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► **To cite this version:**

Vatthana Pholsena. War Generation: Youth Mobilization and Socialization in Revolutionary Laos. Vanina Bouté; Vatthana Pholsena. Changing Lives in Laos. Society, Politics, and Culture in a Post-Socialist State, National University of Singapore Press, pp.109-134, 2017, 978-981-47-2226-1. halshs-02196694

HAL Id: halshs-02196694

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02196694>

Submitted on 29 Jul 2019

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War Generation: Youth Mobilization and Socialization in Revolutionary Laos

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Introduction

For about two decades from the second half of the 1950s, thousands of young boys and girls living in areas controlled by the Pathet Lao (hereafter PL) were enrolled in the ranks of the Lao revolutionary movement. Some were sent to Viengxay district, Huaphan province, in northeastern Laos where the PL had established its government and administration, and others to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (hereafter DRV), the PL's main political and military ally, to undertake their schooling.¹ Many of these young people left for several years, some returning home only in their early- to mid-twenties. These students followed different paths at the end of their studies in the mid-to-late 1970s: some went back to their villages or districts of origin to resume a farming life; others were recruited into the state administration (or left a few years later to work in the private sector or became self-employed). Some did extremely well and today belong to the ruling political class and sit on the Party's Central Committee or even in the Politburo, the Lao Communist Party's most powerful political organ.² We therefore must take into account the diversity of these individuals. These alumni cannot be defined as a homogenous group along class, ethnic, or geographical lines. Only their childhood and adolescence in these revolutionary schools define them as a group

sharing a unique historical experience. When they left their homes and villages, they broke away from a way of life ruled by specific cultural and social norms. These young boys and girls came from different provinces and various ethnic backgrounds, but shared similar experiences of mobility, rupture, and change. They traveled within the same geographical and ideological space framed by revolutionary structures between eastern Laos and northern Vietnam. In other words, these individuals belong to a generation whose life and social trajectory were deeply linked to the Communist collective educational project.

“Generation,” as the term is used in this article, follows Karl Mannheim’s generational theory that has strongly shaped the concept of the role of generations in social history (Mannheim 1952). It emphasizes the importance of shared experience over the biological context of generations. Mannheim considered generation to be based on “location.” Generational location is realized when people born in a certain period of time in a geographically limited space are confronted with certain events. However, while all individuals of the same generational location have the potential to be drawn into the events which make societies change from generation to generation, not all of them are. A generation is thus not a homogeneous group. According to Mannheim, “We shall therefore speak of a generation as an actuality only where a concrete bond is created between members of a generation by their being exposed to the social and intellectual symptoms of a process of dynamic destabilization” (Mannheim 1952: 303). His concept of generation put clear emphasis on the collective experience of historical events in a specific biographical phase and the way a collective arranges its experience. This is what Mannheim described as “generation as actuality,” the way in which experience is shaped by interpretation and self-reflection. In addition, generations are more likely to arise in times of comprehensive social change and instability—in times of war, revolutions, and crises. In this way, a generational unit may be created by the common fight in a war or by the common experience of a revolutionary transformation.

The concept of a generation, as developed by Mannheim, provides a useful analytical frame for the study of certain delineated groups within a certain defined environment—groups like the Lao young people that are the focus of this chapter. This is not a study that attempts to portray and explain the lives of members of a certain age cohort. Ages vary significantly amongst these individuals,

the oldest born in the aftermath of the Second World War and the youngest in the early 1960s. This chapter is instead about young people shaped by war and ideology. The imprint of social and cultural upheaval upon these men and women—who were born in remote rural areas, who grew up during the American-Vietnam War (1961–75), and who were socialized under the tutelage of the Lao communist organization—is what makes this generation different from others. Since the late 1990s, I have been collecting testimonies of those who studied and lived from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s in Northeastern Laos and Northern Vietnam. Working through individuals' life stories and perceptions of their pasts and actions can help to unveil and understand intimate experiences of ideals and practices taught and transmitted through an unique wartime education system that was determined to turn them into exemplary citizens of the new socialist state.³ This is not only about remembrances of a diverse group of individuals sharing, and held together by, a collective memory.⁴ The focus here is first and foremost on concrete realities as lived by individuals who became actors in certain events. What therefore also distinguished this generation of young revolutionaries from other youth was their active participation in the revolutionary transformation of the country, especially in the post-war period. It is in such a context that this generational unit can be understood as a potentially powerful agent of social change.

The characteristics of this generation emerged from a specific historical context and were shaped in part by a new political authority. During the war, the PL needed young people to build the foundations of a revolutionary proto-state. Thus, these individuals found themselves at the forefront of the revolutionary movement in Laos: first in wartime schools whose goal was to produce loyal citizens of the future socialist state; then as agents of that emerging state after the PL victory in 1975. In this respect, these young people constituted a politicized generational category (Valentin 2007; Raffin 2012), a potential force for the revolution that would be dedicated to the construction of post-war socialism. Even so, this generation was not simply constructed by political institutions and events; its members also assigned meanings to such processes and responded in different ways to the socialist proto-state apparatus' efforts to control and homogenize them as living subjects and as a category. In the same way, I do not consider these young men and women as passive subjects of social

engineering, nor do I view the state only as an administrative organization. It also exists through symbolic devices and cultural practices. James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta have suggested that “the states are not simply functional bureaucratic apparatuses, but powerful sites of symbolic and cultural production that are in themselves always culturally represented and understood in particular ways” (Ferguson and Gupta 2002: 981). I would argue that this generation, its making, and the experiences it endured during wartime and in the aftermath of war, illustrate the historical and contingent process of the everyday formation of the state, and how the socialist state was also constructed in the imagination of these young students.

The history of revolutionary movements in Laos has been mostly studied from a political and military perspective. Works are generally divided between two theses, either portraying the Pathet Lao as a “disciple” of the Vietnamese Communist Party (Langer and Zasloff 1970; Deuve 1984; Brown and Zasloff 1986; Evans 2002a) or arguing a certain autonomy on the part of the leaders of the Lao communist movement (Stuart-Fox 1997; Dommen 2001; Rathie, this volume). 40 years after the founding of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic and 25 years after the end of tensions created by the Cold War in Asia, this study takes a closer look at the genesis of the Lao revolutionary movement outside those frames.

War and Revolution in Laos

After March 1953, the Franco-Viet Minh War (1946–54) spilled over into Laos. An invasion by four Viet Minh divisions captured the provinces of Huaphan and Phongsaly in April and December 1953 and turned them over to PL forces. These northern and northeastern border provinces provided the Lao communists with access to the DRV and a base area isolated from the rest of Laos by rugged mountain terrain.⁵ In the course of the Geneva Conference of 1954, the status of the Royal Lao Government (RLG) as the internationally recognized Lao political entity was confirmed, as was its territorial integrity. Nevertheless, the powers at the conference stated that the PL should continue to administer the two provinces of Phongsaly and Huaphan until a negotiated settlement could be reached between the RLG and the PL, and arranged the political, administrative, and military integration of these two provinces into the RLG system.

The degree of external pressure on the civil conflict in Laos was such that any resolution of the conflict progressively eluded its political leaders, in spite of the formation of two coalition governments (1957–58, 1962–63) (Christie 1998: 213–5). The then DRV prime minister, Pham Văn Đồng, declared in 1958 that solutions to the problems concerning the three states of former French Indochina, such as they were defined in the Geneva agreements, “were one and indivisible” (Evans 2002a: 121). Meanwhile, right-wing politicians supported by the United States and Thailand threw their weight behind the anti-communist Lao camp. By the mid-1950s, the United States had begun to implement in Laos, as in South Vietnam, a policy of building an anti-communist “bastion,” which in their view could save Thailand, if not the whole of Southeast Asia, from a communist take-over (Christie 1998: 212). The escalation of the American-Vietnam War (1961–75)—in essence the full-scale conflict in South Vietnam—made any attempt to isolate Laos from the battlefield of the Cold War in the Indochinese peninsula futile. The US Air Force launched in December 1964 a major day-and-night air campaign in areas being contested by ground forces in northern and northeastern Laos, as well as along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in south-eastern Laos in an attempt to interdict men and materials being supplied to the communist insurgency in South Vietnam. Villagers in regions targeted by US air raids fled to the forests and mountains and took refuge in caves, trenches, and foxholes under the instructions of PL cadres who controlled these remote areas.

In mountainous areas it occupied in eastern Laos, the PL tried to pursue a policy of transformation of the masses—an essential first step in the eyes of its leadership toward the construction of a future socialist state. The Communists strove to build a new society and state apparatus in territories under their control; former administrative, political, and territorial structures were therefore abolished. In particular, revolutionary cadres were determined to change customs, attitudes, and religious practices of villagers (most of whom were non-ethnic Lao) that they deemed to be obstructing the founding of a socialist society. From 1954, each time a village “decided” to abandon its “absurd beliefs,” a finely tuned ceremony was set up in the presence of revolutionary representatives from the district and provincial levels, and under the supervision of a master of ceremonies whose task was to officially register the event. Most interestingly, a picture of Prince

Souphanouvong (the most well-known Lao communist leader and official figurehead of the PL) was displayed during the ceremony, seemingly an endorsement of the transfer of political and spiritual allegiances from a local system of belief to a secular and national political authority (Pholsena 2008b: 630).⁶ PL ambitions were very high: the moral, spiritual, and cultural life of the peoples was being transformed in order to form new individuals equipped with exemplary revolutionary morality. PL leaders hoped to create “new socialist men (and women)” who would be indifferent to religious beliefs (labeled as “superstitions”), intolerant of all forms of inequality in social relations (including those that went on in one’s private life), and loyal and productive for the “new society” in the making.

This operation of social engineering was above all conducted through education of the masses based on socialist ethics and patriotism. Makeshift schools were built in the “liberated” districts and provinces, including those hit by US bombing. Male and female teachers were rapidly trained by the Communist authorities and sent to remote villages to educate an overwhelmingly illiterate population.⁷ In 1969, Phoumi Vongvichit, one of the founding leaders of the PL, reminded his troops:

Knowledge is a tool of our revolution. In carrying out the revolution without education and knowledge we are bound to face obstacles and difficulties and [would] be unable to create peace and prosperity for the nation, even though we have the determination to fight and counter the enemy...education is the key which opens all doors to our revolution. (Langer 1971: 8)

Even more explicitly, Kaysone Phomvihane, the PL leader and future prime minister and president of the Lao PDR, noted in 1974 that contrary to the Royal Lao Government’s notion of “neutral education,” “education has always aimed to serve the political duties of the Party” by supporting indoctrination and management training, as well as serving as an instrument of class struggle (Lockhart 2001: 21). Boarding schools set up during the war in northern Laos and North Vietnam aimed to complete this wartime educational system. The DRV played a key role in the project of building a revolutionary Laos. Indeed, the growth of the PL was achieved to a great extent because of the extensive support of the North Vietnamese regime (Goscha 2010). The hosting and training of young Lao people in

North Vietnamese territory during the war fell within the scope of these efforts to strengthen the communist movement in Laos as part of “transnational socialist ecumenism” (Bayly 2007: 226–8). As in Cambodia, it was viewed as essential for the Indochinese Communist Party (founded in 1930 and led by the Vietnamese communists) to expand its membership in Laos, and train local cadres so that they could lead the struggle side-by-side with the Vietnamese and carry out a genuine Indochinese revolution (Goscha 2004: 151; Vu 2009).⁸ According to a recent Vietnamese study, in the early 1960s it was estimated that about 1,000 students from “liberated” areas of Laos were studying at the secondary level in North Vietnam. Between 1964 and 1974—at the height of the Second Indochina War—the number rose to 6,235 students (children, adolescents, and young adults) enrolled in North Vietnamese schools of all levels (from primary to higher education level), in humanities, social sciences, and technology (Le 1999: 144).⁹ As part of the project of building a “new society,” the political and ideological training of these revolutionary cadres was fundamental. In the early 1960s, as part of the DRV’s support to the project of building a new generation of agents to serve the future socialist state in Laos, a school of Marxist-Leninist political theory was created in Hanoi, appropriately named the “School of Solidarity,” to train Lao cadres (this school was later renamed “Nguyễn Ái Quốc School No. 10” after Ho Chi Minh’s famous early alias). The school trained hundreds of Lao Communist Party officials, the majority of whom after returning home were appointed to senior positions within the state apparatus and the Party in Vientiane, as well as in provinces and districts (Vongsa 2007: 100–2). We now turn to the concrete effects of this educational project on children sent from areas of eastern Laos to the north of the country, as well as to North Vietnam, from the early 1960s onward.

Molding the Vanguard of a New Society

Joining the Revolution

Before their departure, most interviewees lived in rural areas infiltrated or administered (clandestinely) by the PL in the east of Laos, both in the north and south of the country.¹⁰ In areas penetrated and secured by Lao and Vietnamese communist forces, it was not uncommon

for young people from villages receptive to, or at least not hostile to, the communist cause to be mobilized for carrying out simple tasks, which often constituted their initial introduction to the revolutionary struggle before being sent to schools in northern Laos or North Vietnam. The recollections of Kham,¹¹ a senior official in Sekong province, are instructive in this regard:

After the death of my father and mother, I was recruited by Tasaeng Achui [located in present-day Kaleum district, east of Sekong province] to work in the Issara [‘Free’] administration. I didn’t want to be a farmer [*pasason*, an ordinary citizen in the general sense]. I had had enough of this hard life and I wanted to work even though I was not getting any salary or did not get any clothes. I was just happy to be fed every morning and evening. I then worked for a year as a courier, carrying messages in bamboo tubes and moving between villages, districts and tasaeng. I also served as a guide, porter, and completed all the tasks that I was asked to do.

In the early 1960s, the revolutionary administration in *tasaeng* Achui was trying to recruit volunteers among young boys and girls “aged 12 years and over” in villages, to send them to pursue “general studies” at “Ban [village] Trai” in Huaphan province. Kham had already started learning to read and write Lao (he was Katu, a Mon-Khmer ethnic group) with the help of Issara militants and fighters; he was “determined” to volunteer for these “long studies” (*suksa vela yaonan*). Sometime in 1961 or 1962, Kham, then aged 15, left with other children on foot for Huaphan province.

Likewise, the story of Phimmasone (a former student of a North Vietnamese boarding school, aged about 55 at the time of our interview) expressed in retrospect her desire to escape a fate that would have been hers had it not been for war, revolution, and the support of an uncle who was a revolutionary cadre. Born in Dakchung in Sekong province, Phimmasone, an ethnic Taliang, traveled to North Vietnam in 1967 at the age of 12:

My parents were poor peasants who barely scraped a living from shifting cultivation, hunting, and food gathering in the forests. They were ignorant people (*khon ngo*), who refused to let me go and study. I wanted to learn and to progress. My uncle, a revolutionary cadre, who worked in the education service at the district and who

was in charge of recruiting and sending Lao children to North Vietnam, had a different view and insisted instead that I should go and study, get an education, so I wouldn't become an ignorant person like them.

Most of the men and women interviewed recalled the circumstances of their departure in a positive light: "to go and study" in the "center" (*sun kang*) in Sam Neua, Huaphan, or North Vietnam was "a chance for them and the country." Access to formal education, in a country where mass education was virtually non-existent, was very limited at that time and generally reserved for inhabitants of the plains and children of those who served under the French colonial administration. Many interviewees strongly associated this opportunity—which they seized—with memories of a burning desire for emancipation. This vivid sentiment, as remembered and expressed in their narrations, must be related to the particular environment in which they grew up and lived (until they left for their studies): their villages (in whole or part), and in some cases their own households and families, had been mobilized for the revolutionary cause; as children, they had early contacts with Lao and Vietnamese communist militants and leaders. In addition, many of these men and women became state officials after 1975. All these elements undoubtedly contributed to their continued praise of such values as knowledge and progress, just as they explained their lasting disapproving view of their parents' living conditions (disparaged as "backward").

Personal desire and elements of fate played a role in the recruitment of these children. In addition, former students often acknowledge the determining influence of an individual (who sometimes became a mentor)—be he or she a militant, a teacher, a local cadre, or even a revolutionary leader—to whom they owed their initial involvement in the revolution.¹² Some had a relative already engaged in the revolutionary movement, either as a soldier in the PL regular army forces or militia units (*kōnglōn*) or within the Lao revolutionary proto-administration at the district or *tasaeng* levels.¹³ At a more fundamental level, some recruitments followed local patterns of power. Thongsing is a retired teacher of Khmu origins, aged around 70 when we met. His father, a village chief, returned one day from a meeting at the *tasaeng* in Huaphan province accompanied by a revolutionary cadre (*phanakngan pativat*). He explained to his son that the

phanakngan had come to the village to “mobilize” (*ladom*) children and asked Thongsing if he himself would like to study “in Vietnam for three months” and return “to become a teacher himself.” Thus, in 1959, at the age of 12, Thongsing joined a group of “30 children” leaving for North Vietnam. Instead of three months, he remained there for 12 years. Vongphet, another man of similar age and a member of the Makong ethnic group, left his village in Savannakhet province near the Lao-Vietnamese border in the same period. His father, also the headman of his village, was working “during the day for the Vientiane [RLG] government and at night for the Issara administration.” Vongphet regularly brought food prepared by inhabitants of his village to the North Vietnamese soldiers who camped during the day in the forest to avoid being found by enemy patrols or denounced by villagers who were hostile to communist infiltration. It was during one of those trips that a group of Vietnamese soldiers offered him “the chance to study in Vietnam before returning to help his country.” He left his village in 1959 at the age of 13, not knowing that he would only return to Laos some 15 years later. As Mandy Sadan contends in her work on the recruitment of young Kachin men in colonial Burma by the British army between the First and Second World Wars, “although a degree of personal volition entered the equation, this wider negotiation [involving the local elite, i.e. headmen of the village] was very important in determining not only who enlisted, but also whether or not there might be any recruits at all from a particular village” (Sadan 2013: 221).¹⁴

Children took with them few belongings upon leaving their villages. They were told they would have to walk for hours, and that the journey would be long and they should not burden themselves with non-essential items. Guided in their journey by one or two PL cadres, they walked during the day, sometimes at night, ate in the forests, and slept only in “friendly” villages when they reached a place that had been securely “liberated.” They were extremely cautious for fear of an attack, bombing, or being captured by “enemy” patrols or villagers that were loyal to the Royal Lao Government or simply unwilling to provide assistance. If the place was thought to be not safe, they would assemble makeshift shelters with large banana leaves at night and stay away from inhabited areas. Children who came from the southeastern provinces, such as Attapeu, Saravane or Sekong (known then as the “Eastern Province”), took the Ho Chi Minh Trail

and stopped in North Vietnamese army camps (*binh tram*) situated at more or less regular intervals to eat and sleep. A group would grow in size as it went through “friendly” villages. At the end of a trip, columns of children could contain up to several dozen students. But groups also suffered losses, as children fled and returned to their villages after experiencing a night away from their families. These escapes took place early in the journey, for later it became difficult, if not impossible, for children to find their way back. While the majority of former students I met alleged that they did not regret their choice to leave their homes and villages, some nonetheless acknowledged feelings of abandonment and loneliness caused by the sudden separation from their families.

A New Beginning

Youth is a shifting category, variably defined according to age and recognized as a phase in the life cycle of an individual between childhood and adulthood (in the case of our interviewees who were born in an agrarian society, this would correspond to the phase before marriage and reproduction). Another notion of youth, however, is used in this article, based on that proposed by Thomas Burgess. He emphasizes the importance of rupture from stable “traditional” societies in understanding youth in 20th-century East Africa: “[w]here discontinuity was more decisive [...] youth emerged less as a phase in the life cycle but as an historical cohort. Youth were defined less by a set of inherited discursive constructs as by unique historical circumstances and narratives that set their generation apart from others before or after, and that allowed a greater degree of negotiation, flux, and invention” (Burgess 2005). In other words, youth in times of disruption (e.g. wars, natural disasters, social crises) is a more autonomous category in that its members become more distant from their elders and their authority, power, and knowledge. When they left their homes and villages, Lao students broke away from a way of life ruled by specific cultural and social norms. Old norms of behavior had been upset and they had to adapt much faster to new realities; during the war, young people matured more quickly. Upon their arrival at the border of North Vietnamese national territory, they were dispatched to wooden barracks until trucks came to collect them and took them into North Vietnam. In these transit camps, housing

conditions were basic, and children were expected to take care of themselves. They were divided into small groups, and supervised by older adolescents. Each group took turns to prepare meals during the day and evenings. Only rice was provided, so the children had to search for the rest (vegetables and other foodstuffs) themselves. "Revolutionary cadres were our guides, they ate like us and lived with us. They told us: 'Take care of yourself. Get something to eat,'" explained a former student. She described how each child received a bowl and a spoon, and "the elder were looking after the younger ones. We got by day after day and we did our best not to be hungry." With daily life upset by the privations of war, the education of a disciplined life began even before children reached their school. Some former students remember their fear and distress at the prospect of a new life where the "normal" order of things was turned upside down, while others conversely recall a feeling of elation that "engendered hope for a different life." The story of Nang, a former pupil and native of Luang Phrabang, attests to the latter sentiment:

We had arrived by truck in a second camp at Điện Biên Phủ [in the northwest of Vietnam near the Lao border]. The place was full of children, hundreds, maybe 500 to 600!...Living conditions were basic. I stayed in a concrete house, which had been divided into several rooms where the children slept on mats on the floor. The staff of this center, cooks, doctors, nurses, were Vietnamese, who spoke Lao fluently. We always received the same type of meal twice a day, steamed rice, a piece of dried meat, and soup. We were divided into groups of six and all had to be present sitting at the lunch and dinner table, if not, no one was allowed to eat. We all received equal portions. It was very egalitarian and regimented! But we didn't miss our parents. We didn't have to work, we had the right to play, to bathe in the river. In Điện Biên Phủ, there was no war. It was a liberated area, we had reached a zone of peace.

Experiences were mixed, nonetheless; they varied depending on specific events occurring in areas where they stayed. For example, young boys and girls who began their schooling in the DRV in the 1960s went through a very different experience compared to that of students boarding in northern Laos during the same period. After months of traveling and passing through one transit camp to another on the Trail, many children welcomed their school facilities in North

Vietnam with true joy. A former schoolgirl, Phet, describes a school in Vĩnh Phúc (a province to the northwest of Hanoi) she entered in 1970: “It was comfortable. Everything was provided. Students even got pocket money! Lao students were treated really well.” Nang, who studied at Hà Bắc¹⁵ for seven years, from 1970–77, recalls: “They took good care of us. They washed our clothes, they even gave us candy once a week.” Children received on their arrival, and every year thereafter, two school uniforms, toiletries (which many of the children never had seen before), a towel, and thread and sewing needles. The Vietnamese staff—the “nanny sisters” (*uai liang*), as my interviewees used to call them—took care of the children’s daily hygiene and prepared their meals. For former students, these staff (with the exception of the teachers, they were almost all women) replaced “a little our fathers and mothers.” The goal of these establishments was to create conditions akin to a normal civilian life for children who had lived for several years in war zones, as well as engender a sense of security and belonging by creating a place of comfort, safety, and even love. Thus, some adults still remember the emotional bond that tied them to an institution they perceived as protective and caring.

In Ban Bac (Viengxay District, Huaphan Province) in the 1960s, students did not enjoy the same favorable conditions. Kham remembers a difficult time—he lived there for three years, between 1962 and 1965—marked by US bombing (forcing students to run for shelter in caves and trenches, day and night); hunger (food was rationed; they ate twice a day, “rice from Chinese aid and Vietnamese meat in cans,” vegetables they grew in gardens or plants picked up in the forest); physical work (they spent weekends cutting wood and constructing buildings); and loneliness (Kham had never before left his family and traveled so far from his village). But in Ban Bac, Kham also remembers watching army troops singing and dancing, and screenings of revolutionary films from a mobile cinema, during which, forgetting for a moment his daily hardship, he “could imagine his future bright and hopeful.” Students, like him, from minority ethnic groups, could benefit from special measures during their schooling. Even though they made some mistakes during exams, they still got the highest scores because the “hierarchy understood that the mother tongue of Lao Sung and Lao Theung¹⁶ was not Lao, and this favorable policy (*nayobai*) got me motivated to work even harder at school.” As a studious student, Kham, shortly after completing his studies in primary

school, entered the school of teacher training (*honghian sang khu*) in Nakhao, Huaphan Province, in 1967.

Education, Discipline, and Morality

On the other side of the border, north of Hanoi, life in boarding schools was very strict. It was organized around a schedule, comprising well defined and carefully supervised activities. The following details are provided by Nang's remarkably precise testimony. If times and durations may not be entirely accurate, the intense daily rhythm was confirmed by several other interviewees:

The alarm clock was set to 5:00 am. After waking up, we performed 30 minutes of physical exercise, gardening, and had a shower. Breakfast was taken at 7 am and lasted half an hour, then the children had a quarter of an hour to get dressed and ready to go to school. We had to present ourselves in front of the door of the classroom at 7:45 and to wait for the teacher who arrived at 8:00. Classes ended at 11.30 am and began again at 2 pm. After lunch at noon, a break of half an hour was granted. But even though we were free during that break, we did not have the right to leave our rooms, it was absolutely forbidden to run all over the place! Classes finished at 4.30 pm. After gardening, shower and dinner, students finished their evenings working on their homework. Friday was devoted to sports, and arts, such as music, dancing, singing.

Some children refused to go along with this regimented life. Some expressed strong sentiments against these boarding schools (comparing them to detention centers), which were particularly painful for children accustomed to an outdoor life in a natural, open environment. A former resident told me the story of two brothers, members of the Thong Luang ethnic group, who managed to escape from their school in North Vietnam: "But they could not go very far...We were in Thai Nguyen, which meant that they had to cross the entire northern region of Vietnam to re-enter into the province of Sam Neua, then travel down to Khammuane Province [central Laos] where they came from. Simply impossible! After some time, they were finally found. Villagers brought them back from the forest where they were dying of hunger. They had survived by eating wild potatoes, they had not gone very far, poor buggers!" Others, conversely, embraced life at

these schools and now consider themselves lucky to have lived there where, as they explained, they acquired (or strengthened) moral values, such as a work ethic, a sense of responsibility, discipline, and friendship. Moreover, their days were not solely filled with lessons in classrooms. Children also involved themselves in various leisure activities such as music, singing, dancing, and sports in the evenings and during weekends. "I loved singing the Vietnamese revolutionary songs!" claimed a former resident when recalling memories of her years at a North Vietnamese boarding school. Of course, these activities were not neutral, either. "At first, of course, I missed my family, my village, but little by little, we forgot. We were children. Studies, games, exercises, all of these kept us quite busy," recalls Thongsing. These schools, a place of learning influenced by Marxist-Leninist teaching and ideology, were also designed to be a "fun" place—through leisure arranged around morally legitimate activities, teachers and administrators strove to exert influence upon and mobilize students.

Students were divided into groups with different functions, and leaders were appointed or elected: representatives of classes or study groups, gardening team leaders, heads (usually chosen amongst the older students) of groups of very young children (below 8 years), and so on. "We had to learn to grow up very fast!" recounted Phet, who was put in charge of a group of children when she herself was barely 10 years old after joining her boarding school in Vĩnh Phúc. Children also learned that their (hard) work could reap rewards. The best students enjoyed trips organized by their school to Hanoi and Halong Bay during the school summer holidays. The rest (that is, the majority of school children), who failed to get better results, were left behind to endure those lengthy and sweltering summer months (children of high-ranking revolutionary cadres, however, were allowed regardless of their academic performance to spend their summer vacation in Viengxay, Huaphan where their parents worked). It is clear that administrators of these boarding schools aimed to encourage emulation and competition by distinguishing "model students" (*nakhian to den*). Conversely, students who refused to participate in gardening, or did not put in enough effort, did not receive their share of money raised from sales of vegetables to the school canteen. This system of associating school activities, manual tasks, and individual and collective responsibilities, was clearly intended to impose a routine in order to wean students from habits related to their former (village)

life and to give them a new mental and physical discipline. The distribution of toiletry items—virtually non-existent at the time in the Lao countryside—including toothbrushes or soap, far from being trivial, is likewise indicative of the desire to introduce a “modern” education coupled with a moral transformation, emphasizing with equal weight hygiene of the body and training of the mind. In other words, these children were expected to internalize discipline through cultural practices and concrete, material devices. More broadly, these schools fulfilled similar functions to formal organizations of youth (the youth wing of the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party was founded in 1955) in authoritarian and centralized regimes driven by “the intention of homogenizing, disciplining and controlling youth in accordance with dominant ideology” (Valentin 2007: 304). The ultimate objective shared by these institutions was to mold and perfect young people as bearers of a new order and as future cadres of the nation. The Lao revolutionary state at the time was built through military battles and political manoeuvres, but it also took shape in the minds and imagination of its future citizens.

Inter-Ethnic Friendship

These boarding schools hosted children of diverse ethnic origins. This was hardly surprising since Communist-controlled areas were mostly populated by inhabitants who did not belong to the ethnic Lao-Tai speaking majority population. Most of these children were not fluent in Lao language upon their arrival at the school, and very few children even of ethnic Lao origins could read and write. In fact, the vast majority of students learned Lao language in these schools. Teaching was divided into two levels: lessons during the first four years of schooling (which corresponded roughly to the primary cycle) were taught in Lao language, while teaching for the subsequent six years (the equivalent of secondary school) was conducted in Vietnamese. The teachers were mostly Viet Kieu, namely Vietnamese who had lived outside the borders of Vietnam, mostly in Laos and Thailand. These bilingual, or even trilingual, teachers were pioneering revolutionaries. They had joined the anti-colonial struggle in the 1930s and 1940s in central and southern Laos and northeast Thailand. They were later forced to go back to Vietnam after the return of the French

to Indochina in 1946 and especially after the return to power in Thailand of Marshal Phibun Songkram, the ultra-nationalist Thai military ruler, in 1948.

This extra-territorial system of education aspired to attain the ideals of socialist internationalist brotherhood proclaimed by Vietnamese Communists and their Lao comrades in their common struggle. These Vietnamese teacher-soldiers were educating a generation of Lao children so as to prepare them for the future construction of their country on new socialist foundations imbued with patriotism. The boarding schools, with their enclosed and controlled environment, served as a sort of anteroom to the future socialist society in Laos. The Communists marched toward the goal of building a classless society with no social, cultural, or racial distinctions. But the integration of children from very diverse cultural backgrounds did not run as smoothly as they wished. For example, children of Hmong and Khmu ethnic origins, present in large numbers in these schools, tended to congregate and to communicate in their own language outside the classroom.¹⁷ These expressions of solidarity between members of the same ethnic group, exacerbated by the highly unusual environment in which these children lived, made sense. Nang remembers:

When they spoke amongst themselves in their own languages, Lao Sung and Lao Theung, they were allowed to as it was their right. It was forbidden to utter racial slurs because we had to respect solidarity and equality between races. There was no argument, such was the communist doctrine!

Nang conscientiously repeats the official creed of formal equality among all ethnic groups in Laos. Her testimony seems to suggest that teachings of socialist ethics imposed a strict respect for difference (whether this was followed in reality remains difficult to verify). Nonetheless, this spontaneous segregation was constantly attenuated by the multiple interactions that school and extra-curricular activities required. In addition, some ethnic groups were poorly represented, such as the Taliang or the Katu. The children of these ethnic groups were motivated to connect with other students from different ethnic backgrounds by the need for companionship. Inter-ethnic friendships were formed. Phimmason, herself a member of the Taliang ethnic group, who befriended a classmate of Hmong origin during her

schooling at Phu Tho. (a province to the northwest of Hanoi), learned the rudiments of her friend's language. Bouakham, a Phuthai farmer from the district of Sepon in southern Laos (Savannakhet province), traveled several years after the end of the war to Xieng Khuang province in the northeast of the country to visit his Hmong friend, now a doctor in a district hospital. They first met during their studies in North Vietnam. Boarding schools did, therefore, contribute to weakening ethnic boundaries amongst their students, at least in some cases.

Some former residents retain warm memories of their schooling in North Vietnam, in part because they felt protected from the turbulence of war, yet peace and respite remained fragile and temporary. School evacuations became systematic with the intensification of the US bombing of North Vietnam.¹⁸ Thongsing was evacuated twice, with his classmates, to the highlands of the province of Phu Tho. around 1964–65, and again in 1968. He and his classmates were sent to stay with Vietnamese families. Thongsing remembers the food deprivation they suffered at that time: "We were treated well, but children sometimes did not have enough to eat." Hunger drove some to commit petty theft (e.g. stealing from the villagers' farmlands). Following the destruction of their schools, a former student remembers building with other students shelters and schools using planks of wood and straw, as well as their evacuation to the mountains of Thanh Hóa region in 1972 (students were informed of the impending attack the day before and were able to prepare for their escape).¹⁹ They moved temporarily to the highlands among the local populations. Gradually, as the end of the conflict approached, boarding schools welcomed fewer students.²⁰ After 1975 and the Communist victory in Vietnam and Laos, the stream of new students to these boarding schools stopped, and two years later, the last residents left these institutions and returned to Laos.

After the War

The Builders

Following the end of the war, the focus now shifted to the building of a socialist state. Some former students settled in urban areas and took over institutions previously under the RLG administration. Others were sent back to their home districts and provinces to develop areas

that had been controlled by the PL during the war. In his work on “revolutionary heroes” in North Vietnam, Benoît de Tréglodé argued that emulation of values such as loyalty and patriotism explained the social transformation of groups that were “traditionally” considered of lower rank in Vietnamese society (de Tréglodé 2012). The upward mobility that the new regime offered to some sections of the Lao population also constituted a strong factor of legitimation, which helped to shape individuals in support of the regime’s goals. This is particularly true of political elites of ethnic minority origins, but also more broadly of the generation that built the post-war society. After completing his teacher training in Nakhao in the late 1960s, Kham took the post of teacher at the school of “general” studies (*honghian vatthanatham*) in the administrative center of his native Eastern Province (now part of the provinces of Sekong, Saravane, and Attapeu). The state of poverty in the country and its administration was so dire that Kham and his fellow teachers had nothing, or very little, to work with. With the help of their students and material collected in the forests, they made furniture and school supplies, blackboards, pencils and paper, and taught in huts that served as outdoor classrooms. Students were overwhelmingly from local Mon-Khmer-speaking ethnic groups.

Kham took seriously his assignment to “build officials of all ethnic groups in the province of the East” (*kōsang phanakngan banda phao khwaeng tavaen ōk*) among these boys and (more rarely) girls much older and more educated than the teenager he was when he embarked on his long walk to “the Centre” a decade earlier. In his interview, he confided his pride in counting amongst his former pupils “leaders” (*phunam*) of Sekong province and ministries in Vientiane. After three years of teaching, the revolutionary cadre was promoted to a new level in the provincial administration, and in 1975, was appointed deputy director of the provincial administration. In the late 1970s and the first half of the 1980s, his work reflected the daily construction of a socialist economy that gradually and painfully emerged from the devastation of war, like that of thousands of other officials across the country. Kham worked on the ground in order to mobilize, organize, and reform the rural society’s economic, social, and political foundations according to the principles and guidelines of the new regime (“we lived and worked in solidarity with the villagers”).²¹ After another year of Political Studies in Hanoi in

1983, Kham became Secretary of Kaleum District Party in Sekong province (created in 1984 following its separation from the province of Saravane) and was appointed chief of the same district in 1986.

These members of the “vanguard” generation, defined by the experience of war in childhood or adolescence and shaped by a collective educational apparatus, identified themselves with, and were the builders of, a new socialist state amid scarcity and deprivation that marked the post-war period. Thongsing, who returned to Laos in 1972, began teaching languages and literature at Nakhao in Viengxay, then after a year in Hanoi to follow a one-year pedagogy course, transferred in the second half of the 1970s to Vientiane to participate in the founding of the teacher training school on the campus of Dong Dok, where the National University of Laos is presently located (created in 1996). “We were poor, we had nothing [teachers wrote themselves textbooks], we were not even paid. But we were enjoying ourselves (*muam*), enthusiastic, supportive of one another. Teachers and students were working together. It was not about money, there was nothing to gain. We didn’t think about our own individual interests, we only focused on the collective work.” Despite precarious living conditions, Nang, who came back to Laos in 1977 and resumed her studies in 1978 and 1979 (before departing to the Soviet Union where she studied for another three years), recalls that she was “happy to live with the state (*mi khūam suk yu nam lat*) in the hands of the state, with the Party-State, because when the state was eating, I was eating, when the State suffered, I too was suffering from deprivation. We were all in the same situation, we lived under the same conditions.” For Nang and her companions, the state was not a bureaucratic apparatus, “up there” on its own. Their relationship with the state was deeply intimate; they were connected by a powerful moral bond, in which their existence and survival intertwined.

The Shattered Image

Those who returned to their villages at the end of the war, or after a few years serving in the administration or in the army, explained that they wanted to “leave revolutionary activities” (*ōk kan pativat*), being weary “of a lifetime of war” (*sivit songkham*); others cited family constraints, such as a sick or elderly parent left alone because the family was dispersed by the war, or a lack of labor to sustain the household.

Bouakham thus decided not to “go and study again” in 1980, after completing his primary and secondary education in North Vietnam from 1969 to 1976, and then another two years in Sam Neua (not province). He was a good student and could have pursued specialized training in the Soviet Union (“at this time, anyone who wanted to could leave to the Soviet Union, Hungary, Germany”), but chose to return to his family instead, whom he had not seen since leaving Vietnam, to get married and start his own family. By the time the Communist victory was achieved, many students, who once embodied the promise of “new men and women,” were exhausted by war. They left the ranks of the Lao revolutionary movement, leaving behind a collective and its ideals. Yet, traces of regret and guilt appear in the narratives of some former students as they look back to the end of a trajectory that once was intimately tied to the fate of the nation, and declare that they chose to become “ordinary citizens (*pasason*)” after the war when they “were supposed to represent the vanguard (*neo na*)” of the new socialist state.

In truth, being a civil servant, working in public service (the police force, local government, hospitals, or schools) or serving in the army was an unenviable fate in the immediate post-war period when everything had to be rebuilt. As soon it was founded, the new regime was already fighting for its survival. The new leadership faced the immense task of rebuilding a country ravaged by US bombing. Furthermore, the country’s economy had been artificially kept afloat with the influx of American aid (more than US\$500 million between 1964 and 1975). Counter-revolutionary guerrillas were still active in the north and the southeast of the country.²² After the Communist victory, most Western countries withdrew their support or reduced their assistance drastically. Thailand, an important ally of the United States during the US-Vietnam War, imposed an embargo that strangled the economy, while inflation reached 80 percent in 1976 and 1977. Lastly, a series of natural disasters (a drought in 1976, and floods in 1977 and 1978) dramatically hampered agricultural production.²³ However, it was also a time of resourcefulness for survival. Civil servants today admit that they “traded” (a “loathed” capitalist practice that was forbidden to them). Some exchanged or sold products from their gardens, others clothing or home-made sweets; all did so in secrecy for fear of being denounced and fined, if not jailed, by the authorities.

Nang remembers that in 1978 food was sorely lacking in the capital to the point where an uncle proposed to bring her back to Luang Phrabang, her native province. But she refused because, as she passionately declared, “going back to Luang Phrabang was like going backward, and I was someone who always moves forward!” She continues: “Life was really confusing, there were no more rules. Everything got turned upside down. People changed sides every day. Officials [of the former regime], who had been allowed to return to their posts, disappeared the next day and people were saying they had crossed the Mekong. Revolutionaries who had participated in the fighting, who had suffered and risked their lives for the nation, suddenly crossed the Mekong too!” Elements of distress and disbelief were still manifest in Nang’s narration almost four decades after the events. The vulnerability and contingent nature of the state were laid bare in those turbulent years, clashing violently with her image of the state as strong and unified.

Conclusion

Fifteen years ago, a couple—the husband, of Oy ethnic origin, worked at the Lao Front for National Construction (the main government mass organization in Laos), and his wife of Phuthai ethnic background at the Lao Women’s Union—with whom I stayed during my field research in southern Laos explained to me: “We have the same intellectual culture. We are civil servants. We know what it means to do research when you are a student, unlike traders who would not understand.” Such statements reflected the ideology disseminated by state agencies advocating the guiding role of the Party-State and its agents *vis-à-vis* the “masses” of the country. But I would argue that this explanation, which is limited to the reproduction of a normative political language, is inadequate. I intended to show in this chapter that we must also approach political change via the society, particularly through the socialization of the individual (here, alumni of the PL educational system), and the individual’s process of internalizing the norms and values of institutions to whom he or she belongs (or used to be part of) (Noiriel 2005: 56). Collective education certainly did not produce uniformly the same effects on all the young students. Along with communist ideals (internalized to

varied degrees), personal ambition and the desire for adventure and educational empowerment should certainly also be taken into account when assessing the revolutionary commitment of these men and women. In particular, those who left the Communist movement upon their return to Laos stopped identifying themselves with the revolution and its ideals (in their own words, they “quit”) as they resumed their pre-war life. Nonetheless, this generation was undoubtedly shaped by the experience of a war that determined their upbringing, and shaped their social environment and the institutions charged with their education.

The genesis of the current state was forged on the battlefields and in response to belligerents’ political maneuvering during the Indochina conflicts; it was also intimately experienced by “new men and women” whose purpose, as claimed by the Lao communist leaders, was to serve the regime and “the people.” Therefore, during and in the aftermath of the war, a “generational unit” emerged, whose social identity was defined by the revolution and shaped by its active participation in the construction of a new socialist state in the post-war years of deprivation and poverty. War and revolution in the countryside of eastern Laos offered social mobility to people of diverse ethnic origins and often humble socio-economic background, and thereby contributed to their integration into society after the seizure of power by the communists in 1975. Despite the fact that this community of people has largely lost its vanguard attribute in the eyes of the majority of the population, it is worth recalling that many of its members still occupy the higher levels of the political system to this day. An appreciation of this fact is essential in any analysis of politics and policymaking in contemporary Laos.

Notes

1. Children were also sent in smaller numbers to the People’s Republic of China, but this program stopped in the late 1960s when tensions between the PRC and the DRV rose. This chapter’s focus is on students who were sent to North Vietnam and Northern Laos. I will explore in a future paper the experiences of children and adolescents who studied in boarding schools in Nanning and Guanxi Provinces.
2. This is true of Pany Yathotou, daughter of a prominent revolutionary leader of Hmong origin. She has been sitting on the Politburo since the

VIIIth Party Congress in 2006, and has been President of the National Assembly since 2010.

3. On a similar approach, see works by Michel Christian and Emmanuel Droit (2005) and Sandrine Kott (2002) on writing a social history of the former German Republic Democratic and Communist Poland.
4. I should stress that individuals I met and interviewed came mostly from Laos' southern provinces (Savannakhet, Champasak, Sekong, Saravane, and Attapeu), with a few from northern Laos (mainly Vientiane, Luang Phrabang, Huaphan, and Xieng Khuang).
5. The Viet Minh forces had also established military bases and training camps in central and south-eastern Laos in the aftermath of the Second World War (see Rathie, this volume).
6. Pictures of Sithon Kommadam, the revolutionary leader of Mon-Khmer ethnic origins, were also used in the South. I thank Martin Rathie for pointing this out.
7. The success of the literacy policy was modest due to limited human and material resources. A 1971 report (based on interviews with former PL recruits) described the communist education structures at the local level as follows: "...a school in the communist sector is at best a makeshift structure, much of the time open to the winds. Especially since the intensification of American air raids in the late 1960s, instruction tends to be conducted in less vulnerable locations such as caves or the jungle. Often the holding of school is temporarily suspended because of the military situation, and in a number of cases, instruction has been discontinued indefinitely for the same reason. Even such essentials as black-boards, pencils, and paper are by no means easy to come by in the more remote villages and hamlets of the Communist area" (Langer 1971: 5-6).
8. The Vietnamese policy of expanding revolutionary operations to Laos (and Cambodia) began as early as 1948 (Furuta 1992: 147). Other factors also incited the Vietnamese to intensify their efforts in building up military forces and revolutionary bases in Laos (and Cambodia). First, in developing close military and political collaboration with the local Communist movement in southern Laos, the Viet Minh were creating a buffer zone intended to protect their western flank from French attacks. Second, the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in October 1949, followed shortly afterward by the new Chinese regime's formal diplomatic recognition of the DRV in January 1950, removed Vietnamese security concerns on their northern frontier. As a result, they were able to concentrate their efforts on developing revolutionary bases and cadres on their western front.
9. I would like to thank Christopher Goscha for sending me a copy of this thesis.

10. With the exception of children of Neutralist political leaders, who mostly lived in Vientiane or in areas administered by the RLG until the early 1960s, at which time the Neutralists split, some siding with the PL and others joining the RLG in Vientiane.
11. Names of interviewees have been changed.
12. This was true in the instance of Douangdi. A senior medical practitioner in Savannakhet, Douangdi was sent to North Vietnam in the mid-1960s thanks to the intervention of Sisomphone Lovenxay, one of the founding leaders of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party.
13. A *tasaeng* is a former administrative division, roughly referring to an intermediary level between the village and the district.
14. See also my article (2006b), depicting how Viet Minh forces were able to enjoy the support of about 20 villages by gaining the trust of their ethnic leader in the district of Dakcheung in present-day Sekong.
15. Hà Bắc Province, situated to the northeast of Hanoi, was created in 1963 following the fusion of two provinces, Bắc Ninh and Bắc Giang. In 1996, the process was reversed and the province of Hà Bắc was once more divided into two provinces, Bắc Ninh and Bắc Giang.
16. The use of generic terms, Lao Lum (referring to people living in the plains and valleys), Lao Theung (for those living on the slopes of the mountains), and Lao Sung (for population groups living on the mountain tops), although officially banned and practically rather inaccurate, is still much used in the daily parlance of Laos.
17. The Khmu and the Hmong constitute the largest and second largest minority groups in Laos, respectively. The Khmu accounted for nearly 11 percent of the population according to the 2005 national census; and the Hmong about 8 percent of the population.
18. On 13 February 1965, the President of the United States, Lyndon B. Johnson, announced the launch of Operation Rolling Thunder (1965–68), an air bombing campaign against North Vietnam.
19. Thanh Hoa Province is located to the south of Hanoi. The attack probably took place in late 1972. The US army continued its massive bombing (including the use of B-52 warplanes) on North Vietnam until November 1968. Operations Linebacker 1 and 2 were conducted between May and October and in December 1972, respectively. The bombing of the school caused a dozen deaths and injuries among students.
20. In 1972, the "liberated zones" covered three-quarters of the territory of Laos and more than half of the country's population. Le Duc Tho and Henry Kissinger signed the Paris Accords on January 23, 1973. The departure of the Americans from Laos dealt a fatal blow to the Royal Lao Armed Forces. Without US financial and military support, they disintegrated rapidly. Less than a month later, on February 21, 1973,

a ceasefire was reached in Laos. The transitional period lasted less than two years.

21. In reality, the success of these reform campaigns was random and (very) limited. At the national level, partly in response to an economy that collapsed following the withdrawal of Western aid, a program of land collectivization was launched in 1976, accelerated in 1978, and permanently abandoned barely a year later.
22. Kaysone Phomvihane, the Prime Minister of the young regime, escaped more than one assassination attempt in 1976.
23. The outbreak of the Sino-Vietnamese border war in 1979 seriously damaged relations between the Asian “brothers” (Laos lent its support to Vietnam against China).