders seeking *Zomia*, an upland region beyond state control. I will return to this in Chapter 3, arguing that this desire to live beyond what is often perceived or deemed the adverse control of the Lao state no longer exists as a physical place. Autonomy versus control is a recurrent theme in negotiating with and living in and around the Lao state. Crucially, it affects people differently. For the Hmong, having documents to show they are citizens of Laos is insufficient for ideas of separatism – which they are perceived to hold by much of the Lao population – to disappear entirely.

The following chapters will look at specific dimensions of contemporary Laos. These include how the official political project rests on the population essentializing and accepting a specific narrative of the past; how this national story is experienced as part of life by Hmong migrants from the

16 See the 2015 Population and Housing Census. Molland (2017) rightly urges caution about the reliability of census data.

surrounding countryside, and how the growing influence of China in Laos generally, has become a far more prominent concern than governmental legitimacy arising from history. Whatever else, the country remains poor. Poverty, malnourishment, and limited access to both education and health care remain significant problems, as well as rising inequality across Lao society. As of 2015, literacy rates were around 85 per cent but just over 13 per cent of the population never attended school. Life expectancy generally is now 65 years for women and slightly younger for men.¹⁷ Through the life trajectories of some of the research participants in this book, I will demonstrate that rural-urban migration forms the backdrop of life for many young Lao, many of whom are Hmong. Many Lao citizens migrate for employment to neighbouring countries to earn higher wages; and many of my research participants aspired to do the same. As we will see here, they also increasingly believe that knowledge of Mandarin, and/or experience of study in China, is very advantageous for building a future in Laos.

In view of its level of poverty, Laos has continued to have the status of Least Developed Country (LDC) since 1971 and losing this status has been a long-standing cornerstone of government policy.¹⁸ The official discourse of ambitious plans to do this is marked by changing the country from its popular description of landlocked to land-linked. This means an integrated and well-connected country within Southeast Asia. Current plans are for Laos to exit the LDC Status by 2025 and reach a middle-income status by 2030. Large-scale developments, such as transport infrastructure and hydropower, are a major aspect of the strategy to do this.¹⁹ The extent to which leaving behind the LDC marker will make a meaningful difference to people living in poverty remains to be seen, however, because rates of inequality in Laos are increasing. This was articulated particularly effectively in March 2019 by the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty in his summing up of a recent visit to Laos, when he questioned why so many people remain in poverty when the Lao economy is booming. He ventured a question to which much of the Lao population would like an answer, and to which I will return in Chapter 4 with reference to China in Laos: Who is really benefiting from development in Laos?

17 See the 2015 Population and Housing Census for these and further statistics about Laos.

18 Further information on the Least Developed Country Status and Laos is available here: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/least-developed-country-category-lao-peoples-democratic-republic.html> (Accessed: 1 July 2018).

19 For an overview of policies relating to land use and development, see Dwyer (2017).

