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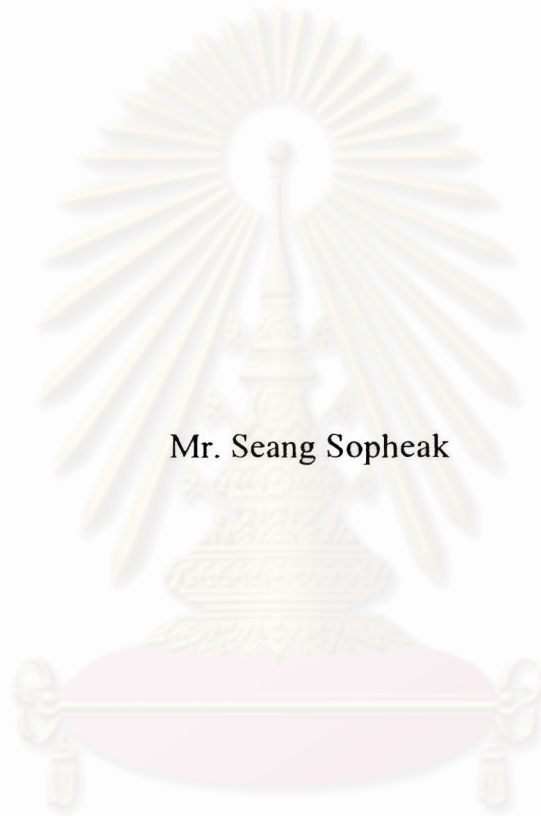
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THE POLITICS OF LAO MONUMENTS AND STATUES AFTER 1975



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วิทยานิพนธ์หลัก: รศ .ดร .วิทยา สุจริตธนาภิรักษ์, 94 หน้า.

วิทยานิพนธ์นี้ เป็นเรื่องเกี่ยวกับการเมืองและการสร้างอนุสาวรีย์และรูปปั้นในสาธารณรัฐประชาธิปไตยประชาชนลาวหลังปี พ.ศ 2518 ซึ่งเป็นปีที่ได้เกิดการเปลี่ยนแปลงจากระบอบกษัตริย์ภายใต้รัฐธรรมนูญเป็นระบบคอมมิวนิสต์ การศึกษาในเรื่องนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์ที่จะศึกษาและวิเคราะห์ทางด้านความรู้สึกชาตินิยมซึ่งปรากฏในอนุสาวรีย์และรูปปั้นจำนวนมากที่สร้างทั้งก่อนและหลังปี พ.ศ 2518 .ดังนั้น การศึกษานี้จะเลือกศึกษาอนุสาวรีย์ของพระเจ้าเซษฐาธิราช พระเจ้าศรีสว่างวงศ์ พระธาตุหลวง ประตูดุ้ย ไกลสอน พมวิหาร พระเจ้าฟ้ารุ่งม เจ้าสุพานวงษ์

ประเด็นทางการเมืองอันมีนัยเกี่ยวกับลัทธิชาตินิยมจะปรากฏอยู่ในอนุสาวรีย์และรูปปั้นที่ศึกษาทั้งหมด อย่างไรก็ตาม เมื่อประเทศนี้เปลี่ยนระบอบการเมืองเป็นคอมมิวนิสต์ในปี พ.ศ 2518 .แล้ว อนุสาวรีย์และรูปปั้นที่เกิดขึ้นก่อนหน้านั้น แม้จะคงดำรงอยู่ ก็ได้เปลี่ยนบทบาทให้สมกับสภาพทางการเมืองใหม่ ส่วนอนุสาวรีย์และรูปปั้นอื่นหลังปีดังกล่าว ล้วนใช้สนองความต้องการของระบอบการเมืองใหม่ ในปัจจุบันนี้ มีโครงการสร้างอนุสาวรีย์และรูปปั้นอื่นอีกจำนวนมากทั่วประเทศ ที่สมควรตั้งข้อสังเกตก็คือว่าเมื่อมีการล้มเลิกระบอบกษัตริย์นิยมในปีพ.ศ 2518 .แล้วบรรดาอนุสาวรีย์และรูปปั้นทั้งหลายที่จะสร้างขึ้นนั้น ล้วนแต่เป็นการอุทิศให้กับกษัตริย์ลาวในยุคก่อนที่ได้ชื่อว่าเป็นวีรบุรุษแห่งชาติ

การศึกษานี้พบว่าอนุสาวรีย์และรูปปั้นต่างๆ ที่ได้สร้างขึ้นและจะสร้างกันต่อไปนั้น เป็นวิธีการสร้างความชอบธรรมของรัฐบาลลาว อนุสาวรีย์และรูปปั้นเหล่านั้น มีบทบาทสำคัญในการสร้างความรู้สึกชาตินิยม และความเป็นอันหนึ่งอันเดียวกันของชาติ เมื่อลาวเข้าสู่ระบบตลาดและเปิดกว้างทางการเมืองมากขึ้น ผู้นำของลาวนั้นกลับมาใช้แนวคิด “ชุมชนในจินตนาการ” อันเป็นการเปิดโอกาสให้มีการสร้างชาติให้ทันสมัยในแง่มุมและทิศทางต่างๆ ดังนั้น จึงได้มีการสร้างอนุสาวรีย์และรูปปั้นของบรรดาผู้นำของชาติไปพร้อมกับผู้นำในยุคสังคมนิยม

สาขาวิชา เอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ศึกษา ลายมือชื่อนิสิต.....

ปีการศึกษา 2552

ลายมือชื่อ อ.ที่ปรึกษาวิทยานิพนธ์หลัก.....

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KEYWORDS: MONUMENTS / STATUES / LAOS / NATIONALISM / STATE  
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SEANG SOPHEAK: THE POLITICS OF LAO MONUMENTS AND  
STATUES AFTER 1975. THESIS PRINCIPAL ADVISOR: ASSOC. PROF.  
WITHAYA SUCHARITHANARUGSE, Ph. D., 94 pp.

This thesis presents the monuments and statues in Lao's People Democratic Republic after 1975, the year that marked the change from constitutional monarchy to communism in this country. The purpose of the study is to analyze the nationalistic implications of several of monuments and statues that have been erected in Laos both before 1975 and after 1975. As a result, monuments and statues of King Setthathirath, King Sisavang Vong, That Luang, Patuxay, Kaysone Phomvihane, King Fa Ngum, Prince Souphanouvong and a few other monuments and statues have been selected as case studies.

Political implications of the change to the new order in Laos are evident in these selected monuments and statues. Since the country became communist in 1975, the roles of monuments and statues built before 1975 have been transformed in order to fit in with the new political environment, while new monuments and statues also served the purposes of the new regime. Currently there are many planned monuments and statues to be constructed by the Lao government throughout the country. What is noticeable is that, although this regime abolished the monarchy in 1975, most of the planned monuments and statues will be dedicated to former Lao kings who are considered heroes in the history of the country.

The study found that all of the new monuments and statues that have been, or are going to be, constructed in the country constitute a means of promoting the legitimacy of the Lao government. All play important roles in building strong nationalism and national unity. Especially since Laos moved toward a market economy and the openness to the international community, it seems that, the Lao leaders have turned back the theory of "imagined community", where modern nation can be formulated in many directions and dimension, in building their country. As a result, monuments and statues of national iconographies have been introduced in the country along with the socialist iconographies.

Field of Studies: Southeast Asian Studies

Student's Signature.....

Academic Year: 2009

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## ABBREVIATIONS

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
GNP	Gross National Product
HCMM	Ho Chi Minh Museum
Lao PDR	Laos People's Democratic Republic
LPA	Lao People's Army
LPRP	Lao People's Revolutionary Party
NEM	New Economic Mechanism
RLG	Royal Lao Government
SEA Games	Southeast Asian Games
USA	The United States of America
USSR	The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics



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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Rationale

Today, Laos remains one of the two communist states in Southeast Asia; however, many things have changed in this landlocked country since the fall of the Soviet Union, the country which played notable roles in Indochina during the Cold War period. Like other countries in this region, Laos had gone through various regimes in history, from feudal ones through absolute monarchy and constitutional monarchy to the present rule by the communist leaders of the former Pathet Lao movement. Wars in neighboring countries and the civil war in Laos affected this country terribly and destroyed the soul and spirit of the state, which the country is still struggling to rebuild in the present era.

To build a strong Lao identity, Lao leaders have made great effort to keep awake their people's spirit of being Lao, which had been slept due to the long civil war. Since obtaining power in 1975, the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) government has tried very hard to build the country according to socialist ideology. In order to rebuild Laos in the post-conflict period, a united Laos and a Lao identity was of first priority. The nationalist campaign included, along with the process of state and nation building, an emphasis on history, culture and language as constituent parts. National figures, represented as monuments and statues, have been outstanding images contributing to Lao nationalism. Embedded in a number of monuments and statues constructed throughout the country are many functions and purposes. Unlike in some countries, some monuments and statues built by the previous regime are preserved by the Lao PDR government. In my assumption, both old and newly constructed monuments and statues have had many implications for Lao politics during every regime in the country. Hence, I would like to study the political implications of these Lao monuments and statues constructed before and

after the revolutionary period. My purpose in conducting this research has been to describe and analyze the political concepts embedded in Lao monuments, especially their implications for nation-building in Laos since 1975.

My first discussion will be of the monuments and statues built by the former Royal Lao Government (RLG) before 1975, in order to understand the historical background of Laos in terms of the roles that these monuments and statues had played, and then I will analyze their transformation to fit with the new regime in Laos. However, my main discussion will concern the period since 1975, under the current government of the Lao PDR. Many new monuments and statues constructed by the current government have played crucial roles in educating Lao people according to the communist and socialist ideology, which contrasts with that of the previous regime. I argue that these monuments and statues have been used as a mean to inculcate the Lao people to believe in the new ideology of the new regime. I will try to analyze and find out how those monuments and statues have played these roles.

There are many questions to investigate, especially as the current government decided to erect a statue to King Fa Ngum, the first King of Lang Xang, as doubts arose elsewhere whether the communist Lao government was promoting the return of Lao monarchy. Even though the government denied these speculations, there exist many doubts which has not yet been satisfied. In my study, I attempt to take up this issue and try to answer why a particular person was chosen, rather than others. I also try to look into how the current government is trying to promote the revolutionary leaders and the building of monuments and statues to Kaysone Phomvihane around the country to promote the Kaysone Cult, which I assume to be a copy of that of Ho Chi Minh in Viet Nam and that of Lenin in the former Soviet Union.

## **1.2 Literature Review**

It has been very challenging to find that documents on Laos are very limited, both in local language and in foreign languages, and especially difficult to find books or documents on the specific topic of monuments and statues in Laos. However, a few

books and various documents from Laos and its neighboring countries concern similar topics, and these have contributed and shown the way to conduct the study. Books and documents from Western societies have been used a guideline for understanding theories of nationalism and state-building, and have been considered as additional resources, in order to understand overall concepts and allow us to make a better analysis in the case of Laos.

Grant Evans, in his book, *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance – Laos since 1975* (Bangkok: O.S. Printing House, 1998), dedicates a chapter, “Statues and Museums”, arguing that, in communist states, statues and monuments are likely to deify national leaders, and therefore to promote them.. Building statues or remembrance monuments are just normal practice, and Laos has not been an exception. When coming into power in 1975, the revolutionary soldiers destroyed quite a lot of statues that they thought were symbols of the old regime. In replacement, the Lao leaders have introduced the Kaysone Cult, which is perhaps based on the model of that of Ho Chi Minh in Viet Nam and of Lenin of the former Soviet Union. However, various other monuments have been promoted by the Lao PDR government in the new era, such as That Luang in Vientiane Capital which had become the national symbol, importantly replacing the hammer and sickle, which was long used to represent the “Red” Lao regime. For Evans, this definitely represented the desire of the Lao P.D.R. to re-legitimize itself after the collapse of communism elsewhere.

Thailand, Laos’ closest neighbor, shares almost the same culture and language, and also shares a similarity in its state building and identity. Public monuments are the visual manifestation of how the Thais have imagined and re-imagined their nation-state over the last century. Thailand was the only country in Southeast Asia to retain its political independence during the age of colonialism, and hence the only nation to use public art in support of indigenous political goals. According Ka F. Wong, in his book *Visions of a Nation: Public Monuments in Twentieth-Century Thailand* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2006), different regimes in Thailand erected public memorials to legitimize their own rule and promulgate their

own concepts of modern Thailand to the people. There is no doubt that here in Southeast Asia monuments and statues have had a strong impact in building the state's identity and nationalism. Ka F. Wong also explains that, coming out of the colonial past, public monuments have been used by many independent countries in Southeast Asia, such as Viet Nam, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia, in order to reestablish a glorious past and reaffirm the new ideologies of their various governments. To my understanding, Laos is a very good example for proving this. The purposes of using monuments and statues in Laos P.D.R as political backup in order to strengthen state regime and state building have been perceived.

In, *Vientiane: Transformations of a Lao landscape* (Routledge: Oxon, 2007), Marc Askew, William S. Logan and Colin Long discuss the erection of the statue of King Fa Ngum of Lan Xang in 2003 by the current Lao government. This brought on many discussions as to whether the government was trying to promote the monarchy. However, it is clear that this Fa Ngum statue was used to promote nationalism and to build Laos' identity when the government considered celebrating the 'true spirit' of Laos. The book points out that, even though the statue of King Setthathirat built by the old regime in 1957 still stands near That Luang in the capital of the Lao PDR, the statue has not featured in any public ceremony by the new Lao government.

It is no doubt that activities, such as the construction of monuments and statues, are involved in the state building in individual societies, especially in post-conflict or failing states - and not only in Asia. In this modern world, perhaps the current movement was modeled on influence from western society as well. Abigail Green, in her book *Fatherlands: State-Building and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), argues that, in order to drag citizens to support the regime, leaders have tried to draw people closer to the institutions of the state and showcase their generosity. States have also forged particularist cultures among their citizens, with varying success, by encouraging them to finance the building of state monuments through voluntary donations. According to her, this is perhaps the most successful method of creating a state identity and unity.

Hans A. Pohlsander, in *National Monuments and Nationalism in 19th Century Germany* (Vorbereitung, 2008), investigated the failure of the 1848 revolution to modernize central Europe and establish a nation with liberal political institutions. Pohlsander seems to agree with Abigail Green. Pohlsander argues that the hundreds of monuments erected sprang from a nation-wide initiative and addressed themselves to a nation, rather than to part of a nation, and thus might be called national monuments. In Germany, the 19th century witnessed a veritable flood of monuments, many of which ranked as national monuments. These reflected and contributed to a developing sense of national identity and the search for national unity; they also documented an unsuccessful effort to create a “genuinely German” style. They constituted a historical record, quite apart from aesthetic appeal or ideological message. As this historical record is examined, German national monuments of the 19th century are described and interpreted against the background of the nationalism which gave birth to them. In a similar book by Páll Björnsson, *National and Gender Identities in 19th-Century Germany: The Case of Leipzig* (date unknown), the author attempts to explain the force and the importance of the visual transmission of national images to the public. He points out that the period of the 19th and 20th centuries saw the construction of a number of national monuments in almost every European country, and that in Germany this was particularly the case during the decades prior to World War I.

Of particular importance owing to Benedict Anderson’s theory of nationalism in *Imagined communities* (London: Verso, 1983), is Anderson’s stress on the role of printed literature and its dissemination. The rise of nationalism is, in Anderson’s mind, closely connected with the growth of printed books and with the technical development of print as a whole. According to Anderson, a new emerging nation imagines itself to be old. He considers nation building as somehow ‘imitative’ action, in which new political entities are ‘pirating’ the model of the nation state according to their needs. In this respect it is very important to adopt Anderson’s theory to the context of Laos nation-building and the process of nationalism by studying monuments and statues.

These few examples have provided some light and should serve as guides for the study of Lao monuments and statues, since there has not been any specific study conducted about these subjects in Laos.

What are the differences between monuments and statues?

	Monument	Statue
Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary	1- a statue or building that is built to honour a special person or event	an object made from a hard material, especially stone or metal, to look like a person or animal
Dictionary.com	1- something erected in memory of a person, event, etc., as a building, pillar, or statue	a three-dimensional work of art, as a representational or abstract form, carved in stone or wood, molded in a plastic material, cast in bronze, or the like
Webster's Third New International Dictionary	4- A structure (as a pillar, stone, or building) erected or maintained in memory of the dead or to preserve the remembrance of a person, event, or action	1- a likeness (as of a person or animal) sculptured or modeled in some solid substance (as marble, bronze, or wax)

There are some concerns about using the term “monuments” and “statues” in this study. However, in this research I will not discuss the differences between the two. My definition for both “monuments” and “statues” is: any object, structure or building that has been erected or built, either by the state or by local people, in order to serve specific purposes in remembrance of a person or event. This research is basically a study of those monuments and statues in Laos that have been constructed for particular political purpose.



### **1.3 Objective**

Monuments and statues play important roles in building strong nationalism and unity in Lao society, especially under the current Lao government, and I have conducted this study of the function of monuments and statues in Lao society and the transformation of this function under the present regime.

Specifically, I have studied and analyzed the political meaning of Lao monuments and statues in terms of their nationalistic implications.

This study is focused on both newly erected statues and monuments, by the Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) since it came to power in 1975, and on old statues and monuments constructed by previous regimes.

### **1.4 Hypothesis**

Lao monuments and statues have had significant implications for politics under each regime in Laos. In the post-1975 period, monuments and statues play strong roles in nation-building and nationalism. The government of the Lao People's Democratic Republic has specific purposes in using and constructing monuments and statues to build a strong socialist state and to inculcate Lao people with a sense of national unity.

### **1.5 Methodology**

The study approaches monuments and statues in terms of their political meaning and uses the "state building" concept in discussing the newly emerging regime of Laos after 1975.

The study has been conducted through exclusive interviews and through observation, and based on available secondary documents.

The areas of research have been the Lao PDR (Vientiane Capital, Luang Prabang, Champasak and Savannakhet provinces).

### 1.6 Significance and usefulness of research

- The study provides a better understanding of contemporary Lao politics.

This study may serve as an example for research on monuments and statues in other countries.



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## CHAPTER II

### CONCEPT OF MONUMENTS AND STATUES

For over a decade after the coming into power of the Pathet Lao movement, Laos was an Indochinese country which maintained silence and was shrouded in mystery. International connections were limited to socialist countries, and the world knew very little what had been happening in Laos. In addition, economic sanctions were enforced against Laos. However, like other countries in the region, building a country after a long period of fighting was perhaps the greatest challenge that Lao leaders had ever faced. In a country composed of 49 ethnic groups (Department of Ethnic Lao National Front for Construction, 2005) like Laos, it was not an easy task to solve problems. To overcome them, one of the foremost works that the Lao leaders had to engage in was to build unity among its people. In many countries, to build national unity and identity is about building solidarity among individuals who share a common background. Apart from this, people must also identify with present conditions, which had been shaped by the Pathet Lao leadership.

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form. [...] The nation, like the individual, is the culmination of a long past of endeavors, sacrifice, and devotion. Of all cults, that of the ancestors is the most legitimate, for the ancestors have made us what we are. (Renan, 1996)

It is probable that most revolutionary Lao leaders saw the importance of state heroes as a mean to enhance national identity and unity among people of different backgrounds among the country's populace. An effort to create national identity is about the construction of a "cult of past heroes" (Buch, 2003:27). In communist

countries, building monuments or statues of the heroes of the communist movement is very common. Not only to excite the people about the recent past, monument and statue are also used to reaffirm the new ideology of the current government as well (Wong, 2006). Before analysis of various perceptions that have prevailed in monuments and statues at different times in Laos, a concise coverage of the historical background and some key terms should be discussed.

## 2.1 Monuments and statues according to the Western concept

In order to study this subject, I have faced challenges in explaining the term “monument” and “statue”. A very short and easy to understand from Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary provides definition of the two terms as follow:

- [1] **Statue** an object made from a hard material, especially stone or metal, to look like a person or animal.
- [2] **Monument** a statue or building that is built to honour a special person or event.

The Webster's New Universal Dictionary of the English Language provides the definition of both terms as follow:

- [1] **Statue** the form of a person or animal carved in wood, stone, etc. modeled in a plastic substance, or cast in plaster, bronze, etc. especially when done in the round rather than in relief.
- [2] **Monument** something set up to keep alive the memory of a person or event, as a table statue, pillar, building, etc.

If we consider the definition of both sources we can see that a “monument” is usually bigger than a “statue”, and also that, often, a large scale statue turns into a monument and thus plays a very big role in society, and often conforms to the state's

ideology. However, not all statues become monuments. In Southeast Asia, for example, the Lord Buddha images that have been erected by the local people are not to be called monuments. To me, if a statue is made solely of a person or animal, it is merely a statue; if it symbolizes persons *and* events or occasions, it is a monument. The public statues-and-monuments style that we see in Southeast Asia today has been influenced by western concepts since the colonial period. No century in modern European history built monuments with more enthusiasm than the 19th. Of the hundreds of monuments erected, those which sprang from a nation-wide initiative and addressed themselves to a nation, rather than part of a nation, may be called national monuments. Nelson's Column in London or the Arc de Triomphe in Paris are obvious examples. In Germany the 19th century witnessed a veritable flood of monuments, many of which rank as national monuments. These reflected and contributed to a developing sense of national identity and the search for national unity; they also document an unsuccessful effort to create a «genuinely German style». “They constitute a historical record, quite apart from aesthetic appeal or ideological message. As this historical record is examined, German national monuments of the 19th century are described and interpreted against the background of the nationalism which gave birth to them.” (Pohlsander, 2008).

Building monuments and statues had become the most comprehensible media used by the states to deliver abstract ideologies to the people in western society, especially before the arrival of mass communication. If there was no political perspective behind it, perhaps government would not have spent massive amounts of money on projects, in some cases. One such situation is the case of a leader who tries to draw the people closer to the institutions of the state and showcases their generosity in order to drag citizens to support the regime (Green, 2001).

## **2.2 Monuments and statues in Lao society**

There is no specific information about the arrival of western concepts in building monuments and statues in mainland Southeast Asia. However, in ancient times in this region there had already existed the tradition of building public

structures. The very early public monuments and statues in this region were mainly of religious activities and sacrifices. The construction of Buddha statues and stupas were very common examples, and people in this region still engage in this practice today. In the ancient Khmer Empire, mega-structures of religious monuments had been constructed throughout the kingdom and these activities had become symbolic of royal custom in Cambodia to show the power of the King, who was considered a god.

One early type of human statue in the Khmer Empire was perhaps the statue of King Jayavarman VII, the great King of the Khmer. However, though historians seem to agree that such structures depicted this great King, yet their function was not different from that of the later Buddha statue images and many other Hindu gods and deities constructed in the Khmer kingdom. The statue of King Jayavarman VII was definitely the result of the custom of the “god-king” or *devarāja* in ancient Cambodia, established in the 9<sup>th</sup> century AD by Jayavarman II (Britannica, 2010), founder of the Khmer empire of Angkor.

As in the Khmer Empire, Lao society experienced many constructions, including those of the Buddha statues and stupas. However, there is no denying that the western concept of building statues and monuments came into Laos with its French colonial masters, who ruled not only Laos but also Cambodia and the present Vietnam for nearly a century. The very first western style structures in Laos were probably the statues of Pavie<sup>1</sup> that were erected both in the Royal Capital of Luang Prabang and in Vientiane back in 1930s. The idea behind the building of Pavie’s statues in Laos during the colonial period was to honor one human being (leader) who had given tremendous success to the country. In this case, Pavie’s achievement was the peaceful conquest of the territories that form Laos today; this is, according to Jules Bose, the resident supérieur in Laos at that time. “Pavie’s sympathy for the indigenous peoples of Indochina, and his intellectualism, made him an appropriate

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<sup>1</sup> Auguste Jean-Marie Pavie (1847- 1925) was a French colonial civil servant, explorer and diplomat who was instrumental in establishing French control over Laos in the last two decades of the 19th century. After a long career in Cambodia and Cochinchina, Pavie became the first French vice-consul in Luang Prabang in 1885, eventually becoming the first Governor-General and plenipotentiary minister of the newly formed French colony of Laos. (Wikipedia, 2010i)

symbol for these sentiments” (Chafer & Sakur, 1999). From this point on on the monuments are not for religious purposes anymore, but for human purposes and definitely serve the purposes of the leader, the politics behind which I am going to discuss in the next chapter.

The Lao word for monument, *anusawali*, has very broad meaning. The latest Lao dictionary, by Thongkham Ornmanisorn, published by Lao National Library in 2008, provides a very short definition: *anusawali* implies *any structure built for remembrance*. Thus, *anusawali* serves for structures with either religious or political purposes, or both. In addition, there is no term available for the word “statue” in the western sense in this dictionary, and I conclude that the term *anusawali* in Lao includes both the western concepts of public monuments and statues. They are symbols for the country’s political power on one hand, and at times, objects of worship on the other (Wong, 2006). As in other countries, the functions of conventional statues and edifices are often blurred, as they incorporate the myths, faith, and politics of the country which stick to the spirit and soul of the Lao people.

After Pavie’s statue in Laos had been erected, many more monuments and statues were constructed in Laos. As in neighboring countries, the system of monarch in the former Kingdom of Laos left many king’s monuments and statues, such as the statues of King Setthathirath and King Sisavang Vong. After the revolution and the setting up of the Lao PDR, more and more monuments and statues were constructed throughout the country. According to a book: *Fa Ngum: The founder of Lan Xang Kingdom*, (Vientiane, 2002) issued by the Lao Ministry of Information and Culture in 2002 alone, at least twelve projects were approved by the government. Besides the monuments of the revolutionary leaders that the Lao government plans to build, local leaders such as the ethnic people of Lao and the former Lao Kings had also included in the projects. The very surprising erection of a King Fa Ngum statue in 2002 brought much speculation, both inside and outside the country, as to whether it signified the revival of the monarchy in the Lao PDR. Though the government denied this interpretation, many questions still needed to be answered, as the government seemed to be promoting the former kings of Laos such as King Anuong, King

Setthathirath etc. by constructing more monuments, statues, parks etc and attaching the kings' names to them.

### **2.3 Monuments and statues and their nationalistic implication**

In his article "Immobile Memories- Statues in Thailand and Laos", Grant Evans (2002a) uses the term "statuemia" to describe how leaders or state promote their political ideology to the citizen. In most states, especially the socialist states, we often find a leader cult, and cult activities always include the building of monuments and statues around the country. In Asia, examples can be seen in China, North-Korea and Viet Nam. Similarly in Laos, as in the case of Kaysone statues after he died in 1992, as Evans' suggests, in an orgy of the state's statuemia, the Lao government has placed more than 150 statues of Kaysone throughout Laos.

The world has experienced the uses of public monuments monopolized by the states in the twentieth century. They are obviously exploited by the political leaders and used as means to achieve their political ambitions. It is normal to find that at any stage leaders try to re-create the past images in order to suit their present needs (Wong, 2006). "As the upsurges of nationalism in the nineteenth-century Europe began to rewrite the course of history, memorial monuments also came into play in the public sphere, as historical events were re-interpreted and new political leaders were turned into objects of commemorative veneration" (Hutton, 1993). The huge structures of the Khmer Empire - the Angkor Wat, for example - have at all times been used by the Cambodian leaders to promote national pride, and thus have nationalistic implications. The violence that led to the burning down of the Thai Embassy in Cambodia's capital in January 2003 over the Angkor Wat monument undoubtedly revealed the success of using public monuments to promote nationalism in order to serve the purposes of politicians.

In whatever way citizens are enjoying the result of the new creation of their nation's pride, yet, primarily sponsored by states, statues and monuments are intended to convey the hegemonic view of the nation. As uniform hegemony is a chimera and



dominant views are often contested or contorted to serve other political or cultural purposes (Evans, 2002a), it is visible that monuments are among a nation's most tangible and enduring means for focusing its members' attention on matters of historical significance. "There is no doubt that re-creation of country's glorious past has enjoyed support from the citizen and in doing so has given the chance for newly emerging states or regimes to drag citizens to support the regime. Leaders have tried to draw the people closer to the institutions of the state and showcase their generosity. States also forged particularist cultures among their citizens, with varying success, by encouraging them to finance the building of state monuments through voluntary donations" (Green, 2001).



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## CHAPTER III

### SHORT HISTORY OF LAOS AFTER INDEPENDENCE

Before going on to discuss monuments and statues in Laos, we should understand some basic information about Lao history, especially its history since Laos received independence from France back in the middle of the twentieth century.

Just like Cambodia and Vietnam, Laos<sup>2</sup> was a French protectorate and then a colony of France for about half a century. Unlike Cambodia, the French interest in Laos was rather straight-forward. The presence of France in Cambodia started very early, when King Ang Duong<sup>3</sup> of Cambodia requested French protection in order to protect Cambodia from being swallowed by Vietnam and Siam<sup>4</sup>. Later French authorities forced King Norodom<sup>5</sup> to sign a treaty giving the French virtually complete administrative control over Cambodia in 1884 (Wikipedia, 2010a). However, French interest in Laos was always in relation to somewhere else. The very important person in the creation of Laos as a French colony was Auguste Pavie, who later became the first French vice-consul in Luang Prabang. The goal of Auguste Pavie and other French imperialists of the late nineteenth century was to extend French jurisdiction over as much of Siam as possible (Stuart-Fox, 1997).

It was the French who united the three kingdoms in Laos - Luang Prabang, the Kingdom of Champassak and the territory of Vientiane – in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and

<sup>2</sup> 'Laos', here, refers to the 3 parts: Vientiane, Luang Prabang and Champassak.

<sup>3</sup> Preah Bat Ang Duong (Khmer: ព្រះបាទ អង្គ ជ័ង) (1796-19 May 1860) (r. 1841-1844, 1845-1860) was king of Cambodia. He is regarded as the Great-King of Cambodia, who protected the country from both invasion and steered it away from poverty.

<sup>4</sup> Of course the French had their own interests, and the King was certainly experienced and intelligent enough to understand that he was risking the independence of his country and risking his own sovereignty – perhaps less than the danger of the Vietnamese and Thai, but still, he was making the best of a bad deal.

<sup>5</sup> Norodom (Khmer: ព្រះបាទ នរោត្តម) (1834-1904) ruled as king of Cambodia from 1860 to 1904. He was the eldest son of King Ang Duong. In 1863, to prevent the two powerful neighbors, Vietnam and Siam, from swallowing Cambodia altogether, he invited France to make Cambodia its protectorate. Many Cambodians believed that this brilliant act and his shrewdness did actually save Cambodia from disappearing.

incorporated them into the so-called “Protectorate” of French Indochina, later to be formed into a unified Lao state, with Vientiane as the capital.

Like many other countries under colonial rule there always exist movements against the colonial master. In Lao history there appeared also various outstanding nationalist leaders including Father Kadouat, Ongkeo, Ongkomadam and Chaofapatchai organized anti-imperialism movements in many parts of the countries (The National Assembly of the Lao PDR, 2010). In Lao modern history those people were patriotic national heroes who had been introduced in the school curriculum. Since the 1930s, the battle of the Lao people has been closely connected to the battles of the three countries in Indochina, which eventually led to the end of World War II in 1945. Amongst the Indochina countries, Vietnam gained victory; Laos declared Independence in 1945 and made a mark in the world map for the first time (The National Assembly of the Lao PDR, 2010).

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### 3.1 Post-Independence Laos

After gaining full independence in 1954, Laos became, for the first time, a constitutional monarchy. However, at the same time civil war broke out between royalists and the communist Pathet Lao, a Communist independence movement organized in North Vietnam by Prince Souphanouvong in 1951. Viet Minh and Pathet Lao forces invaded central Laos, resulting in civil war. By the Geneva Agreements of 1954 and an armistice of 1955, two Northern provinces were given to the Pathet Lao; the rest went to the royal regime (Laos, 2010).

In 1957, Prime Minister Prince Souvanna Phouma of the Royal Lao Government and Pathet Lao leader Prince Souphanouvong, the prime minister's half-brother, agreed to the reestablishment of a unified government, with Pathet Lao participation and integration of Pathet Lao forces into the royal army. However, although from 1954 to 1960 Laos experienced a series of governments ruled under the constitutional monarchy system, they did not last long, and the armed conflict began anew. The period of the 1960s witnessed terrible bloody fighting in Laos in spite of the fact that there were many attempts to stop the fighting through coalition governments. During this period, the involvement of outsiders began, which led to expanded conflict rather than an end to the fires of war. In 1968, the North Vietnamese Army launched a multi-division attack to help the communist Pathet Lao to fight against the Royal Lao Army. This attack led to much loss of life, and also to the army largely demobilizing, leaving the conflict to irregular forces raised by the United States and Thailand (Wikipedia, 2010b). The Vietnamese involvement in Lao political conflict in the 1960s resulted in a deep involvement in Laos by the United States. 'Fighting communism', and the promotion of the 'domino theory' by the government of the United States, turned Laos and the whole of Indochina into a battlefield.

From the beginning of 1964 the American Air Force bombarded Laos heavily, resulting in an average of one ton of American bombs per Lao person over the 20-year period. 'When the bombing finally halted in 1973, U.S. aircraft had dropped

2,092,900 tons (1,898,260 metric tons) of bombs on Laos, approximately the total tonnage dropped by U.S. air forces during all of World War II in both the European and Pacific theatres' (Dommen, 1985:90). More than two tonnes of U.S bombs per inhabitant were dropped on the liberated zone (Pathet Lao zone), particularly in Xiangkhouang Province. Laos experienced a protracted war, and suffered from 1964 to 1973 the heaviest aerial bombardment in world history (The National Assembly of the Lao PDR, 2010).

The end of the Lao conflict came with the end of the war between the United States and the communist North Viet Nam. Following the Paris Peace Accords between the United States and North Vietnam, a ceasefire was finally attained in February 1973. In March 1975, confident that the U.S. no longer had the stomach to intervene militarily in Indochina, the North Vietnamese began their final military offensive in South Vietnam, which by the end of April brought them to victory with the fall of Saigon. A few days earlier the Khmer Rouge army had entered Phnom Penh. The Pathet Lao now knew that victory was within reach, and with the Vietnam War over the North Vietnamese authorized the seizure of power in Laos. In 1975, many non-Communist government officials resigned and were replaced by Communists, including the senior Royal Lao Army commanders, and Pro-Communist demonstrations occurred in the capital, Vientiane, denouncing the rightists and demanding political change. A Pathet Lao minister took over the defense portfolio, removing any chance of the Army resisting the Pathet Lao takeover (Wikipedia, 2010c).

By November 1975, the Pathet Lao had taken over Laos, and in December of the same year in Vientiane, Prince Vong Savang; the Crown Prince of Laos, submitted the letter of abdication of King Sisavang Vatthana to the Pathet Lao. With this, the new regime abolished the monarchy and established the Lao People's Democratic Republic, with Prince Souphanouvong as President. Kaysone Phomvihane acted as Prime Minister and Secretary-General of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party.

Shortly thereafter, the Pathet Lao signed an agreement with Vietnam that allowed Vietnam to station its army in the country and to send political and economic advisors into the country. Vietnam afterward forced Laos to cut any remaining economic ties with its other neighbors.

### 3.2 Post-Revolution Laos

Thus, after overthrowing the monarchy, the Phak Pasason Pativat Lao (Lao People's Revolutionary Party, or LPRP), the country's communist party, came into power in 1975. Since then Laos has been a single-party state, in which the Lao People's Revolutionary Party is the only legal party. In the early stage, the new communist government imposed centralized economic decision-making and broad security measures, including control of the media and the arrest and incarceration of many members of the previous government and military in "re-education camps". "These draconian policies and deteriorating economic conditions along with government efforts to enforce political control prompted an exodus of lowland Lao and ethnic Hmong from Laos. About 10% of the Lao population sought refugee status after 1975. Many have since been resettled in third countries including nearly 250 000 who have gone to the United States." (History in Laos, 2010)

There is no doubt the three Indochinese Communist groups – those of Kampuchea, Laos and Viet Nam – won their fight against imperialism, or the imperialist-associated regimes, at the same time, and in Laos the communist group has remained the prestigious leading group, despite the rebellions of various groups against the regime.

Whereas communist parties in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and their close comrades Cambodia, have crumbled, in Laos the ruling communist party, the —LPRP, has retained undiluted political control. The constitution, adopted in August 1991, notes simply in Article 3 that the LPRP is the "leading nucleus" of the political system. LPRP statutes, revised following the Fifth Party Congress held in 1991, leave no doubt regarding the dominant role of the party:

[...] The party is...the leading core of the entire political system, hub of intelligence, and representative of the interest of the people of all strata. The party formulates and revises the major lines and policies on national development in all spheres; finds solutions to major problems; determines the policies regarding personnel management, training of cadres, and supplying key cadres for different levels; controls and supervises activities of party cadres and members, state agencies and mass organizations.

However, even though the LPRP remains the strong and solid faction in Laos, the changes of world politics, and especially the collapse of the former Soviet Union, which was the strong back-up of the regime, strongly affected the Lao political arena. In 1986, encouraged by Gorbachev's reforms in the Soviet Union, the Lao government began decentralizing control of the economy and encouraged private enterprise, while at the same time in Viet Nam the Doi Moi economy reform was implemented by the Vietnamese government. The economic sanction by the United States and some other western countries had forced Laos to rely on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 brought Indochina very big changes. By this year, Viet Nam, compelled by the international community, had to withdraw its troops from Kampuchea. Kampuchea moved to a so-called democracy, with multiple parties, for the first time in about twenty years, since the Communist Khmer Rouge had come to power. In Laos in August 1991 big changes could also be noticed. Even though Laos remained a one-party state, the Supreme People's Assembly adopted a new constitution that dropped all references to socialism. In addition to implementing market-oriented policies, the country passed laws governing property, inheritance, and contracts (Laos Country & Travel Information, 2010), and in 1995 the United States lifted its 20-year aid embargo of Laos.

### **3.3 The Lao State and the new arena**

As discussed above, changes have taken place in Lao society, especially since the open policy instituted by the country's formerly revolutionary leaders. Ireson (1998) divides Laos' post-revolution years into three periods: National integration (1975-1986); Decentralization and Liberalization (1987-1992); and Building Physical Infrastructure (1992-).

Like Viet Nam, Laos today enjoys its adoption of a market economy. In the 1980s, Laos went through its own version of perestroika, although, despite the fact that the year 1986 has been viewed as the key turning point in Laos' reform, the Lao government remained very cautious in limiting compromises with the outside, especially those related to culture and the strength of its state-leading ideology. It was not a coincidence that in the early 1990s the government introduced a mild cult of personality around Kaysone, after his death. In my understanding, the objectives behind this state's celebration probably include a search for new sources of legitimacy, as well as the security of this communist state, after having moved to an open policy which, from then on, Laos has unavoidably had to engage in fully.

It is indubitable that, since the decision of the Lao government to expose the economy to market forces, Laos has had admirable achievements. Doing various kind of business to boost foreign capital investment has allowed Laos to have direct contact both in the region and global area. The admission of Laos into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1997 was a sign that Laos is no longer a "buffer state" but an important partner in the region. However, in term of maintaining solid control, Viet Nam remains the closest partner, in particular at the government-to-government and party-to-party level (Askew, Marc, William S. Logan & Colin Long, 2007). This perhaps shows that, even though Laos is more open to the outside world for economic progress, at the same time the government and party attempt to maintain the spirit of their revolutionary past.

Economic recovery and growth, since the adoption of the "New Economic Mechanism" (NEM) in 1986 and the joining of the world community, continue to be the aims of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP), in order to attract more



trust from the people. It can be argued that the success of today's Laos means the failure of the past Laos, which followed a strict model of Marxist development. In the eyes of the Lao people this is clear and understandable; and the government has used this to gain back support through promoting this atmosphere of progress. Building a strong nationalist Lao identity and a prosperous Laos has always been a priority. It is clear that, since the 2003 amendment to the constitution, the term "good citizen" has been used to replace that of "socialist man", and from then on Laos has been referred to only as a country of "peace, independence, democracy, unity and prosperity"(Vatthana, 2006) in state propaganda. This more or less seems to be a return of the old policy of the RLG, which focused on the roles of its people and on the 'unity' among its ethnic groups - at least among the three biggest groups, the Lao Lum, the Lao Thoeng and the Lao Sung.

The third period of Building Physical Infrastructure, as Ireson suggests, has been welcomed by the Lao in general and the new generation in particular. Influenced by globalization and an opened society, the new Lao generation no longer care about the hammer and sickle, but about acquiring a modern lifestyle. In short, we can conclude that the second period of Decentralization and Liberalization, as suggested by Ireson, completely succeeded in Laos, and that the next step has been to re-establish the capitalism that they (the party) used to oppose. Today it is not strange to see hip-hop or breakdance-style Lao boys on the streets, especially in the capital of Vientiane where the communist politburo is located. The successful hosting of the 25<sup>th</sup> SEA Games in the country recently has become another driving force for the spirit of nationalism and Lao identity among the people, and no doubt special honors for the leading party. As one university student expressed proudly:

*"I am happy to see today our country (Laos) is developing and could host the international games (SEA Games) with a lot of successes"*

This is one of many thoughts of the Lao people that we can find if we interview<sup>6</sup> them about their feelings about the hosting of the SEA Games in Laos in December, 2009.

It is obvious that the search for legitimacy by the LPRP through the promotion of the struggle against foreign intervention and the construction of socialism has disappeared and has been replaced by the promotion of Laos' social spirit, unity, culture and development. The newly rehabilitated infrastructure of roads, schools, hospitals, temples, public buildings, parks, museums, monuments... etc around the country, and especially in the capital of Vientiane, represent the efforts of the LPRP in searching for new sources of legitimacy. This shows that, following the death of Kaysone, the attempts to make a cult of his spirit, mentioned earlier, as well as the construction of various monuments, as in other socialist countries, were not that successful – probably because Laos is not the right place, and Kaysone was perhaps not the right person. Where similar practices have succeeded, in China in the case of Chairman Mao and in the case of Uncle Ho of Viet Nam, in Laos it is a different story. The young Lao generation has no much knowledge or even interests about Kaysone as the Chinese or the Vietnamese have over their Chairman Mao and Uncle Ho. With the new development, the opportunity to insert nationalism for the development of Laos has returned, but this time with different methods and through different objects. As suggested by Maurice Agulhon (1978:145), “monuments” are always the right thing to fill in when expanding and enlarging a city. They have long been part of the history of urbane decor. In Laos, “monuments” at this time have turned back to a very long history that by no means had to do with the revolution at all.

In 2003 the Lao government unveiled a statue of King Fa Ngum in its capital, which brought on a lot of attention, and discussion as to whether it meant the promotion of the monarchy by the so-called communist state. The state denied this. The Fa Ngum case became a crucial test of the LPRP, which later allowed the construction of more

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<sup>6</sup> Base on reports in newspapers, TVs and my direct interview with them in Vientiane during the research.

statues and monuments of former kings. That is, the success of Fa Ngum monuments was welcomed by the majority of Lao both inside and outside the country. In the next chapter I will discuss why the construction of monuments and statues in Lao society today is so important, and also why a certain person has been selected.



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## CHAPTER IV

### THE POLITICS OF LAO MONUMENTS AND STATUES AFTER 1975

Monuments and statues are not just for decoration. They are not just used to fill the space during city expansion, but have definite purposes in term of politics for each state and regime. As I have discussed earlier, before the arrival of the western concept of statues and monuments, Laos had experienced the building of many monuments and statues devoted to religion. Laos has its own art of for the construction of the Buddha image, with a localized appearance and based on local interpretation, just like other Buddhist countries. Some other mega monuments left in Laos today have become the national symbols of the country. Among them are the That Luang<sup>7</sup> and Patuxay<sup>8</sup>, which are located in Vientiane Capital.

Thus, we understand that monuments and statues in Lao are not totally new. However, as discussed above, with the arrival of colonial rule in Southeast Asia and in Indochina the mainly religious concept behind the construction of monuments and statues in Laos changed. The first statues of Auguste Pavie in Luang Prabang and Vientiane around 1930 had very deep root connections to Lao politics during the colonialist period. For this reason, there is no doubt why the Pavie Statue in Vientiane was dumped into the Mekong River during the Lao Issara movement<sup>9</sup> (Evans, 2009), and why something similar happened to the statue in Luang Prabang during students' demonstration before the Pathet Lao occupied this city in August 1975 (Laos – L'histoire mouvementée des statues Pavie au Laos, 2010).

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<sup>7</sup> To be discussed in the next section

<sup>8</sup> To be discussed in the next section

<sup>9</sup> The Lao Issara ("Free Laos") was an anti-French, non-communist nationalist movement formed in 1945 by Prince Phetsarath. This short-lived movement emerged after the Japanese defeat in World War II and became the government of Laos before the return of the French. It aimed to prevent the French from restoring their control over Laos. The group disbanded in 1949. (Wikipedia, 2010j)

Concerning the political implications of Lao monuments and statues, I understand that (though there are no critical evidences): despite the fact that not many statues had been erected in Laos (even though now the LPRP has put importance on constructing monuments and statues) after independence compared to its neighboring country, Thailand; Laos has more or less saw the sample of using the “cult” of monarchy in monuments and statues in addition to what left over by the French. Thai politicians have understood, and have been very well prepared, to use monuments and statues of the Thai king to gain political popularity since the 1939 administration of Field Marshal Plaek Pibulsonggram<sup>10</sup>, whose cabinet approved the erection of eight monuments of former Thai Kings (Saiphim, 1995:52). Since then there has been a mushrooming of construction of monuments and statues of the king around the country, all of which has been greatly welcomed and praised by the Thais.

In comparison to Thai governments, the Royal Lao government regime had left only about two public monuments and statues of the former Lao kings Setthathirath<sup>11</sup> and Sisavang Vong<sup>12</sup>. The statues of these two kings remained ‘on stage’ in Lao society, though the country experienced conflicts of ideology and political change for more than three decades. In order to make a thorough study of the politics of Lao monuments and statues I will first discuss monuments and statues before 1975 and their transformations, and then monuments and statues in Laos since 1975. The first section will discuss the remaining two monuments to King Setthathirath and King Sisavang Vong, and other public monuments built before 1975 such as the That Luang and Patuxay monuments, and attempt to establish the political implications that really have weight for those monuments in Lao society, especially from the side of the current Lao government. A second section will concern monuments and statues constructed and erected since 1975, which means the current Lao leader. As the regime has changed, the purposes of these structures have changed as well, although they necessarily must retain the favor of the current regime.

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<sup>10</sup> Field Marshal Plaek Pibulsonggram (Thai: แปลก พิบูลสงคราม, (1897-1964), often known as Phibun Songkhram or simply Phibun in English, was Prime Minister and virtual military dictator of Thailand from 1938 to 1944 and from 1948 to 1957.

<sup>11</sup> To be discussed in the next section.

<sup>12</sup> To be discussed in the next section.

#### 4.1 Monuments and statues before 1975 and their transformation

As I have discussed, before the establishment of the Lao PDR in 1975, Laos was ruled by a constitutional monarchy, with King Sisavang Vathana as head of state. As in Cambodia and Thailand, Lao kings had attached themselves strongly to Buddhism. Historically the idea of the *chakravartin*<sup>13</sup> had placed the king as the ruler of the universe. People of these countries believe that the king sat upon the throne not so much because of divine right as because of his obviously good karma in his previous lives. Yet the king, as well as the royal family, remained in a special category of society different from that of ordinary people.

Monarchical system in all parts of the world have had to face strong challenges in the modern world, beginning in Europe, along with the emergence of capitalism, as divine-right monarchies were no longer welcome in new political views and so went into decline. In Asia, colonialism played a strong part in the decline of monarchical systems. Some absolute monarchies turned into constitutional monarchies, as kings became the symbols of their countries and no longer ruled with absolute power.

[...] monarchies everywhere had to adjust to the new idea of political space, one defined by borders rather than sacred centers. Some failed to make the transition, such as the “multi-national” empires that split up following the carnage of World War I in Europe. Elsewhere, monarchies were destroyed either by colonialism or by anti-colonialism. Some, however, successfully transformed themselves into national monarchies, and became symbols of the nation. (Evans, 2009:4)

The regimes of Cambodia, Laos and Thailand are probably the good examples of monarchies that have maintained themselves into the modern period. The

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<sup>13</sup> A Chakravartin literally means “whose wheels are moving”, is a term used in Indian religions for an ideal universal ruler, who rules ethically and benevolently over the entire world.

monarchy in Cambodia was abolished<sup>14</sup> only five years prior to that of Laos – long after those of Viet Nam and Burma, illustrating the failures of monarchical systems during and after the colonial period. Interestingly, however, the Thai monarchy has provided another clear picture, that of adaptation to changes in the modern world, as it has survived until today. In any system - whether monarchical, republican or communist - the establishment of legitimacy is the main task for the security of the regime. The Thai monarchy probably maintained its legitimacy by successfully presenting itself as the protector of the nation during the colonial period and as leading the country into the modern world (Evans, 2009).

I will not discuss the causes of the collapse of the Lao monarchy in 1975, but it is obvious that the successful coming-to-power of the communist Pathet Lao movement, which was in principle opposed to monarchy, left no doubt that sooner or later the Lao monarchy would end. By December 1975 all the Indochinese countries were fully controlled by communists, and no monarchies ruled. It is obvious that the Lao monarchy, even before 1975, had been striving to remain the symbol of national unity, and no doubt would have liked to secure itself in a modern political system when this system had already farm from power (absolute monarchy) since the French arrived. Unlike Thailand that the royal families were disconnected to politics since the overthrow of the absolute monarchy in 1932, the Lao politics experienced royalty prominence throughout the kingdom.

Like other monarchies in the region, the Lao monarchy was traditionally attached to Buddhism and had used this attachment to maintain support from the people. However, the monarchy only served as the symbol and ritual focus of the country's richest culture, the Lao. And the Lao government before 1975 had to gain

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<sup>14</sup> In March 1970, Gen. Lon Nol deposed Prince Sihanouk and assumed power in Cambodia. On October 9, the Cambodian monarchy was abolished, and the country was renamed the Khmer Republic. After that, civil war broke out in Cambodia which lasted until 1993, when the first general election under United Nations supervision was held. In September 24, 1993 under the new constitution, a multiparty liberal democracy, in the framework of a constitutional monarchy, was established; with the former Prince Sihanouk elevated to King, and since then Cambodia has been a constitutional monarchy. On October 7, 2004, King Sihanouk abdicated the throne due to illness. On October 14, the Cambodian Throne Council selected Prince Norodom Sihamoni to succeed Sihanouk as King. King Norodom Sihamoni officially ascended the throne in a coronation ceremony on October 29, 2004.

its legitimacy by building national unity in other ways, although religion remained important. When the king gave importance to the That Luang Festival and the casting of the image of former Lao King Setthathirath in front of That Luang to mark the Buddhist New Year Festival, it was probably nothing else but a matter of attaching the spirit of a royal national hero to the other, religious, national symbol, the That Luang. By then were meant to respect its founder, the statue of King Setthathirath.

The Royal Lao government (RLG) had left two significant public monuments and statues of their former kings in its capital - those of King Setthathirath, in front of That Luang, and of King Sisavang Vong, in front of Vat Simoeung. Since the collapse of the monarchy, for more than three decades these statues still proudly stand in the communist capital - unlike the situation in Cambodia, where the monarchy had been abolished in 1970, the royal statue of King Sisowath in Phnom Penh as well as other royal symbols were taken off immediately by the new regime. In Laos, however, although the two royal statues were not taken away, their functions are clearly not the same as before.

#### **4.1.1 King Setthathirath statues**

Statues and monuments in the past in Laos were mainly religious, and, with the exception of the statue of August Pavie, Laos got its first non-religious statues later than other Southeast Asian countries. The first public statue of the Lao King Settha the Great, or Setthathirath, was only erected in 1957. The idea of constructing this King Setthathirath statue by the Royal Lao Government was not a coincidence, either in time or location.

Who was King Setthathirath? Setthathirath was one of a few Lao kings who gained recognition for his achievements from some Lao groups. Born in 1534, Setthathirath successfully defended Laos against the military campaign of the Burmese conqueror Bayinnaung, who had already subdued Xieng Mai (Chiang Mai) in 1556 and Ayutthaya in 1569. Setthathirath was a prolific builder and erected many Buddhist monuments, including Wat Xieng Thong in Luang Prabang (Wikipedia,



2010d) and the That Luang stupa in Vientiane, which has now become the national symbol of Laos. Another major accomplishment of King Setthathirath was the establishment of his capital at Vientiane rather than at Luang Prabang, more than four centuries ago (in 1560). Considering all of his achievements, Setthathirath was, in Lao history, a national figure that could be used to unite the Lao people – as was Fa Ngum. Therefore, a national *cult* of Setthathirath could be created at any time a Lao government wanted to do so. This was no doubt what the former government of Laos did with the construction of his statue.

The statue of King Setthathirath was cast in sitting position and placed in front of the That Luang stupa, which he had built, in the royal capital of Vientiane, which he had established. It was said that the statue was to commemorate the twenty-five hundredth anniversary of Buddhism. Even though such an act, by itself, does not necessarily mean the establishment of a strong *cult*, it gains the attention of the common people, who are, for the most part, believers. In Lao society, it attaches the sense of “holiness” (*saksit*) to the figure, and thus makes it more attractive. This *saksit* refers to a super spiritual force that can cause extraordinary things to happen - great persons are supposed to have *saksit*. Such beliefs are also to be found in neighboring countries. There is no doubt that a person like Prince Phetsarath<sup>15</sup> of was believed by the Lao to have *saksit*, and after his death the Lao believed his images could protect them from harm. The statue of King Setthathirath drew on this *saksit* belief. In his article “Immobile Memories: Statues in Thailand and Laos”, Evans (2002a) recalled how the belief in Setthathirath’s *saksit* was revealed during the creation and erection of his statue in 1959.

[...] the casting of the statue had continual problems, especially the casting of the head – the mould broke three times. A spirit calling ceremony, attended by monks, was therefore held to seek permission from King Setthathirath to cast the statue, whereupon the casting proceeded without problems ...

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<sup>15</sup> Prince Phetsarath Rattanavongsa was prime minister of Laos from 1942 to 1945, and was the first and last vice-king of the Kingdom of Laos.



**Figure 1:** The statue of King Setthathirath in Vientiane

This first statue in the former Vientiane capital of Lan Xang was further associated with incredible phenomena when the Chao Khouang (provincial head) of Vientiane roared into the compound in his car to announce a strange occurrence just before the procession of King Setthathirath statue:

[...] Right now Chao Saysettha (King Setthathirath) has descended into Ban That Luang and is causing a commotion, dancing around with a red face singing loudly and brandishing an ancient sword. [...] He yelled at me: “You are my go-between, don’t you know it? Now you are about to parade my image to That Luang. Why didn’t you inform me? I must join in your procession of my image.” [...] (Evans, 2002a:173)

Reports of this kind of supernatural event touch the hearts of the people who join in the ceremony, and sooner rather than later the stories of the event spread around the country and led to a feeling of awe of the *saksit* of the statue. Tham<sup>16</sup> announced “... Our parade will now have life and spirit and is given greater meaning! Hurry and bring him (statue) to join our procession for it is close to the time when the procession will begin” (Evans, 2002a). According to Evans, not only did this event occur, but a following event was a transformation of the Nang Tiam<sup>17</sup> [Nang Khao Song] announced as a sacred Buddha, (who was announced as a sacred Buddha?) a son of Chao Setthathirath joined the ritual to give blessing to the person in charge of making the statue of King Setthathirath. According to Evans, the LPDR did not allow the publication of the manuscript tham wrote about these events that occurred during the erection of the Setthathirath statue. For the government, it would have been a matter of “superstition” rather than fact. But what was the importance of such “superstitions” at that time?

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<sup>16</sup> Tham Sayasitsena was the person who was in charge of the ceremony. His name still appears on the pillar of Setthathirath’s statue. I visited his home to seek some information but failed to meet him because of his poor health condition. When I conducted the research he was in his 90s and had just had an operation, so he wasn’t allowed to meet any visitors.

<sup>17</sup> Nang is “Miss or Mrs” and Khao Song her real name.

She is a Nang Tiam - a female spirit medium. In this particular case she is possessed by the spirit of Chao Setthathirath's son - there is no logical reason for this except that it is a ceremony for his father's statue. (Evans’s response to author, April 29, 2010)

As Askew has argued (2007), in the modern history of Laos, even though no statue of Setthathirath had been featured permanently in public ceremony, as had other newly erected statues, yet in the eyes of the common people, the statue of Setthathirath had received their private worship. It is certain that King Setthathirath had continued to be considered one of the greatest leaders in the history of Laos, and there is no opposition to this attitude by the LPRP, as Setthathirath had indeed established Vientiane as the capital, and That Luang had already become the symbol not only of Vientiane but of Laos. The *saksit* of Setthathirath still creates awe in the eyes of the Lao people. Today the Lao government allows the annual festival of That Luang to celebrate this achievement, and also needs to consider the creator of That Luang as well - therefore, when paying homage to That Luang, the Lao people also pay tribute to Setthathirath, who sits just in front of That Luang. The legacy of Setthathirath perhaps is not just that the people pay homage during the That Luang festival, but also the belief in his *saksit*. Small models of Setthathirath's statue have been made for Lao people to put in their homes or offices for the purposes of paying homage. Similarly, the Thais pay homage to their kings, but perhaps in conditions different from those in Thailand, so that Setthathirath cannot become the subject of a *national cult*, as the Kings of Thailand are.

All of these facts can perhaps answer the question of why the Setthathirath statue was not torn down by the LPRP. The promotion of Setthathirath has a specific purpose for the Lao government. To build a strong nation, after the collapse of communism in Laos and elsewhere, the establishment national unity through the promotion of national heroes is perhaps the best thing, since the trust of the people is already in these such royal heroes. Besides, the name of Setthathirath could not be erased as long as That Luang and Vientiane exist. The attempt to move the capital city from Vientiane to the Pathet Lao stronghold, Viengxay in Houaphanh Province after the Pathet Lao had successfully captured Vientiane in 1975; perhaps was one of several ideas for deleting the past and moving toward the new communist ideology in Laos. However, to turn this "old stuff" into present legitimacy seems to be a gaining game to the current government at this point in time.

There is no doubt that, today, the legacy of King Setthathirath is really alive, and the government still keeps his name for streets, buildings (including the Setthathirath Hospital), etc. At the time of writing, the Lao government is on the way to building the Setthathirath Park to commemorate this king who moved the capital of Laos from Luang Prabang to Vientiane in 1560. The creation of this park is just one among many other big projects to celebrate Vientiane 450<sup>th</sup> year, in 2010. Thus the Lao people of this and the next generation will hear more about King Setthathirath, their ancient King, despite the facts that they no longer understand monarchy as part of modern politics and that monarchy is no longer a choice for them.

#### 4.1.2 King Sisavang Vong statues

Other big statues and monuments in Laos built during the RLG period are the two monuments to King Sisavang Vong, one located in Vientiane in front of Vat Si Muang and the other located in Luang Prabang in the former Royal Palace, which is now a national museum. It is worth noting that, while the first statue was installed in Vientiane in 1974, the second one was installed in 1976,<sup>18</sup> during the time of the Lao PDR. Why did the Lao PDR government decide to install a symbol of monarchy after they had just abolished the monarchy the year before?

Sisavang Vong was the King of Luang Prabang, and then the first king of the united Kingdom of Laos in modern times. He succeeded his father as King of Luang Prabang after the death of his father on 25 March, 1904. Luang Prabang was then a French protectorate within French Indochina. Born in 1885, Sisavang Vong was the longest-reigning king in Asia by 1954, when he celebrated his Golden Jubilee, until King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand who surpassed his reign in 2001 (Wikipedia, 2010e). Unlike Setthathirath, Sisavang Vong could be considered a king in a modern political environment, after most of the monarchies had collapsed in Europe and Asia. For Sisavang Vong it was probably hard to adjust to the new fashion of modern

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<sup>18</sup> According to my interview with the authority of the Luang Prabang Museum, the statue of King Sisavang Vong was installed in 1976, but according to Evans, in his article "Immobile Memories – Statues in Thailand and Laos", it was installed in 1977.

monarchy around the world, as well as to the rise of nationalism in Laos during the anti-colonial period. Sisavang Vong was deposed when the Lao Issara declared the country independent in 1945. Although later he was reinstated as king when the French returned to Indochina, Sisavang Vong's rule was insecure as a result of the political turmoil in the country, which had long experienced divisions. However, even though Sisavang Vong was not highly regarded in the eyes of the LPRP and is not regarded highly by ordinary Lao today, Sisavang Vong had in fact also (at least in his reign) made the major accomplishment for his country of uniting the following provinces within the kingdom: Houaphan, 1931; Houakhong, Xiengkhouang and Vientiane, 1942; Champassak and Sayboury, 1946 (Wikipedia, 2010e). It would probably be because of these circumstances that the RLG decided to erect his statue in 1973<sup>19</sup>, just two years before the revolutionary success. If no revolution had occurred, perhaps the image of Sisavang Vong could have led to the establishment of a national *cult*, such as the royal cult in Thailand.



**Figure 2:** The statue of King Sisavang Vong in Luang Prabang

<sup>19</sup> In Grant Evans's "Immobile Memories – Statues in Thailand and Laos", on page 160, Evans says it was erected in 1974, but in his latest book, *The Last Century of Lao Royalty* he translates a Lao newspaper article (Khaosan Pathet Lao, January 3, 1973) which gives the date of the inauguration of the statue of Sisavang Vong as January 2, 1973.



**Figure 3:** The statue of King Sisavang Vong in Vientiane

Again, despite the fact that the belief in *saksit* was not applied to the statue of King Sisavang Vong, the very insightful purposes of the Royal Lao Government should be understood in reference to the spirit of nationalism and unity that had arisen in the time of conflict inside the country, as well as in the region. In his speech during the inauguration of the King Sisavang Vong statue in Vientiane, the Lao Prime Minister, Prince Souvanna Phouma, read:

[...] however, the monarchy has, more than anything else, taken on the titanic undertaking of ensuring that the kingdom will exist in unity, national concord, hospitable relationships among compatriots, and reverence for national institutions. [...] (Evans, 2009:98)

Thus the modern monarchy in Laos had already served as a national symbol. In other words, there was a need of the king's rule to protect the country, as well as the spirit of the people. King Sisavang Vong as well as other Lao kings was historically considered the protector of the nation and the people. Having *dhosphisrajdhamma*,<sup>20</sup> the Lao king had already gained support from his subjects. Hence, in Lao society, it was not difficult to raise King Sisavang Vong high.

[...] historically, Lao kings have bequeathed to the Lao people kindness and the prudence that are the instinct of humanity, rather than violence. This is due to the *arak lak muang* that gave protection to the king, thus setting in motion the *Dhamma* principle of our religion. Thus, in each epoch, the Lao people have turned towards the words of the king for a model of self-conduct, and through such a spirit of having one integrated unifying mind among father and sons. [...] (cited in Evans, 2009:96).

Considerations of all of these points is perhaps the reason that Sisavang Vong statues have survived the communist revolution both in Vientiane and in Luang Prabang until today - or perhaps it is for fear of popular outcry should the statues be removed (Evans, 2002a). But, unlike for Setthathirath, there exist no public activities

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<sup>20</sup> *dhosphisrajdhamma* is an element of the Buddhist dharma, which chiefs or rulers of people are supposed to hold.



associated with the Sisavang Vong statues, and as such public recognition of Sisavang Vong statue is now insignificant. Neither Sisavang Vong statue is well-known to the local Lao people. During my visits to both monuments, in Vientiane and Luang Prabang, I first talked to a woman who was weaving white thread inside Vat Si Muang if she knew whose statue was in front of the temple. Interestingly, the answer that I received from her was that she did not know, and asked me if it was the statue of Than<sup>21</sup> Kaysone Phomvihane.

I asked the same question to a couple of students who were visiting the Royal Palace Museum in Luang Prabang where another statue of King Sisavang Vong handsomely stood just where visitors first stepped into the palace, but the answers that I got were exactly the same as that of the old woman in Vientiane. We can thus see that the Kaysone Phomvihane *cult* is prevalent, though none of these persons knew what Kaysone really looked like. In contrast, today King Sisavang Vong's image has no meaning; unlike on the day it was erected and officiated over by the last King of Laos, Sisavang Vathana. Kept as it is, with no promotion to the public, sooner or later his importance will fade away, which is probably best for the LPRP.

But why didn't the LPRP take the statue down after it succeeded in abolishing the monarchy? We can find no definite answer to this, but the reasons may include the points discussed earlier, as well as his role in presiding over independence from the French Union. However, it is more surprising that his second statue, in Luang Prabang, was installed during the period of Lao PDR. This is probably because *both* statues were donations from the Soviet Union following King Sisavang Vong's visit to the USSR in 1972, as suggested by Evans (2002a), and probably signifies the desire for continuation of relations of the new regime with the USSR which was at that time the big power most important for the countries of Indochina. Another reason may have been that they were giant standing statues of Sisavang Vong weighing five tons, and four to five times his actual size, depicting him in the act of bestowing a constitution, the highest law of the country. Whatever the reasons, at present we see

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<sup>21</sup> Than is a polite word in Lao equal to "Mr." in English.

clearly that the presence of the statues seems scarcely to yield any political gain for the present regime. However, it is a nice irony of Lao history, not present for other revolutionary countries, that the new regime not only has kept both statues but had honored Sisavang Vong with street names in both Vientiane and Luang Prabang. In the complicated modern Lao political development, it is a very interesting phenomena for understanding the political ideology in the country.

#### 4.1.3 That Luang and Patuxay monuments

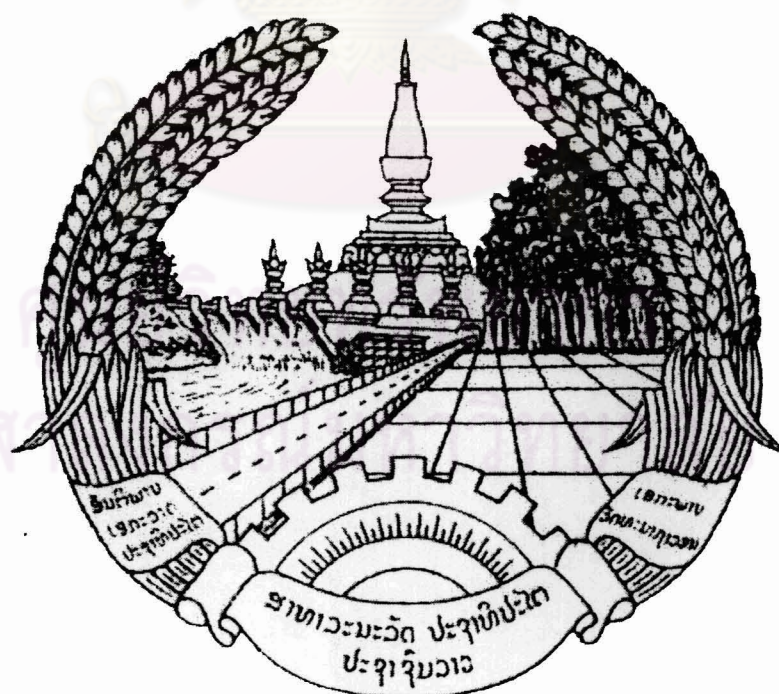
The very old monuments that we can see in Laos today are That Luang stupa and Patuxay monument. Both monuments are located in the capital city, Vientiane. As mentioned, one of them, That Luang, was built by King Say Setthathirath in 1566, after he made Vientiane the capital of Lan Xang. This great stupa indeed received unexpected support from the LPRP when it became one of the main focuses in the Lao PDR national insignia adopted by the 1991 constitution. Patuxay has not received this honor, but the ancient structure of That Luang has served another political purpose for the new regime in Laos.

Pha That Luang, which literally means “Great Stupa” in Lao, is a large gold-covered Buddhist stupa on the eastern outskirts of Vientiane capital. Since its initial establishment, claimed to have been in the 3rd century, the stupa underwent several reconstructions up until the 1930s, due to foreign invasions of the area. Today, this structure is generally regarded as the most important national monument in Laos, and a national symbol. That Luang had already achieved great importance when King Setthathirath moved the capital from Luang Prabang to Vientiane and rebuilt the stupa on its old and sacred site. In fact Vientiane was already an ancient settlement when Setthathirath chose it as his capital, as Stuart-Fox argues in his book *Naga Cities of the Mekong*:

[...] Buddhist temples had been located along the river bank ever since Buddhism reached Viang Chan more than 700 years before Setthathirath’s time. Thus some of the temples Setthathirath built were certainly on the sites

of earlier monasteries. .... and the building program that Setthathirath undertook was both ambitious and lavish [...] (Stuart-Fox, 2006:62)

There is no doubt that the ancient kings proudly built huge monuments to show their great power and the power of their kingdoms, gaining the support from the people as well legitimacy for their rule. This applies to other places in this region - the thousand stupas in Bagan in today's Myanmar and marvelous religious monuments of the former Khmer Empire in today's Cambodia are critical evidence of this today. There is no exception to this in "King Setthathirath's momentous decision to transfer the capital of his kingdom from Luang Prabang to Vientiane, when he took every possible precaution to ensure that the spiritual powers of the Lao world would support the move" (Stuart-Fox, 2006). To get support, King Setthathirath needed to build great structures throughout his new capital, such as monasteries and this great stupa, the That Luang.



**Figure 4:** The Lao PDR national insignia, authorized by the 1991 constitution, featuring the That Luang as key symbol.



**Figure 5:** The That Luang Monument in Vientiane

Similarly, this practice is very visible in the present junta government of Myanmar's construction of a huge model of Shwedagon Pagoda in Naypyidaw, the new capital of Myanmar. To reaffirm its legitimacy and the rightness of moving the capital, constructing a replica of Shwedagon Pagoda was a need, as the pagoda was already associated with the religion and the Myanmar people's heart and soul. In other words, these activities represent appeals for the support of the people.

When the Pathet Lao got power in December 1975, they were reluctant to celebrate the spirit of That Luang. Buddhism was no longer designated the state religion, and religious rituals were discouraged by the state. According to Evans (1998), the reason for all of these moves was that the government wanted to mobilize economic surpluses in the effort of construction and development. The new regime considered that any activities related to That Luang would cause circulation of a large amount of money. Thus the RLG had promoted the That Luang Festival as a national festival, and it became a time for swearing an oath of fealty to the King (Evans, 1998). Since That Luang itself was very much attached to royalty and would cause people to remember the old regime, there is no doubt that, while the King presided in

the That Luang festival, the top leaders of the new regime had never attended the festival until it was again reintroduced in the Lao PDR<sup>22</sup>.

It is very clear that after the New Economic Mechanism (NEM) was adopted in 1986, the new regime brought back national icons in order to re-attract the people's support. The introduction of the leader *cult*, such as that of Kaysone (to be discussed in the next section), the promotion of old structures such as monuments and statues and the promotion of Buddhism have all been efforts of the LPRP beginning at that time. "The replacement of the hammer and sickle with the icon of That Luang in the national symbol was a clear signal of the shifting away from socialist iconography and the promotion of recognizably nationalist iconography, following the collapse of the communism elsewhere and the regime's desire to re-legitimize itself" (Evans, 1998). There is no doubt that the LPRP dared to erect the statue of Fa Ngum and promote other national heroes, even though these people were symbols of monarchy, or so-called feudal men, which they (LPRP) had previously fought.

From then on, in the eyes of LPRP, That Luang became one of the main symbols used to get support from the citizens, as it symbolized the national unity and nationalism. Though it is not as big as the Angkor Wat of Cambodia, That Luang of Laos also had a long history and attracted the feelings of the Lao people, as the Cambodians were attracted to their Angkor Wat. Therefore, this great stupa image has been appearing on every occasion representing Laos within the country and on the international stage. It is also very significant that the That Luang image has been used as the national logo, such as during the 10<sup>th</sup> ASEAN summit in Laos in 2004 and, most recently, in the 25<sup>th</sup> SEA Games in late 2009. It is very clear that That Luang is used by the regime to show its willingness to recall the country's glorious past, and as a tool to promote national pride and unity.

Another big structure in Laos Capital today is the Patuxay monument. If the life of Patuxay is not as long as that of That Luang; perhaps at least, the architecture

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<sup>22</sup> In fact neither Kaysone nor Souphanouvong ever attended the That Luang festival after 1975 (Evans, 1998).

and the history of this monument are comparable to it, the only difference being that the Patuxay is a rather modern structure which has served modern Lao politics.

The name “Patuxay<sup>23</sup>” in Lao literally means Victory Gate or Gate of Triumph. The case of the politics behind monuments and statues in Laos is also reflected in this monument. The monument was renamed *Patuxay* in 1995; it had previously been called the *Anosavali Monument* or the *Victory Monument* when the communist regime came to power. Its original name was the *Monument aux morts*. Built during the 1960s, this monument was dedicated to those who fought in the struggle for independence from France (Wikipedia, 2010f) and to commemorate those who had died in the struggle against communism (Stuart-Fox, 2006) during the RLG period. It is interesting that this structure was designed by Tham Sayasitsena, the same person who designed the Setthathirath statue. In his book *Victory Arch - Construction, Significance, Prestige*, Tham Sayasitsena describes how this monument could remind people of the absolute victory of King Fa Ngum, who conquered all principalities in this region and united his kingdom under one administration, as well as the victories of King Setthathirath and his successors for their keen and extensive intelligence in mapping out their strategies to overcome enemies. It was probably in this regard that the Monument was constructed by the RLG.

Since the monument was also a symbol of the old regime’s fight against communism, and (worse) that it was built using American funds<sup>24</sup>, it was probably not a desirable object by the new regime, which had come into power after fighting against American imperialism as well as the old regime. Hence, a new transformation of meaning was needed, so that it was renamed the Victory Monument. The victory at this time probably was not to other else but the fund owner. According to Tham, it was there at the monument on the 2nd of December 1975 that massive groups of people of Vientiane Municipality gathered before they marched in procession to overturn the former regime and declare the taking of power into the people's hands,

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<sup>23</sup> In Lao script: ປະຕູໄຊ

<sup>24</sup> The Patuxay was built using American funds. The US had given Laos money to build a new airport. However, the Laotian government of the day used the money to build the monument instead. As a consequence it is sometimes referred to as the “vertical runway” (Wikipedia, 2010f)

leading to the establishment of the Lao People's Democratic Republic. This is similar to the situation in Cambodia, when the communist groups changed the name of its “Independence Monument<sup>25</sup>” in Phnom Penh to “Victory Monument”.



**Figure 6:** The Patuxay Monument in Vientiane

It was only in 1995, when the country moved to a more open policy, that the monument was given more attention and retaken for the state's purposes. It was officially renamed in notice No.: 637/IC of the Ministry of Information and Culture on 22 May 1995:

<sup>25</sup> The Independence Monument (Vimean Ekareach) in Phnom Penh, capital of Cambodia, was built in 1958 following the country's independence from France. When the communist took power in this country, the monument's name was changed to “Victory Monument”. In 1993 the name was changed to Independence Monument, when the country reintroduced the monarchy.

[...] witnessing that a construction in form of an arch (of late called: Anousavaly = the monument) located at a public park in front of the now PM office is a place that accumulates invaluable craftsmanship of Laotian artisans - a place which visitors and foreigners are interested in its real name...,

[...] the ministry of Information and Culture, therefore, decides to name the said place: "Patusai" = Victory Arch, as of the date of the issuance of the present notice. The cause that leads to naming it PATUSAI = Victory Arch is due to that the morphology of the construction is a victory gate/arch that the world over has been erecting.

[...] especially, this has been the place where the Vientianians had gathered before they marched in procession to overturn the old regime on 23/8/1975 ... and as a result the new regime has been established on the 2/12/1975 ...

This was probably an attempt by the new regime to bring Patuxay back into Lao eyes after That Luang had already been adopted as a symbol of state unity and as a national symbol, but the reasons for renaming it (Patuxay) probably were not to symbolize victories won by earlier heroic Lao generations in the wars to defend their beloved Motherland, as Tham had suggested. Since the government had constructed a socialist-style national war memorial of the "unknown soldiers" (which I will discuss in the next section), Patuxay could not switch its function to replace the national war memorial. The restoration of Patuxay could probably function to promote tourism for the sake of economic growth of the regime, as it is very ironic that the notice of the Ministry clearly mentioned "[...] a place which visitors and foreigners are interested in its real name...". In this regard, unlike That Luang, Patuxay does not have political values that can easily be used by the new regime. Thus it is obvious why That Luang was selected to feature in the new national insignia of the Lao PDR in 1991. As expressed by a Lao in Vientiane – *"Patuxay does not have anything important, Lao people never go... only the tourists, they come to take photos. That's all about Patuxay today!"*



## 4.2 Monuments and statues in Laos after 1975

The first decade of the Lao PDR did not present any outstanding achievements, as perhaps the country was still influenced much by what was called Marxist-Leninist ideology, coupled with economic sanctions by the 'Free World countries' and the Cold War in the region. However, the third period of post-revolutionary Laos, beginning in 1992, which focused on building physical infrastructure, as described by Ireson (discussed earlier), did really mean a lot in the eyes of both the leaders of the LPRP and those of the Lao people themselves. Freedom was gradually granted to the people, while in the early 1990s foreigners could not travel freely in the country and the citizens dared not to talk to foreigners (Kyaw Yin Hlaing, 2006). However, since 2005, one has been able to travel freely in Laos and be greeted by smiles and the welcome of the local people. It could be the reason the state has been gradually welcomed by the people, especially since Laos turned to market economy, resulting in the growth of the country's economy in recent years and the significant improvement of the infrastructure.

In the 1980s, when centrally-planned economy was fully applied in the country, the economy was deplorable. According to a World Bank ranking, the per capita gross national product (GNP) in 1991 was just US\$200. Its labor force was poorly trained and educated, its infrastructure severely damaged from years of inadequate maintenance, and its ability to feed itself precariously was dependent upon the weather. Development expenditure was financed almost entirely by foreign aid, and, by 1991, exports financed only 40 percent of imports (Laos: The Economy year, 2010). This weak economy definitely put the LPRP in an insecure situation. During the period, the LPRP adhered to promoting the Marxist-Leninist theory in its political rule, the only choice that they (LPRP) had to attempt to get support from the people after overthrowing the monarchy. The communist leaders' iconography, exemplified by Marx, Lenin, Ho Chi Minh and the top leaders of the LPRP, was in public as an attempt to peddle their political ideology and the soul of their state. However, economic failure and the changes in international politics due to the collapse of communism forced the LPRP leaders to search for nationalist iconography instead.

This was visible after the death of the key LPRP leader, Kaysone Phomvihane, which the regime saw as the best time to lift him up as a statesman and at the same time call for national unity under the regime - as the newly president, Nouhak Phoumsavan, announced, to “turn the grief and sorrow [...] into patriotic deeds, love of the new regime and unity” (Evans, 1998a).

Similar to the situation in other communist countries, since the death of Kaysone, his personality has been used as the focus of a *cult*, similar to that of Mao Zedong of China, Kim Il Sung of North Korea, and Ho Chi Minh of Viet Nam. However, due to different circumstances, the cult of Kaysone Phomvihane may not be as successful as those of the three leaders above. In early 2000 there was another turning point in Lao iconography, when the LPRP decided to erect a King Fa Ngum statue, after a decade of promoting Kaysone Phomvihane. There is no doubt that this move of the professedly Marxist-Leninist regime of Laos reactivating a royal iconography attracted many in other countries. But it was unconvincing that the Lao government denied that they were promoting the return of the monarchy, and that the Fa Ngum statue was a celebration of the true Lao spirit (Vientiane Times, January 14-16 2003). But who else after King Fa Ngum? In searching for more Lao spirit, Fa Ngum seemed to be just the starting point for the LPRP regime - eight years later the government approved more public parks and memorials to Kings Setthathirath, Souriyavongsa and Anuvong, and to Prince Phetsarath (Vientiane Times, July 29 2008). Are all of these efforts just another search for legitimacy in the modern period of a communist country? In the next sections I will discuss how all of these monuments and statues relate to the politics of the Lao PDR, starting from the case of Kaysone Phomvihane.

#### **4.2.1 Kaysone Phomvihane monuments and statues**

Before the death of Kaysone Phomvihane, Laos did not have any statue of its revolutionary leader, as the other communist countries did. The very notable appearance at the 6<sup>th</sup> Lao People's Revolutionary Party congress in March 1996 of the bust of Kaysone Phomvihane as a replacement for that of Ho Chi Minh, which the last

five congresses had displayed, was accompanied by the images of Marx and Lenin on the platform. This was a sign to reaffirm that the LPRP resolved to keep Socialism as the system, despite the more openness to market economy. There is no doubt that, “since the death of Kaysone Phomvihane, his personality had been used as a cult by the new regime as a part of the state’s ongoing attempt to invent national legitimating myths” (Evans, 1998a). The major activity associated with this cult has been the erection of memorial busts of Kaysone throughout the country, together with the later Kaysone museum and memorial museum in Vientiane. According to Evans (2002a), there were at least 150 statues of Kaysone produced in North Korea, and some of these were officially donated by the North Korean ambassador on behalf of Kim Jong Il, the new “great leader” of North Korea, on the day of Kaysone’s anniversary (Vientiane Mai, 15 December 1995).

Born as Nguyen Cai Song (Asia & Pacific Review, 1994:117) in December 1920 in Savannakhet Province, Kaysone Phomvihane was the leader of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party from 1955. Kaysone became an active revolutionary while studying in Ha Noi during the 1940s. In 1955 he was instrumental in setting up the LPRP at Samnuea in northern Laos, and in the years which followed he led communist forces against the Americans. And after this group completely got power in 1975 he served as the first Prime Minister of the Lao People's Democratic Republic until 1991 and then as President from 1991 until his death in 1992. “After his death in 1992, the Laotian government built an eight million dollar gold-plated museum in his honor, in Vientiane, partially funded by Vietnam (Former President Kaysone Phomvihane Memorial Museum), with a 30 foot, cast-iron, statue of Kaysone Phomvihane as a middle-aged pot-bellied gentleman in a tight-fitting suit in front of the building” (Owen Bennett, 2000). Besides his memorial museum, his image had been used on a bust, to be installed around the country, as Evans (2002a:163) comments. “Larger busts of Kaysone (1.2m) were installed at the provincial level, while the smaller (0.75m) busts were installed at the district level”. All of these efforts made by the LPRP were part of the celebration of the cult of Kaysone, a cult which, in fact, he had never encouraged (Kaysone Phomvihane Memorial, 2010).



**Figure 7:** Bust of Kaysone inside the Kaysone Phomvihane Memorial Museum KM6. Note the plaque reads: “Kaysone Phomvihane is in our thoughts whenever we carry out our duty.” In Lao: “ປະທານ ໂກສອນ ພິມວິຫານ ຍືນຍົງຢູ່ໃນພາລະກິດຂອງພວກເຮົາຕະຫຼອດໄປ

1920 - 1992”



**Figure 8:** The statue of Kaysone Phomvihane in front of Kaysone Phomvihane Museum in Vientiane



**Figure 9:** Images of Kaysone Phomvihane and That Luang appear in the Lao banknotes

The purposes behind the cult of Kaysone Phomvihane were not openly revealed. However, generally personality cults are most common in regimes with totalitarian systems of government, that seek to radically alter or transform society according to (supposedly) revolutionary new ideas. “Often, a single leader becomes associated with this revolutionary transformation, and comes to be treated as a benevolent “guide” for the nation, without whom the transformation to a better future cannot occur” (Wikipedia, 2010g). Examples of this emerged under classical socialist systems, such as the cults of Stalin and Mao Zedong in the Soviet Union and China, respectively. “Similar cults grew up around the party leaders in the other socialist countries during the Stalin period and even after Stalin’s death many features of the personality cult could be observed in countries where the classical socialist system lived on” (Kornai, 1992).

In Laos PDR, it took nearly two decades in order to have a personality cult of its first revolutionary leader. As part of the state control ideology, besides the memorial museum, Kaysone’s ‘philosophy’ was introduced around the country. His image appeared on the Lao PDR banknotes, and his busts and statues, in a very socialist style, have been displayed throughout the country. According to Evans (1998a) at least three full-length statues of Kaysone made in China were in Vieng Xai, the old revolutionary base area, at the museum in Vientiane, and at the museum in Savannakhet (his birthplace) after 1996. Kaysone statues and monuments are very visible in Lao politics. They might serve as a source of social, cultural and political memory, like other statues and monuments once did. To me, this is very much in conformity with the politics of the LPRP and with the social changes that Laos was facing at the time of the introduction of the Kaysone cult. This would suggest the possibility of factions in the party wanting to use the Kaysone cult to advance their own interests (Evans, 1998a).

However, things seemed to be moving so well in Lao society, and no doubt Kaysone was a very suitable candidate in the new Lao politics. Therefore, the hero and the national leader could represent an appeal for Laos’s identity and unity, as Prime Minister Khamtay Siphandone suggested on Kaysone’s 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary:

[...] Kaysone deserves the title of a great revolutionary and a nationalist [...] President Kaysone Phomvihane was the center of unity and unanimity within the Party and integrity of the entire people. He initiated the policy of renovation in our country [...] it was President Kaysone who laid the foundation for a theory of developing the socialism oriented people's democratic regime. He was an outstanding theoretician and man of action. (Vientiane Times, 15-21 December 1995)

It was very clear that, at this point in time, with the social and political changes elsewhere, Laos needed to move carefully concerning the nature of Lao society as well as in the international society. The Cold War, which ended after the collapse of the Soviet Union, had resulted in the return of monarchy in the neighboring country of Cambodia, which had long been a close comrade in the Indochina war, and the LPRP probably did not want to fall into the same path as Cambodia and thus needed a strong society. As Evans (1998a) suggests with the decline of full-blown socialist rhetoric following the shift to a post-socialist regime, the Lao government has increasingly emphasized Lao nationalism, and nationalism needs its heroic figures and myths. The actions and achievements of individuals rather than groups are much better stuff for myth making, and as a central architect of the new regime Kaysone can fulfill this role. And thus, "Kaysone's spirit needs to be propounded to the people as much as possible". Therefore, there is no doubt that, when the Lao government announced the construction of the Kaysone museum, it was designed to educate the young generations of Lao in building Laos as a country of peace, independence, democracy, unity and prosperity (Vnagency, 2002).

It is undeniable that the statues of Kaysone play a vital role in the politics of the Lao PDR to promote nationalism. "Communist nationalism produces its own orthodoxy in statuemanía and one which in some senses is driven by the opposite impulse of official nationalism" (Evans, 2002a). A very visible discovery is that Kaysone statues are very exceptional, as they are usually state guarded ones, rather than public monuments. As Evans notices, "none of the statues of Kaysone Phomvihane are in openly accessible public spaces. They are all in fenced-off areas or

at least in the semi-public boundaries of state offices”. To me, perhaps, the statues of Kaysone Phomvihane have been another attempt by the LPRP regime to remind its state personnel as well as its people not to overly enjoy the so-called “openness” of the country but to keep in mind the socialist idea that brought them what they have today with their ideal leader, Kaysone Phomvihane. It is very usual, when we hear Kaysone’s teaching or vision on Lao television, to be reminded of similar television campaigns in Thai society, where they are focused on the king and other royals. And it also does not surprise us to see one of the main busts of Kaysone in Vientiane municipality inscribed with the words “Kaysone Phomvihane is in our thoughts whenever we carry out our duty.” (Evans, 1998)

The Kayone Phomvihane statues are clearly part of a national iconography moving into the modernity of the country under the socialist ideology. They represent the national spirit and commitment and no doubt are the symbolic apparatus of nation-state building. Besides this, the statues of Kaysone also represent the pride of the Lao nation. The Lao leader is used as a figure to power people’s spirit, and perhaps it is also another means to embody the sense of *saksit*, in the same way as other old statues. The very latest story is that Lao athletes asked for blessings from his statues before they went to the SEA games competition in Vientiane recently, as well as thanked him when they received what they called the greatest success story of Laos in the history of the SEA Games. As Mr. Somsavat Lengsavad, standing Deputy Prime Minister and committee chairman of the SEA Games, said as he led the Lao athletes to pay respect to the statue of Kaysone at the Vientiane museum to ask for a blessing:

[...] “We wish for the spirit of the late president to protect our athletes and ensure the games are a success, just as the late president led us to success in the past,” (Vientiane Times, 01 December 2009)

After the SEA Games he led the athletes again to thank him (Kayone Phomvihane).



[...] “... the memory of the former president would always be in the hearts of Lao people and that memory encouraged everyone, especially the athletes, to win medals for their country,” (Vientiane Times, 28 December 2009).

While the teams went as well to the Fa Ngum and Setthathirath monuments, the state news only featured the story at the Kaysone museum. Kaysone Phomvihane is another attempt by the LPRP to create another history of Laos to suit its present needs by lifting a normal man up higher. In the past, this kind of action was reserved for royals. In doing this, statues and memorial monuments are very important, as they come into play in the public sphere. However, whether this attempt going to be a success or not, is another story. Undoubtedly, the middle-aged people of Laos know of Kaysone and the rest of the revolutionary leaders quite well. All the people that I met seemed to share the same feeling: that the current political system is the best choice for them, in contrast with the chaotic demonstrations they have seen in their neighbor country, Thailand. What I interestingly found is the sentence; “*If without them they would not have today*” came from those people I talked with whenever they talked about political opinions in the country. But all of this has happened a long time after the introduction of this Kaysone Phomvihane cult. Today, Kaysone Phomvihane’s name, as well as his philosophy, has been widely heard among Lao people through the various activities that the LPRP has been introducing, which resulted in the ridiculous thought by the young Lao that, no matter which statues there are in Laos, they are all of Kaysone Phomvihane.

It is an important phenomenon that the LPRP allows more and more signs of royalty in this socialist country. The government has denied that the new additions mean the promotion of monarchy in Laos. They show an attempt to find legitimacy by the LPRP. From a book issued by the Lao Ministry of Information and Culture, dated 2002, there were at least twelve projects that had been approved by the government, three projects of which were dedicated to the former Lao kings. In Vientiane alone there is plenty of activity of construction of monuments and parks, etc, dedicated to former Lao leaders, including the former kings of Laos, and the government has attached the names of these leaders to the new parks and monuments. Some of these

projects have received support from foreign government or international donors. The case of Kaysone Phomvihane is a way for the LPRP to legitimate itself - but why does it care to construct more and more symbols of monarchy, and to preserve of the existing monuments? In the next section I will try to explain more about the other monuments and statues in Laos as of today, and the future plans of the Lao government.

#### **4.2.2 King Fa Ngum statue**

The Lao PDR made a very surprising move in early 2003 when they unveiled a statue of King Fa Ngum in the capital. Unsurprisingly, this received many comments in the international press, as well as by Lao people living abroad who were in doubt about the real intentions of the Lao government. For the government, the Fa Ngum statue was part of the country's celebrations of the 650th anniversary of the Kingdom of Lan Xang, and they quickly denied any misinterpretation in international media that the Lao Government was promoting the return of the monarchy by building this statue of King Fa Ngum.

There were many versions of the history of Fa Ngum. Some have argued that Fa Ngum was just one among many other historical myths. However, based on many sources, we know that Fa Ngum did really exist in the history of Laos. Born in 1316, it was he who established the Lao kingdom of Lan Xang (Stuart-Fox, 2006). The very agreeable and well-known history of Fa Ngum is that he was brought up in the royal court of the great kingdom of Angkor, which then claimed an empire extending over much of modern Thailand, central and southern Lao, Cambodia and southern Vietnam. Fa Ngum married a Khmer princess and became a devout Theravada Buddhist. With Khmer forces he brought under his control large areas to Angkor's north and established the kingdom of Lan Xang ('a million elephants') with his capital at Luang Prabang (History of South East Asia: Laos, 2010).

His bronze statue, which weighs about 3.5 tonnes, was erected in the Pakpassak area of the city, the location where Fa Ngum declared the creation of Lan

Xang, in a very royal-like celebration in January, 2003. Perhaps this was a replay of the celebration of 46 years ago, when the city, under the RLG, erected the statue of King Setthathirath. This was 28 years after the 1975 erection of the statue of Fa Ngum in the capital of the Communist-Party-led state, and about a decade after the introduction of the Kaysone cult throughout the country. Obviously, the erection of the King Fa Ngum statue by the LPRP was just another attempt to legitimize itself in Lao society, in terms of the new political atmosphere. Since Lao joined the world community, and the freedom awarded to the people more and more as discussed earlier, it probably would not be able to prevent its citizen to see the outsider. The very agreed point was that, the world has no longer lived with strict socialist regime and closed state since the collapse of communism caused by a global force at the beginning of the 1990s, and in this regards, Laos itself also know this. At least with the young generation of Laos who could travel outside their country more and more would not happily practice state ideal. I do not mean to conclude that the Kaysone cult in Lao society has failed, but only that it is not very popular in the new modern Lao politics. Hence, the LPRP needed to turn back and rely on traditional nationalistic themes for its legitimacy. Evans (2009:31) suggests the reason for the creation of the Fa Ngum statue was as follows:

[...] The decision to erect the statue of King Fa Ngum was a high point of the reorientation of society toward older forms throughout the 1990s. [...] it was said that the nation needed symbols of national unity, and Fa Ngum, the first king of a unified Lan Xang kingdom, was considered a proper symbol of that unity.

It is true that Fa Ngum is one figure welcomed by all Lao factions as suitable to symbolize the Lao nation. In fact, according to Evans (2009), a Fa Ngum statue was one of the projects that the RLG had also been planning to erect since 1953, though that plan had come to nothing. When it became a reality under the LPRP in 2003, a long time after the revolution, that the LPRP was in a very secure position to construct this royal symbol. For the LPRP, this was perhaps a good time to move Laos into modernity by strengthening the spirit of nationalism and unity among its

multi-ethnic population. “The statue of King Fa Ngum is not only meant to be a symbol for the nation, but also to inspire courage among Lao people of all ethnic minorities for national development. Dreams of a newly civilized nation comparable with the ancient Kingdom are already afoot” (Vientiane Times, 24-26 December 2002). The state-controlled press claimed this move was welcomed by the people (Vientiane Times, 24-26 December 2002). It no doubt that this move has been welcomed by the people thus the LPRP probably found the right way when they decided to sponsor the erection of this Fa Ngum statue.

[...] Hundreds of people from around Vientiane municipality stood around the future public park to watch the spectacle. “It is a great day for the nation. King Fa Ngum rescued the country and brought peace, independence, unity and prosperity to all Lao people,” said a resident of Wattay Noi village.

[...] “The statue will be a symbol for the people and it will remain for younger generations to inherit and to learn about the history of King Fa Ngum,” said a monk from Dong Palep temple. (Vientiane Times, 24-26 December 2002)

The statue of Fa Ngum was meant to partake of the similar sense of *saksit* that was apparent when the Setthathirath statue was erected during the time of the RLG, when plenty of ritual and ceremony was organized by the state for him (Fa Ngum). It showed the very clear insight of the LPRP in its search for a new/old basis of legitimacy, in that the LPRP had moved back towards the older religiously sanctioned ritual forms, while explicit communist secular rituals were either abandoned or muted (Evans, 2009). This insight was already apparent at Kaysone’s death, when Buddhism was brought back into LPRP state rituals during his funeral. For King Fa Ngum statue, it seems the government was willing to use such “superstition” in order to attract more belief and trust for the new achievements that they hoped to make. In putting the Fa Ngum statue onto its base, high officials, accompanied by religious ritual, gave appropriate respect for the soul of King Fa Ngum.



**Figure 10:** The statue of King Fa Ngum in Vientiane

[...] The raising of the Fa Ngum statue onto its base began with a solemn ceremony led by sacred chanting from 25 senior monks from temples around

Vientiane municipality to bless the spirit of King Fa Ngum. The ceremony began with the lighting of candles led by Khekeo Soysaya, Deputy Minister of Information and Culture to worship Buddha and to invite the spirit of the great King Fa Ngum to allow the raising of the statue and protect the country.

[...] The monks led by Most Venerable Dr. Vichith Singharaj, President of the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organisation prayed Sootsay Nganh To blessings and good luck for King Fa Ngum to make his statue more sacred. The monks poured holy water into the dishes to dedicate to the spirit of King Fa Ngum. Four of the 25 monks were selected to pray *Soot Si Thit*, a religious chant in the four directions: east, west, north and south to banish evil spirit and allow Fa Ngum's spirit to stay with the statue of protect the country [...] (Vientiane Times, 24-26 December 2002)

Fa Ngum is honored because of his achievement of uniting the Lan Xang Kingdom, rescuing the country and bringing peace, independence, unity and prosperity for Lao people of all ethnic minorities. The erection of his statue was meant to show that the LPRP was following in his (Fa Ngum) steps and would eventually lead the way to a prosperous Laos similar to that of the Lan Xang Kingdom. This is similar to the case of Cambodia, where the Khmer are very proud of their past Kingdom and their former King Jayavarman VII, who they believe to have been the great king of the former empire. However, Fa Ngum of Laos probably even went far beyond Jayavarman VII of the Khmer. Not only is he the symbol of the nation, but he has been lifted higher than a mere human being and becoming a more *saksit* figure than Jayavarman VII, since the Lao people use his image in the “*yan*”<sup>26</sup> to help protect themselves, while this is not done in Cambodia with Jayavarman VII. Thus we can see that Fa Ngum has strongly influenced Lao society, especially the common people. There is no doubt that the main purpose of the construction of the statue of King Fa Ngum by the government was “a response to the provision of the

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<sup>26</sup> Magical or sacred paper or tattoos found in Laos and neighboring countries. This *yan* is mostly placed on houses as protection, and on shops to ensure the prosperity of business. They vary according to what is written in the *yan*.

party related to the new cultural vision”<sup>27</sup>. This, to my understanding, applies to both the change to a new political environment and the external respect/belief of the people toward King Fa Ngum. Hence, the Lao government had nothing to be afraid of in building the statue of this sacred King and hero, regardless of the different comments about whether the LPRP was trying to promote the return of the monarchy.

However, the irony of the reactivation of the royal figures by the LPRP, among Lao abroad and international observers, was indeed this question of whether the Lao government would possibly revive the monarchy after its failure to make a legitimate symbol of its revolutionary leader. As Pavin (2003), a Lao academic in Bangkok, observed:

[...] thus, that the communist government of Laos now allows royal symbolism and promotes monarchical sentiment can be considered as a re-traditionalization of the totalitarian regime to garner political security. The Lao government is urgently in need of new symbols for its legitimacy after long years of authoritarianism... (cited in Askew, Marc, William S. Logan & Colin Long, 2007:206)

The government quickly denied this interpretation. Dr. Souneth Phothisane, Director of the National Museum, said that the point of the statue was not to promote a monarchical regime but to celebrate the true spirit of Laos.

[...] “We don't mean to promote the monarchy. We built the Fa Ngum statue to remind us of the spirit of patriotism and courage that Lao people have shown against various enemies. It is an expression of the love for the

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<sup>27</sup> This is the first purpose of the construction of new statues in the Lao PDR. All together, there are five main purposes - the other four are:

- to support the main direction of the Ministry of Information and Culture to have the statue of (Lao) ancestors as the reflection
- to remind the people of Laos of the devoting legacy, not giving up fighting of the leaders and people in the periods
- to serve as tourist attractions and relaxing places for locals and foreigners
- to be places for organizing activities and ceremonies on national days and family celebrations (for example: wedding ceremonies) [Note: this is a translation from Lao language: Ministry of Information and Culture. *Fa Ngum: The founder of Lan Xang Kingdom*. Vientiane: 2002.]

beautiful land that Fa Ngum was born into and united bringing peace, independence, unity and prosperity to the people,” he said. (Vientiane Times, January 14-16, 2003)

However, Pavin may have been right in some respects. It is very clear that the LPRP indeed was searching for a new symbol of Laos. While the former President Kaysone Phomvihane was remembered for his revolutionary activities; “King Fa Ngum would not be remembered in the same way, as he was from a different historical era and was a different sort of symbol for the Lao people,” Souneth Phothisane continues. It should be considered another new promotion of nationalism by the new regime, rather than as a promotion of the monarchy. The LPRP’s institution was, in fact, rather strong at the moment when the statue was allowed to erect, and the monarchy had already been absent from Lao society for more than three decades; and it seemed to me that it no longer aroused any interest among the people<sup>28</sup>. And we can clearly see that Fa Ngum and the other royal statues that the LPRP plans to erect (see: 4.2.4.2) are all statues of ancient Kings with no connection to the last royal family of Laos.

#### **4.2.3 Prince Souphanouvong statue**

Another noticeable monument and statue erected in Laos after 1975 is the statue of Prince Souphanouvong. The Prince Souphanouvong museum, as well as his monument, were established after the statues of Kaysone – only after Souphanouvong’s death in January 1995. Currently there is one museum in Vientiane dedicated to the Prince, and one monument with his statue in his birthplace in Luang Prabang. Even though Souphanouvong was of the royal blood, his monument came without the surprise that attended the erection of the King Fa Ngum statue. This is probably because he was pro-communist, and was the first president of the Lao PDR.

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<sup>28</sup> In most of my interviews with young and old Lao, they were no longer interested in the system of monarchy.





**Figure 11:** The statue of Prince Souphanouvong in Luang Prabang

Souphanouvong was born on July 13, 1909 in Luang Prabang of Prince Boun Khong, the regent. Souphanouvong was nicknamed as (sic) “Red Prince” by foreign observers because of his attraction to radical politics when studying engineering in France in the 1930s. He joined the Free Laos movement after returning to the land-locked country in 1938, and was forced to live in exile in Thailand between 1946 to (sic) 1949. “In 1950 he became a founding member of the Pathet Lao, the communist party which played a major role in the fight for independence from France in 1954 and went on to oppose post-independence right wing regimes until Laos went communist in 1975” (Laos honours “Red Prince”, 2009). However, Souphanouvong was in fact a figurehead leader of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, and so his position as the first President of the Lao People's Democratic Republic, upon its successful seizure of power in 1975, was largely ceremonial. The strongman of the Lao PDR was actually Kaysone Phomvihane.

It took ten years since his death for a museum dedicated to him to be opened by the Lao regime,<sup>29</sup> and fourteen years to have his monument and statue erected in Luang Prabang in 2009. The LPRP has promoted no Prince Souphanouvong *cult* of personality like that of Kaysone Phomvihane, and this is no doubt the reason for the tardy establishment of his monument and statue. Still, Prince Souphanouvong was an important figure in the LPRP, at least among some of its top leaders. Among these his name and popularity are still used to promote both socialism and nationalism in the political arena. Born as royalty, his character was of value for the group to gain support:

[...] “it was rare that a person who was born into a royal family would join revolutionary activities. President Souphanouvong truly lived the revolutionary principles of patience, reason, responsibility and bravery,” Mr. Khamchan, 45, a resident of Naviengkham village, Luang Prabang. (Vientiane Times, 13 July 2009)

<sup>29</sup> The formal document that I received from the officer in Prince Souphanouvong museum in Vientiane during my research shows that the political bureau of the LPRP issued a paper N. 196/ກມສພ dated 19/04/2005 to establish the museum of Prince Souphanouvong.

The erection of the statue of Prince Souphanouvong probably answered the lack-of-confidence question, “Did Kaysone make the revolution all on his own?” which arose during the time the LPRP decided to build the museum of Kaysone Phomvihane. The government would probably not give the answer if Prince Souphanouvong is another different symbol for the Lao people.

The 5.4 meter tall memorial statue of Prince Souphanouvong was unveiled by Vice President Bounhang Vorachit, Standing Deputy Prime Minister Somsavat Lengsavad, ministers, deputy ministers, provincial governors from northern provinces, military officers, students and local people, totaling 2,000 on 7 July 2009. The 3-tonne bronze statue was casted (sic) in China, and depicted President Souphanouvong in a standing position and applauding, in commemoration of his role in the revolution and, subsequently, the peace and development of Laos (Lao News Agency, 2009).

Portrayed in socialist clothes, the statue of Souphanouvong is part of LPRP’s attempt to promote nationalism and heroic sentiment among the Lao citizens. As expressed by the Governor of Luang Prabang, Mr. Bounheuang Doungprachanh “[...] these would become a symbol of solidarity and unity amongst the Lao people of all ethnicities and will become a significant place for Lao people and a historical place for new generations to study the revolutionary principles of President Souphanouvong” (Lao News Agency, 2009)

The erection of the Prince Souphanouvong statue in Luang Prabang occurred as part of state programs to mark his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday (July 1909), which included Buddhist ceremonies. These programs were held in big towns throughout Laos. In Luang Prabang 200 monks were invited to join the alms given. The government also renamed an avenue in Vientiane after him, as well as a university in Luang Prabang, and erected another Souphanouvong memorial in Vientiane.

If we look at the state-controlled press, we are informed that Prince Souphanouvong still receives love from the people in general, especially from the

Luang Prabang people (Vientiane Times, 13 July 2009). Lao people still address him as “Chao<sup>30</sup>”, despite the fact that he was a President of a communist state. His reputation is acceptable to the Lao majority, and it is very clear that the LPRP had no hesitation in lifting up Souphanouvong as a national hero, and I think this would probably be a response to any request of the Lao people themselves, and not only to satisfy the Lao leaders. But were all the revolutionary leaders to be memorialized with a statue? In the next section, I will discuss other monuments and statues built by the state, and the new plan of the Lao government to build more monuments and statues throughout the country.

#### **4.2.4 Other monuments and statues**

Besides the main monuments and statues that I have discussed above, there have been many other monuments and statues erected by the LPRP government since their coming into power in 1975. Since the country had gone through various wars it is obvious that there might be many monuments and statues dedicated to them. Two noticeable monuments that I will discuss are the Lao-Vietnamese Friendship Monument and the Unknown Soldier’s Monument.

##### **4.2.4.1 The Lao-Vietnamese Friendship Monument and the Unknown Soldier’s Monument**

It cannot be denied that the relationship between Laos and Viet Nam is very strong, in terms of politics, diplomacy, and economy, as well as grassroots cooperation. The two governments use the term “special relations<sup>31</sup>” whenever they talk about the relation between Laos and Viet Nam. Colonialism, war, and revolution in this region was definitely the starting point of such a special relationship between peoples in Indochina, which also is applied to Cambodia’s relationship with Viet Nam. In Laos particularly, the struggle for independence and the successful revolution

<sup>30</sup> “Chao” is equivalent to “Prince” in English.

<sup>31</sup> In Lao, when talking about the relationship between Laos and Viet Nam, it always referred to as: “ຄວາມສາມັກຄີພິເສດລະຫວ່າງ ສອງພັກ, ສອງລັດ ແລະປະຊາຊົນສອງຊາດ”, literally meaning “special relations between the two parties, two states and people of the two nations”.

back in 1975 of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) had been greatly bound up with Viet Nam. This was very clear when the twenty-five year Lao-Vietnamese Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation was signed by both countries in July 1977. According to Brown, MacAlister & Joseph J. Zasloff (1994), "the treaty legitimized the stationing of Vietnamese army troops in Laos for its protection against hostile or counter revolutionary neighbors. Another element of cooperation involved hundreds of Vietnamese advisers who mentored their Laotian counterparts in virtually all the ministries in Vientiane. Hundreds of LPRP stalwarts and technicians studied in institutes of Marxism-Leninism or technical schools in Hanoi".

Historically, like Cambodia, Laos had been pushed and pulled by its neighboring countries, Thailand and Viet Nam both of which sought hegemony in the region until the presence of the French in late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Vietnamese influence on Cambodia and Laos was advocated in the name of Indochinese solidarity. Since Laos still practices a form of socialism, and because of its geography, the close relationship with Viet Nam probably was very much needed to maintain the security of the regime. Today, Viet Nam's influence on Laos is determined by economic assistance and ideology as well as by geographical and historical proximity. The two nations fit together, as the leaders liked to say, "like lips and teeth". Vietnam provided landlocked Laos a route to the sea, and the mountainous region of eastern Laos provided Vietnam a forward strategic position for challenging Thai hegemony in the Mekong Valley (Brown, MacAlister & Joseph J. Zasloff, 1994). "However, despite the special relation with Viet Nam, Laos started to implement its New Economic Mechanism and opened the door to rapprochement with Thailand and China at some expense to its special dependence from Vietnam". Today, flocks of Chinese businessmen can be seen in Laos, and the modern Thai culture has also influenced the young Lao. In my interview with a Lao historian in Vientiane, he explained that today Thai pop culture has been welcomed by the young Lao and the Lao government welcomed this culture due to its open policy, and as a member of ASEAN, but in term of politics and the philosophy of the state, Viet Nam is still an important partner for Laos.

The special relation between Laos and Viet Nam has been reflected in various activities. Memorial monuments constructed by the LPRP since it came to power in 1975 were very significant in promoting the political aspects of this relationship. There are several monuments and statues built by the Lao government to commemorate the friendship between two countries, in cities throughout the country. Those memorial monuments have been named ‘memorials to voluntary Vietnamese soldiers’, and mostly depict statues of Vietnamese and Lao soldiers standing together, as in the cases of the Lao-Vietnamese soldier memorial monument at Muang Phin in Savannakhet Province and the one at Phonsavan in Xiangkhouang province. Just like other statues in Laos erected since 1975, the Lao-Vietnamese soldier memorial monuments were built in very socialist style, and the central government, as well as the local authorities, paid very much attention to these monuments. Homepage ceremonies to the monument have always been attended by the provincial governors every year, or at least on every special celebration, such as in October last year when Laos marked the 60th anniversary of “special relations” between the parties, states and peoples of Lao and Viet Nam (Lao Phatthana Daily, 30 October 2009).

This special relation between Laos and Viet Nam, particularly depicted in monuments and statues, also is apparent in other close cooperation between the two state museums of Kaysone Phomvihane in Vientiane and the Ho Chi Minh Museum (HCMM) in Hanoi. According to the Viet Nam News Agency (2002), the Ho Chi Minh Museum (HCMM), at the request of the LPRP politburo, had provided both financial and technical assistance in building the Kaysone Museum. The Kaysone Phomvihane Museum has become another means of the Central Committee of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party to control and be responsible for any state construction related to monuments and statues around the country to serve the political purposes of the party.

The Unknown Soldiers' Monument in Vientiane is another main channel for promoting the government's ideal of nationalism and carrying out its obligation to protect the country and to develop it. It is obvious that the LPRP has given importance to the Lao People's Army (LPA) as the main force for achieving its revolutionary

successes since the establishment of the LPA on January 20, 1949, by the late President Kaysone Phomvihane in the former revolutionary stronghold of Huaphan province. The first Unknown Soldier's Monument was constructed in 1978 to mark National Day on December 2. However, when the government decided to replace the old monument and build a new one. The significance of this is twofold. Firstly, there is no doubt that the LPRP was showing its recognition of the sacrifice of the LPA for the freedom of the country. Secondly, this was another sign showing the progress and growth of the city under the leadership of the LPRP, as the government claimed the new unknown soldiers' monument was built to reduce traffic congestion around the That Luang esplanade and removed the old one.



**Figure 12:** The Unknown Soldiers' Monument in Vientiane

Whatever the reasons are, the new Unknown Soldiers' Monument in Vientiane, which cost around 3 billion kip<sup>32</sup>, will also serve another purpose of revolutionary ideology, as recalled by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of National Defense, Lieutenant General Duangchay Phichit (mofa.gov.la, 2009):

[...] "The monument will be a place where Party and government officials, the armed forces, all ethnic groups and foreign visitors can lay wreaths to commemorate the soldiers who sacrificed their lives for the cause of national liberation and protection, [...] today the entire Party, armed forces and Lao people of all ethnic groups as well as Vientiane residents feel very pleased to know that the great deeds of revolutionary combatants who fulfilled their duties and laid down their lives for the national cause have been recognized through the monument."

The Unknown Soldier's Monument was to play another visible ideological role in Lao society. Its official unveiling was attended by both Lao President Choummaly Sayasone and Prime Minister Bouasone Bouphavanh, and was part of activities to mark the 60th Anniversary of Lao People's Army Day on January 20, 2009. For the LPRP, the LPA is their important force, the one that helped free the Lao people from the yoke of foreign domination and defended the country as well as significantly helped to develop the country. Thus, for it to be given respect and public awareness is a must.

#### 4.2.4.2 Planned monuments and statues in Lao PDR

The erection of the King Fa Ngum monument as part of the promotion of national heroes by the new regime has led to many other monuments and statues planned to be constructed by the LPRP throughout the country. In 2002, the Ministry of Information and Culture had proposed to build monuments and statues of 12 Lao heroes, including: 1. King Fa Ngum, 2. King Anouvong, 3. King Souriyavongsa; revolutionary leaders including 4. Kaysone Phomvihane, 5/6. Prince Souphanouvong

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<sup>32</sup> Approximately US\$360,000.



(in Vientiane and Luang Prabang), 7. Phoumi Vongvichit, 8. Phoun Sipaseut, 9. Sisomphon Lovansay; and the local leaders 10. Sithum Kummadam, 11. Phaiduanglor Blueyav, and 12. Thav Tu. The strategy of promoting nationalism and national unity can be seen here, as this proposal included the local leader Phaiduanglor Blueyav, who is Hmong<sup>33</sup>.

To me the six years between the erection of the Fa Ngum statue in early 2003 and the erection of the Prince Souphanouvong statue in Luang Prabang in late 2009 was probably a wait-and-see game that the LPRP engaged in after starting to introduce royal iconography, after a longer period since the introduction of the Kaysone Phomvihane *cult*. After it was clear that the erection of the King Fa Ngum statue was welcomed by all factions, the government had no hesitation to build more monuments, and now they no longer more worry about royal iconography. In July 2008 the Lao government approved a plan to build more public parks in remembrance of more royal figures such as King Setthathirath, King Souriyavongsa, and King Anouvong, and also a memorial site for Prince Phetsarath (Vientiane Times, 29 July 2008). Clearly, in the LPRP's search for new legitimacy, it has created a new sense of nationalism and has attached national pride to national heroes other than their own present and former leaders. Hence, all the monuments and statues built by the LPRP do not serve only to celebrate the new achievements of the government, but also promote the ideology of patriotism, unity and national pride. As Vientiane Information and Culture Department Deputy Director Soutan Phonsongkham claimed:

[...] "the establishment of the memorials would remind people of what it meant to be citizens of the Lao PDR and the importance of Lao independence."

[...] "These people were well known in Lao history as they were the ones who influenced movements to free Laos from the occupation of foreign

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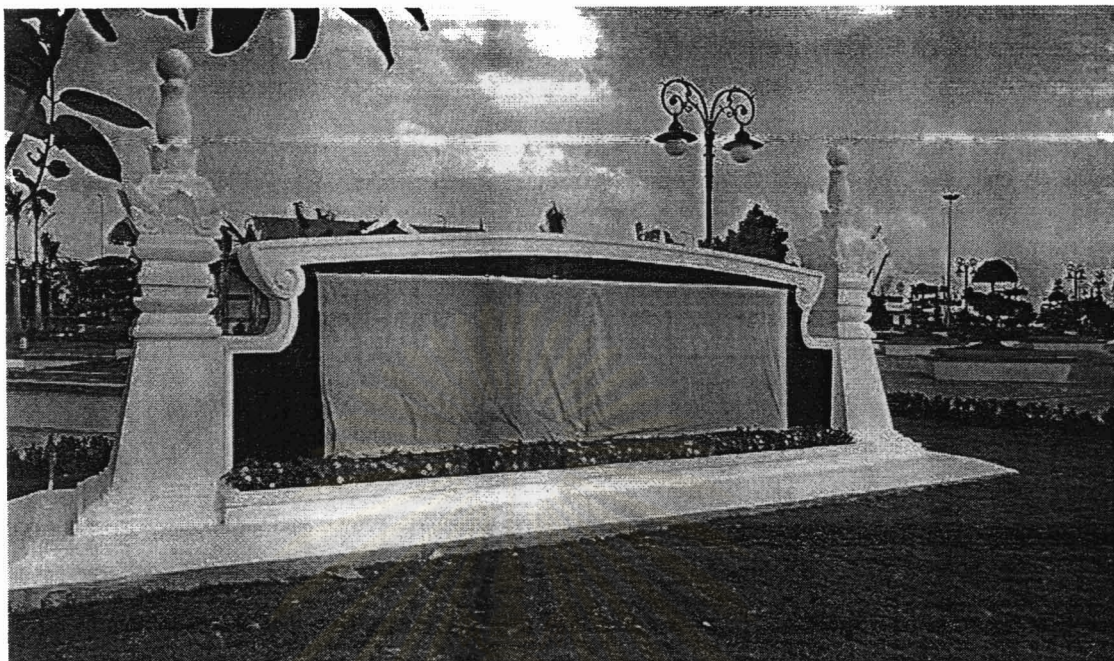
<sup>33</sup> One should note that the special importance of this, as many Hmong fought under the direction of the American CIA and the RLG against the Pathet Lao, and some of these continued to oppose the government militarily after 1975, although that seems to be finished now.

countries, without these people, Laos would not be as it is today” (Vientiane Times, 29 July 2008)

Since Vientiane is growing, more plans and city decorations are very much needed to refresh this socialist capital. This is perhaps in accordance with Maurice Agulhon’s (1978) remarks “that statuemanía belongs entirely to the history of the *décor urbain*. It is in effect the expanding and enlarged city, its opening out in the nineteenth century which multiplied the places, the boulevards, the perspectives and the promenades, and which called on monuments to fill up these spaces”. Since Vientiane will celebrate its 450th year in 2010, having become a capital city when King Setthathirath moved in, the government has planned numerous projects to celebrate the event. At least 21 special projects have been embarked on by the Vientiane authorities to mark the event (Vientiane Times, 30 January 2010). These projects include the new park in honor of its founder, King Setthathirath, already in place in front of the National Assembly building in Vientiane, which is not far from his statue erected by the RLG and the That Luang stupa built by the King himself.

Another outstanding public space is King Anouvong Park, which is located on the Mekong riverbank in Vientiane, which includes his statue, is to commemorate the last king of the Vientiane dynasty (Vientiane Times, 09 January 2010). Despite political controversy related to King Anouvong between Laos and Thailand, it is very obvious that in Laos Chao Anouvong is considered an outstanding national hero. The newspaper article continues:

... [King Anouvong] who led his people nationwide to fight against Siamese feudal dominance in 1827-1828. Though the uprising was quelled, the movement formed a significant page in Lao history in the cause of national defense, and has ever since been remembered as such. This park will be a place for both Lao and foreign visitors to pay homage to the memory of the late king. (Vientiane Times, 09 January 2010)



**Figure 13:** The newly King Setthathirath Park in Vientiane



**Figure 14:** The newly King Setthathirath Park in Vientiane

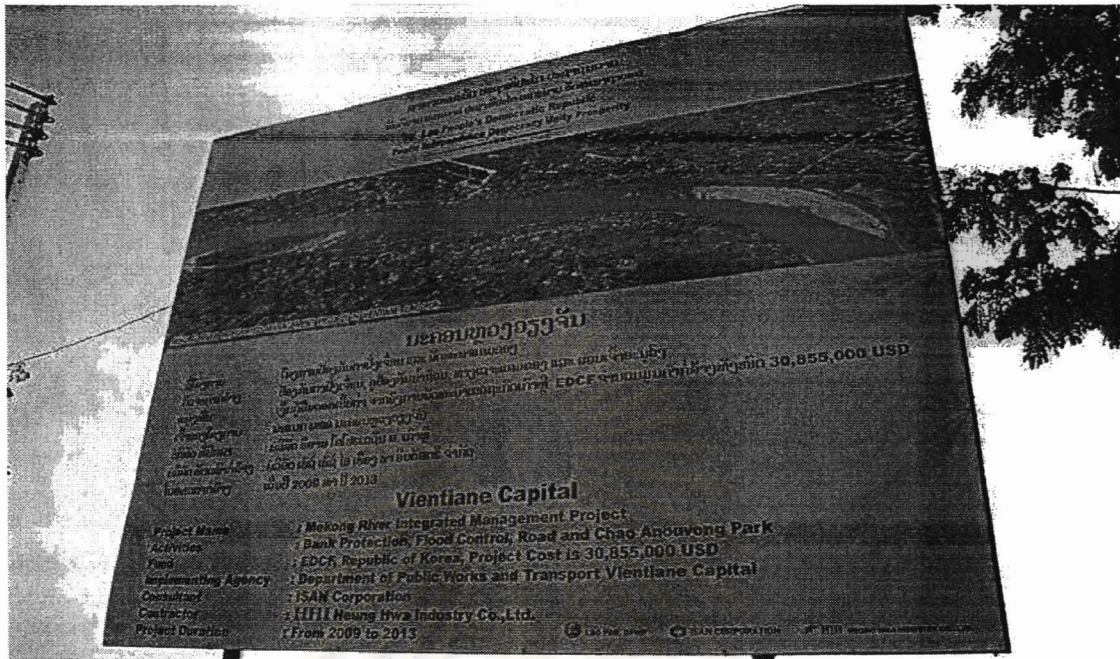


Figure 15: The billboard displays the planned King Anouvong Park in Vientiane



Figure 16: The area planned King Anouvong Park in Vientiane

According to Mr. Soutan, the government will construct a memorial site for Prince Phetsarath inside a former youth garden near Hor Kham, the Presidential Palace in Vientiane. The location is very contentious, as the LPRP has allowed another royal icon to be located in the communist presidential palace itself. However, Soutan explained that the location was chosen because it marked the spot where Prince Phetsarath and his Lao Issara government members announced the independence of Laos from foreign occupation in 1945. While Laos does not celebrate this as an 'independence day', but rather celebrates national day on December 02, 1975, the memorial site of Prince Phetsarath is to commemorate his efforts for Lao independence. This has emerged as another big topic for discussion in the new Lao politics.

From all the discussion above, we can see that the "statuemanía" that the Lao government has attached importance to reveals very clearly what is behind the phenomenon in Laos. Public monuments and statues have been a common nationalist form of propaganda in Thai society since the Pibulsonggram administration during the 1940s, and in Cambodian society as well, as the recent movement to build some monuments and statues in Cambodia, but in the case of the Lao PDR it is very noticeable that the government of a so-called communist state is now paying more attention, and give priority, to imposing statues of royal icons. In the next section I will try to analyze how these monuments and statues really matter in the politics of the Lao PDR.

ศูนย์วิทยทรัพยากร  
จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

#### 5.1 Analysis

To understand the exact purposes behind all these recent developments in Laos is not an easy task, especially when there is limitation of media as well as of freedom of speech in Laos. Even though we agree that the Lao government has been providing toleration and a certain amount of freedom to its people in recent years, in general the Lao people show little interest in politics and as well as sharing point of views. However, we can overcome these challenges. Let me try to analyze the purposes of building these monuments and statues in the Lao PDR from the findings discussed earlier.

To date, the LPRP has controlled Laos for almost 35 years through a one party system. Recent development in the country has provided the LPRP a golden opportunity to control it for decades more. In order to maintain this status quo, as well as to build a strong Laos nation, Laos needs to have a strong nationalism and national unity. The Lao PDR had been maintaining its communist ideology since the revolution, but the regime has faced a lot of challenges in that the ideology has not had much power among the people. However, the LPRP has been more tolerant than some communist groups throughout the world (perhaps to my understandings) since it first stepped into power, and the current development under the regime is evidence enough of the preparation of the regime for participation in the modern world. Despite reports of the killing of members of the former regime, including members of the royal families of the former Kingdom of Laos, the LPRP has never turned to mass killing, as the communist Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, who came to power only eight months prior to the Pathet Lao, did.

This group (the Pathet Lao) has kept as much as possible its national identity and unity, and perhaps follows the old regime's track in its manner of building nationalism and national unity. To state an example, only their different ideology has forced the regime to change some parts of its national anthem, but it has kept the same melody. This was not the case in any other country in which a communist group has come to power. It is interesting that, at the end of the national anthem, the words are: "...*We (Lao people) resolved to struggle for victory, in order to lead the nation to prosperity*<sup>34</sup>" In other words, this national anthem of the new regime advocates building nationalism in the country, calls for support from the people as well as the rightness of the revolution and certainly trust in the government to build prosperity in the country. Furthermore, the public structures, such as the monuments and statues built before 1975, have been transformed to serve the new political atmosphere, in addition to the many other new monuments and statues which have been built by the new regime. All have been used to increase nationalistic sentiments.

Why are monuments and statues important? "The conceptual ideas of monuments and statues built in any state are intended to convey the hegemonic view of those nations and apparently serve the state's ideology. Each age re-creates the past with images that suit its present needs. As the upsurge of nationalism in the nineteenth-century Europe began to rewrite the course of history, memorial monuments also came into play in the public sphere, as history events were re-interpreted and new political leaders were turned into objects of commemorative veneration" (Hutton, 1993). "Memorial imagery lends definition to popular conception of the emerging nation-state and become an integral part of national history and public memory" (Hutton, 1993). Laos is no exception. As Evans (2002) noticed, "the statues of Kaysone spread throughout Laos are designed to represent the nation and the party, and in particular their homology or identity". And the new infrastructures as well as the statuemanía policy implemented by the LPRP recently have indicated the purposes to inculcate its people to believe in the new regime in dealing with the new era but building on its core socialist ideology. So, in order to

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<sup>34</sup> In Lao it reads: ຕັດສິນໃຈສູ້ຊິງເອົາໄຊ ພາຊາດກ້າວໄປສູ່ຄວາມວັດທະນາ

achieve this aim, a nationwide campaign of nationalism should be carried on. Hence, a foundation of “common history”, as a theory of nation suggested by Renan (1996) should have been presented. With all of these elements that led to the rise of national iconographies in Laos which followed by the mushrooming growth of monuments and statues all dedicated to those heroes in a frame of common history, has been accepted by all Laos. And now let us see how monuments and statues work in this country.

### 5.1.1 Monuments and statues before 1975

The monuments and statues built before the revolutionary period became key icons of discussion when talking about Lao politics in the new era. This is because the statues of two kings, Setthathirath and Sisavang Vong, were not pulled down, although the two statues did not have any political benefits for the new regime until recently. Setthathirath’s statue has been sitting in front of That Luang for 35 years now, ever since the LPRP came into power, yet the statue did not receive any state celebration, unlike the other statues built after 1975. However, Setthathirath’s name has been re-emphasized since That Luang, a mega Buddhist stupa built by him, was chosen as a state symbol of the regime. It is not a coincidence, as the LPRP then decided to replace the hammer and sickle with That Luang. However, although Laos has turned back to its past for its nationalist propaganda, one should understand that it probably won’t turn back to its recent past. This is shown in the case of the statues of King Sisavang Vong in both Vientiane and in Luang Prabang, which do not receive the same attention as the Setthathirath one. As mentioned, they remained because they were donations from the former USSR, once the main supporter of the Lao PRD.

We see very clearly why Patuxay was not selected to be the national symbol instead of That Luang. Since Patuxay was built during the 1960s, it has received a very similar fate as of the King Sisavang Vong statue. Besides serving as a tourist spot, and even though some restoration had been done and some local people enjoy jogging there in the evening, Patuxay is a very simple structure built in dedication to those who fought in the struggle for independence from France. Since the LPRP does



not celebrate the day of independence from France, it is true that Patuxay could not serve the objectives of the new regime. In this regard, we can see that the new search for legitimacy through the promotion of nationalism and national heroes through monuments and statues by the LPRP needed to use someone or something that does not have negative political implications for them. These may refer to the former RLG members as well as the RLG's infrastructures and achievements.

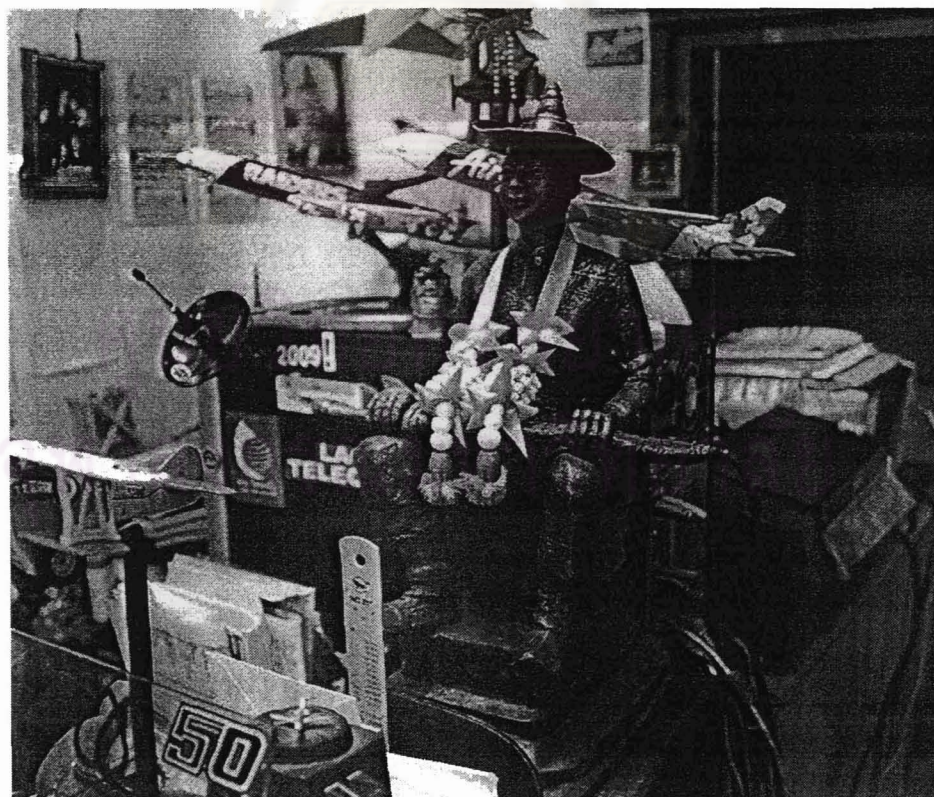
Since its adoption as the national symbol, the image of That Luang has appeared everywhere in the Lao administration. The government has promoted the image of the monument both inside and outside the country, and today it has become a must-see place when visiting Vientiane. The That Luang Festival has become the biggest festival in the country once again, as it was during the RLG period. The LPRP was at first reluctant to promote this festival. This shows that the government today pays more attention to old Lao culture, tradition and religion (Buddhism) after having long promoted Marxism-Leninism. At the same time, ordinary people pay more and more homage to the founder of That Luang, King Setthathirath - the small models of his statue that the Lao put in their houses or shops, in a similar pattern to the royal cult of Thailand, are indications of this. Hence, the government so far seems to be on the right track, and does not hesitate to use this method to gain more popularity. Since the promotion of the That Luang monument has been welcomed by the people, its founder's profile has also been raised, and the LPRP has given more and more honor to this King by given his name to various public infrastructures, such as the huge park in Vientiane dedicated to King Setthathirath. Do not forget that the capital of the LPRP today was then the first capital of Setthathirath 450 years ago, hence, the achievements of Setthathirath, is a solid key to propagandize the achievements of the regime. Thus both, the That Luang and the Setthathirath himself could have messages between people and the government very well.

### **5.1.2 Monuments and statues after 1975**

The first secular monument built after 1975 was that of Kaysone Phomvihane, the top leader of the LPRP. In a communist vision, it is clear that the LPRP had tried

to introduce the cult of its leader through busts and statues, aiming at promoting a spirit of a solid leader similar to that of Viet Nam or North Korea. As Evans (2002) suggests,

[...] the Kaysone statues represent the most intensive episode of statue building ever in Lao history. Their proliferation is connected directly to the LPRP's inheritance of a particular type of communist iconography, combined with the need of the party to implant signs of its legitimacy and control of Lao territory by using icons of its main political figure. It is also part of a more general attempt to construct a nationalist iconography. The busts and statues of Kaysone Phomvihane that have been placing countrywide indicated an undisguised attempt to symbolize national unity by this regime.



**Figure 17:** The Model of King Setthathirath has been made for the people to pay homage

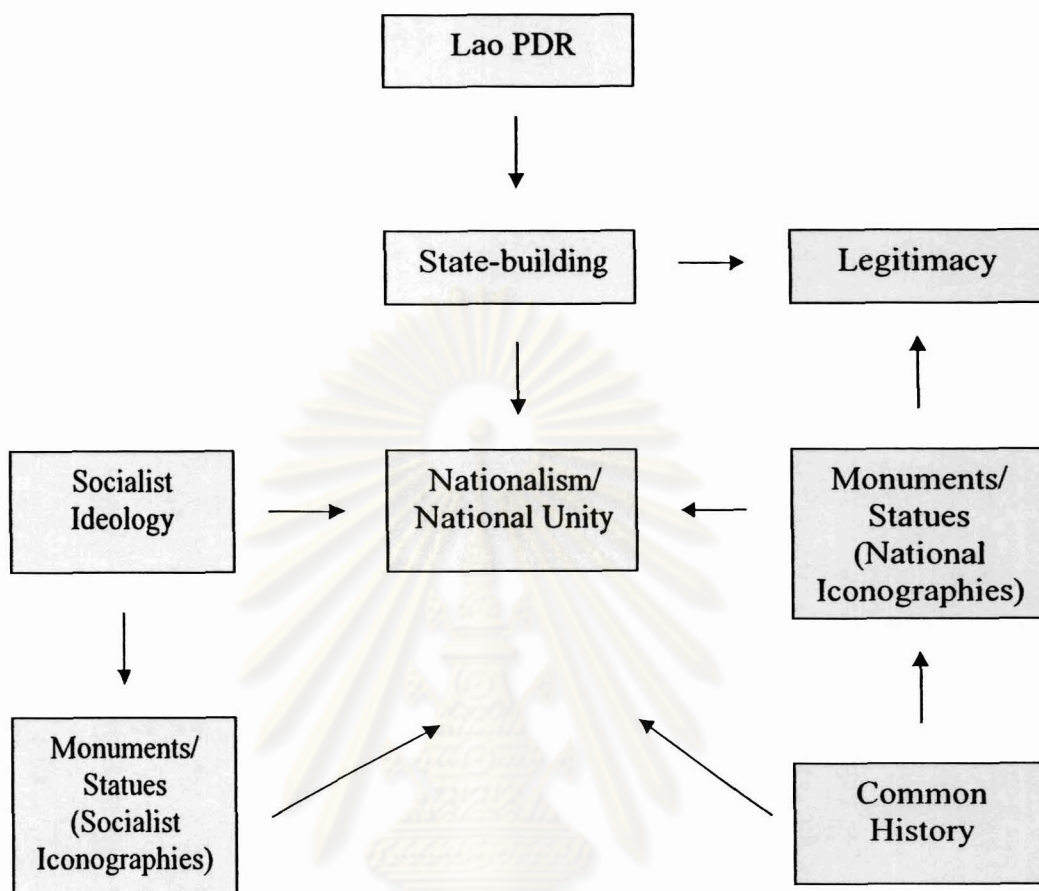


**Figure 18:** The *yan* features the image of King Fa Ngum in a Lao's house

However, the introduction of this personality cult of the revolutionary leader in Laos started only after the decline of communism, whereas in other countries it started during the moment when it was flourishing. Hence, the Kaysone cult may not be working in the country; or perhaps it is just that the Kaysone cult alone cannot help much to assure the security of the LPRP, especially since it has adopted the New Economic Mechanism (NRM).

If this is the case, the renowned erection of the King Fa Ngum by this regime in the early 2000s is no more blurred. While the “non-common” history could not lead to successful nationalism, then the “accepted by all” history should be moved in. For the time being, as far as I understand, the LPRP maintains political control, albeit with a new economic policy, it thus decides to add former history to its accomplishment. In this regard, we could see the Lao government immediately denied the report that Fa Ngum statue erection was an attempt of the LPRP regime to revive the monarchy. But as affirmed by the government, the erection was a part of celebration the true spirit of Laos which is a “common history” that should be agreed by all. It is no objection that everyone agrees that Fa Ngum was a great King in Lao history, so that the LPRP has been clever enough to begin their new campaign for political legitimacy with Fa Ngum. While Fa Ngum symbolizes the ‘true spirit of Laos’, Kaysone Phomvihane can continue to work as the true spirit of revolution, for this new phase of the Lao history. Hence, the government has no hesitation to back up Fa Ngum when everyone accepts him (Fa Ngum). There was no surprise at all when the LPRP celebrate a biggest ceremony unveiling the statue of King Fa Ngum back in January 2003 which was attended by all high ranking officials of the LPRP. Today the King Fa Ngum statue receives the homage of both the people and the state. In the recent SEA Games in Vientiane, an actor played the role of King Fa Ngum in the opening ceremony, and all Lao athletes, as well as the organizing committee, had to go to the King Fa Ngum statue to ask for blessings before the game, as well as after the games to thank him.

Thus, to achieve the goal of gaining support from the people, revolutionary nationalism and national unity have to work with both revolutionary iconography and national iconography. That is why, although the government plans to build more monuments and statues in commemoration to more Kings, such as Setthathirath, Souriyavongsa, Anouvong and so on, monuments dedicated to revolutionary leaders need to be constructed as well. The newly erected of Prince Souphanouvong statue and plans for others are examples of this. The chart below describes how monuments and statues work in Laos.



## 5.2 Conclusion

Monuments and statues constructed in Laos today have been used as a means to inculcate the Lao people to believe in the regime. Some of the monuments and statues built before 1975 may not serve quite the same functions for the current regime as the newly erected ones do, but they have been carefully given roles that fit into the new political and economic environment. Both new and old monuments and statues play strong roles in building nationalism and state identity, and have gained the support of the Lao people, and thus have given more legitimacy to the LPRP.

In trying to build their nation, the LPRP has had to face choices of following the “political structure or institution” or the “imagined community”.<sup>35</sup> Laos has been under a communist regime since 1975, with one political party controlling the country, and the regime has maintained a strong political structure and institution. And it was obvious that the regime chose this concept. To implement this, Laos needs to have a strong sense of nationalism as well as the ideal of strong state’s representative. It is thus, when the first start of Kaysone cult after his death, the government decided quickly to introduce this core leader aimed at refilling socialist ideology through the bust and statues that the government paid its cost to erect countrywide. The busts of Kaysone and his monuments and statues are only the things left that the new regime could depend on and for the people to see whenever there is talk about revolution as well as the state’s ideal policy. This is perhaps the reason why the regime needs to put the phrase “*Kaysone Phomvihane is in our thoughts whenever we carry out our duty*” at the base of his bust. This is a straightforward and big attempt of the LPRP to raise the revolutionary leader as a mean of nationalism and national unity.

When appeals to nationalism or national unity do not imply a “common history”, their success is limited. Then the choice of the “imagined community” was the only last choice. “In the modern nation state, the impact of rapid economic change, social and scientific discoveries together with the development of mass communication drove a harsh wedge towards the conventional understanding of a political entity. A modern nation can be formulated in many directions and dimension” (Wong, 2006). Hence, nationalism and national unity needs to reflect every sector, and include a common history. This was clearly what the LPRP recalled when they promoted the That Luang monument as the national symbol, followed by the erection of the King Fa Ngum statue and the others statues throughout its capital.

The nationalism and national unity as part of a common history need to be accepted by all in order to achieve its goal. Thus, Lao needs to select specific

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<sup>35</sup> “Imagined community” is a concept of the nation, originating with Benedict Anderson

narratives and histories to fill in this theory. In this regards, national iconographies work better than political iconographies for the creation and maintenance of the “imagined community”. It is thus only the past heroes that fit these circumstances. Understanding this theory; the LPRP needs to impose this “national unity” on all their subjects – in all aspect of the returning of traditional belief, culture, religions, filming, schooling and so on so forth. They are among many other steps to achieve the ultimate goal. There are other steps for achieving this goal. In “*statuemanía*” of the government, through praise of past icons and figures exhibited in new and old monuments such as That Luang and the King Setthathirath statue, and Settathirath park, King Anuvong park, the King Fa Ngum statue, and through many other projects, the Lao government hopes their own imaginative concepts will be appreciated and absorbed into the minds of the people, thereby establishing a secured legitimacy through which it can implement its strong visions of the modern Lao nation.



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