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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Ritual, war, and opium: Infrastructural sedimentations in the ethnohistory of the Mun (Lanten Yao) of Laos

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Abstract
The 'commons' has acquired a renewed theoretical currency in recent years as a way of conceptualizing how different beings live together in shared places that are shaped and modified by human and non-human actions and structures. Through socioecological changes, warfare, movements of populations, sacralizations of land, political territorializations, and man-made infrastructures, the topography of any region, as a commons, is a process of perpetual transformation, invested by different flows and communities of humans. In this article, we will consider the positioning of the Lanten Yao (Mun) ethnic group within the Luang Namtha region in northern Laos. In the twentieth century, the Lanten Yao lived through the transformation of the commons into the territorialization and infrastructural building of colonial empires and nation-states, and negotiated the routes and boundaries between Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and China. Today, the land is once again being transformed through the Belt and Road Initiative, with the construction of Special Economic Zones, two 'smart cities', a high-speed railway, and a new speedway only a short distance from the Lanten villages. These new infrastructures are once again leading the Lanten to transform their relationships to their land, other peoples close and far, and distant states and administrations. In this article, we will explore how these shifting relationships to the commons are expressed in the rituals, sacred memories, and changing religious configurations among the Lanten Yao.

Keywords: Laos; Luang Namtha; Mun; Lanten Yao

Introduction

Those who name themselves the Mun, and who present themselves to outsiders by the ethnonym Lanten, known as a branch of the Yao, are one of the smallest and most socioeconomically marginalized ethnic minorities in Laos, numbering some 10,000 and living in around 50 villages in the provinces of Luang Namtha, Bokeo, Oudomxay, and Phongsali, in the far northwest of the country close to the borders with China,

Myanmar, and Thailand, and not far from northwest Vietnam.[1] Lanten religion is a remarkably complex form of 'Yao Daoism'[2] which has long fascinated scholars owing to its structural similarities with the earliest organized Daoist communities of China's later Han dynasty (25–220), in which all young men undergo ordination as Daoist ritual masters. In the past few years, the villages of the Lanten have suddenly found themselves near the centre of a major hub of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): a high-speed railway provides rapid and comfortable connections to Kunming and Vientiane; new highways are improving access to Thailand; modern high-tech cities are sprouting in new Special Economic Zones at the borders with China and Myanmar. The 'infrastructural commons' around which the Lanten weave their lives is undergoing a profound transformation, leading to deep changes in their patterns of economic life, residency, family life, and religion.

As the Lanten adapt to the challenges and opportunities afforded by the new infrastructural developments, it is tempting to think in terms of an autonomous traditional community, organically connected to its land, being disrupted or overwhelmed by massive and rapid modern investments. The sight of bulldozed valleys cleared of trees for urban development or of concrete and steel railway bridges and tunnels drilled through the variegated topology of the land lends itself to a view in which the infrastructure is an external overlay cutting through a pristine natural and cultural ecology. The increased penetration of the Lao state and its integration with China, facilitated by the new railway and economic zones, seems to confirm James Scott's lament of the 'end of Zomia'.[3] For centuries, the freedom-loving, anarchical tribes had fled agrarian empires and kingdoms to live far away in the hills—but now, the modern state and its infrastructures have finally caught up, drawing the hill peoples into its administrative grid.

When interpreted through the lens of infrastructure, the ethno-history of the Lanten suggests a different story—one that presents complex models of

[1]There are two branches of Mun in Laos, the Blue Trouser People (*kwa bu mun* in Mun language) and the Black Trouser People (*kwa kia mun*), the latter residing exclusively in Phongsali province. There is no contact or exchange between these two branches, which number around 4,700 and 5,500 members each, respectively. This article focuses on the Blue Trouser People, particularly on those living in Luang Namtha province, especially in Namlue village.

[2]Michel Strickman, 'The Tao among the Yao: Taoism and the Sinification of South China', in *Rekishi ni okeru minshû to bunka- Sakai Tadao sensei koki jukuga kinen ronshû* [Peoples and cultures in Asiatic history: Collected essays in honour of Professor Tadao Sakai on his seventieth birthday] (Tôkyô: Kokusho kankôkai, 1982); Eli Noah Alberts, *A history of Daoism and the Yao people of South China* (Youngstown, NY: Cambria Press, 2007); Meiwen Chen, 'Religion as a civilizing process? Rethinking Yao religious culture and ritual manuscripts', *Journal of Chinese Ritual, Theatre and Folklore*, vol. 187, 2015, pp. 155–209; E. N. Alberts, 'From Yao to now: Daoism and the imperialization of the China/Southeast Asia borderlands', *Asian Ethnicity*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2017, pp. 156–172; Joseba Estevez, 'Conquering demons, taming the forest: The ritual roles of the Lanten priests and masters', PhD thesis, University of Münster (Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster, WWU), 2023; this work earned the prestigious 2024 Frobenius Research Award for the best anthropological research in the German-speaking countries (namely, Germany, Austria, and Switzerland).

[3]James C. Scott, *The art of not being governed: An anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2009), p. vii.

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interconnection instead of the myth of ethnic or Laos isolation.[4] Over the centuries, the Lanten have been living in a perpetually shifting and disruptive 'infrastructural commons'.[5] BRI investments are the most recent layer in a long history of entangled infrastructures within which the Lanten have dwelt. Each period of history, marked by migrations and different forms of political organization, has involved new infrastructural formations that become sediments in the 'infrastructural geology' that continues to shape the life of the Lanten Yao today. These formations include those of the pre-colonial era of regional hegemony of the Kingdom of Luang Prabang (1707–1893, under the dominance of Siam during the nineteenth century) and of the Qing empire (1644–1911), the colonial era from the late nineteenth century until the mid-twentieth century, the period of the Indochina wars from 1954 until the early 1990s, and the post-Cold War era leading to the present era marked by the BRI. This article will outline these historical periods and infrastructural formations, showing how each of them has left its mark on the religious system and transformations of the Lanten, up until today with the new infrastructural developments associated with the BRI. An infrastructural analysis informed by a geology of historical contingency conceptualized as sedimentation allows for a more holistic view that surpasses the ethnographic present, raising the fundamental question: 'But, is this really new?' The historically deep and complex stratifications of this story serve as a reminder that Chinese BRI developments are simply the latest layer of a historically accretive infrastructural landscape in a highly variegated sociocultural environment.[6] In this matter, the Lanten Yao culture and religion have evolved over centuries in response to profoundly disruptive political, military, and economic infrastructures.

This article takes the ethno-history of the Lanten Yao as part of a broader collaborative effort to consider the dynamics of entanglements between religion and the infrastructural formations of the BRI. Infrastructure is typically defined as 'the fundamental physical facilities and organizational systems needed for the operation of a society'.[7] In this article, we draw on recent trends in critical infrastructure studies which see infrastructures as 'socio-technical assemblages' that are hybrids of the human and non-human.[8] The non-human dimension can be conceptualized through the notion of 'ecological infrastructure', seen as the ecological systems and organization that enable society to function. The 'commons', meanwhile, has acquired a renewed theoretical currency in recent years as a way of conceptualizing how different beings live together in shared places that are shaped and modified by human

[4]Andrew Walker, *The legend of the golden boat: Regulation, trade and traders in the borderlands of Laos, Thailand, China and Burma* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999). As a reference to Laos, see also Oliver Tappe, 'Towards a historical anthropology of Upland Laos', *The Highlander Journal of Highland Asia*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2019, pp. 19–25.

[5]Orlando Woods and David A. Palmer, 'The sacred dimensions of the BRI's infrastructural commons', in this special issue.

[6]Marie De Rugy, *Imperial borderlands: Maps and territory-building in the northern Indochinese peninsula (1885–1914)* (Leiden: Brill, 2022).

[7]Poh Chuin Teo, 'Belt and Road Initiative: The case of Malaysia', in *The Belt and Road strategy in international business and administration*, (eds) Wei Liu, Zhe Zhang, Jin-Xiong Chen and Sang-Bing Tsai (Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2019), pp. 176–199.

[8]Ash Amin, 'Lively infrastructure', *Theory, Culture, and Society*, vol. 31, no. 7–8, 2014, pp. 137–161.

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and non-human actions and structures.[9] In contrast to the concept of 'community', which suggests relatively bounded, stable, and homogenous groups of humans, the 'commons' suggests shared spaces within which heterogeneous beings—humans and others—coexist with each other.[10] Infrastructures release the material potential of a commons, opening some spaces while closing others, mobilizing and connecting some actors and objects while bypassing or shutting out others. The perpetually shifting and open-ended nature of infrastructures leads to corresponding transformations of the commons.

Going further, we follow the proposition in the Introduction to this special issue that 'religion might act as an infrastructure for mediating the relations between the human and non-human worlds'.[11] In this article, we consider Lanten society through the prism of the inter-connected and shifting relations between ecological, socioeconomic, and religious infrastructures, and the commons opened up by these intertwined infrastructures. This infrastructural approach can be seen as an extension of Marcel Mauss's proposal over a century ago for the study of 'social morphology' which he defined as the physical substratum of social life consisting of the dynamic and rhythmic mutual influences between the morphology of the land, the seasonality of living systems, and the physiology of society, in which technology and religion both serve as key mediators between the human and non-human worlds.[12] Through socioecological changes, warfare, movements of populations, sacralizations of land, political territorializations, and man-made infrastructures, the topography of any region, as a commons, is a process of perpetual transformation, invested by different flows and communities of humans. In order to construct our ethno-historical narrative, we draw on ethnographic and oral history data collected during long-term anthropological research conducted in Luang Namtha from 2010 until 2020 among the Lanten and also among Tai Yuan and Tai Dam communities in the region, as well as historical data from documentary sources, notably the accounts of European travellers from the turn of the nineteenth century, archives of Laotian war refugees, and previously unpublished local chronicles.[13]

[9]See Woods and Palmer, 'The sacred dimensions of the BRI's infrastructural commons'.

[10]For instance, Estevez, following Wessing, refers to the Lanten as a 'community of spirits' comprising the living (embodying reincarnated ancestors) and their pantheon of deities and communal ancestors. J. Estevez 'On the Lanten methods to fetch the Hon or living force of the original rice', in *Vernacular Chinese-character manuscripts from East and Southeast Asia*, (ed.) David Holm (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2024); Robert Wessing, 'A community of spirits: People, ancestors, and nature spirits in Java', *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2006, pp. 11–111.

[11]Woods and Palmer, 'The sacred dimensions of the BRI's infrastructural commons'.

[12]Marcel Mauss, 'Essai sur les variations saisonnières des sociétés Eskimos. Étude de morphologie sociale' [Essay on the seasonal variations of Eskimo societies. A study of social morphology], *L'Année Sociologique*, vol. 9, 1906, pp. 39–132; Michael T. Bravo, 'L'influence de Marcel Mauss' [The influence of Marcel Mauss], *Études Inuit Studies*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2006, pp. 33–49.

[13]The documentary sources we have used include, notably due to their references detailing encounters with Yao (Mien or Lanten/Mun) communities and/or the mapping of Luang Namtha: Auguste Pavie, *Travel reports of the Pavie Mission: Vietnam, Laos, Yunnan, and Siam—The Pavie Mission Indochina Papers, 1879–1895. Vol. 3: 1903*, (translation and introduction by Walter E. J. Tips) (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1999); Eugène-Adolphe-Alphonse-Marie-Joseph Lefèvre, *Travels in Laos: The fate of the Sip Song Pana and Muong Sing, 1894–1896* [Paris: E. Plon, Nourrit et Cie, 1898], (translation and introduction by Walter E. J. Tips) (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1995); Pierre Lefèvre-Pontalis, *Voyages dans le Haut Laos et sur les frontières de Chine et de Birmanie* (Mission Pavie Indochine 1879–1895) [Travels in Upper Laos and on the Borders of China and

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Reviewing these interactions over several historical periods, we find that the migrations and circulations of the Lanten over the centuries involve them navigating complex infrastructural landscapes, combining strategies of avoiding, following, using, and contributing to different infrastructures. The Lanten commons has been constituted by the shifting assemblages of infrastructures along and around which their collective lives have evolved. These infrastructures include the sociomaterial and technical organization of rice cultivation, ritual, transport and trade, opium production, sovereignty, modern state-building, and war, among others. While some of these infrastructures are more locally centred, others enable inter-regional connections and hierarchies, or emanate from expanding and centralizing political centres. All of them connect local places with other places beyond the local. Thus, what defines the highlands of the Southeast Asian massif, in the past or present, is not the absence of infrastructure, but dense infrastructures connecting or separating the different socioecological and political regions of lowlands and highlands. This region is characterized by an 'infrastructural sedimentation' in which, at different periods under different political configurations, new infrastructures are built, often overlaying previous ones which continue to shape the cosmological, cultural, or even physical landscape. The result is an 'infrastructural geology' in which sedimentation does not consist of a uniform superposition of layers but, owing to the uneven spread and durability of different layers and the collisions, and the frictions and erosions between them, the surface often reveals older layers of sedimentation. The 'infrastructural commons' are the local worlds of living and circulation along these overlapping and sedimented infrastructures. The transformations, adaptations, and opportunistic uses of these new developments by the contemporary Lanten represent the latest phase in a history of centuries of resilience and adaptations to infrastructure building and destruction by a succession of empires, polities, colonial regimes, military campaigns, and modern states.

In the highlands of the Southeast Asian massif, infrastructural commons overlay and intersect with two socioecological commons: a 'topographical commons' and a 'rice-cultivation commons'. The first of these commons consists of the shared ecosystem and landscape shaped by the dichotomy between inhospitable and mostly pathless mountains and jungles, and the fertile basins easily accessible by navigation. This topographic divide separates the social space in this region into the two main geomorphological criteria of the 'lowlanders' and the 'uplanders', depending on residential settings.[14] In both cases, members of these societies ascribe the spiritual 'ownership'

Burma (Pavie Mission Indochina 1879–1895)], Vol. 5 [Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1902], (translation and introduction by Walter E. J. Tips) (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2000); James McCarthy, *Surveying and exploring in Siam: With descriptions of Lao dependencies and of battles against the Chinese Haws* (London: John Murray, 1900); Prince Henri d'Orléans, *From Tonkin to India by the Sources of the Irrawaddy January '95–January' 96*, (trans.) Hamley Bent (London: Methuen and Co., 1898); Alfred Raquez, *Laotian pages: A classic account of travel in Upper, Middle and Lower Laos* [Hanoi: F.H. Schneider, 1902], (translation and introduction by William L. Gibson and Paul Bruthiaux) (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2018). On the *Short Chronicles of Luang Namtha*, see footnote 38 below. The collection 'Indochina war refugees in Laos, 1954–1975—Documents and reports', curated by the University of Wisconsin-Madison, also constitutes an invaluable source for the study of the life and inter-ethnic relations of the local populations during the Lao Civil War and the post-war period. Available at https://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/UUF3DZOKQXHDD8Q, [accessed 10 October 2024].

[14]A criterion used to classify societies in Laos based on their dwellings rather than on explicitly addressing ethnic and cultural differences. See Gerd Baumann and Andre Gingrich (eds), *Grammars of identity/alterity: A structural approach* (New York; Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2004).

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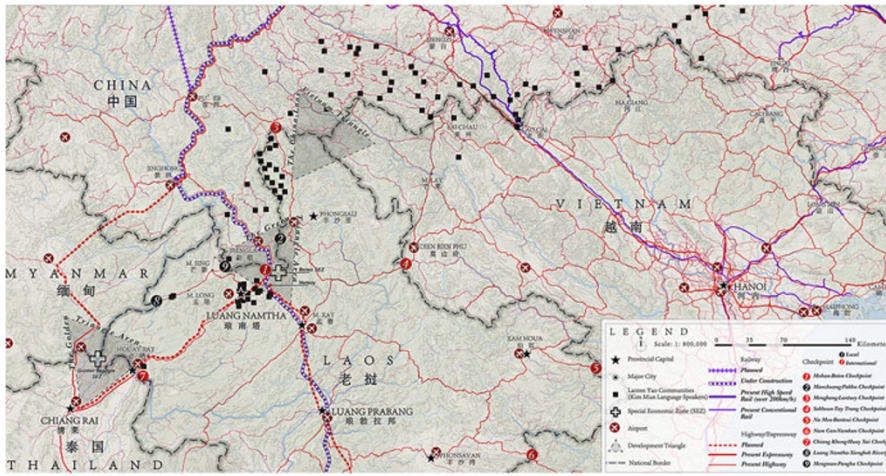

Figure 1. Transportation network in the China-Laos-Thailand-Vietnam border region with location of the Lanten villages. *Source:* 2021; data about Lanten villages in Vietnam, except those visited by the authors, are not available; mapping by Joseba Estevez and Zhang Menting.

of the space to spiritual beings whose hagiographies and singularity are particular to each society's collective and individual cosmological worldviews.[15] These link with the second commons formed by rice cultivation, structured around a regional agricultural calendar defined by two seasons and (usually) one harvest, the necessary collective work required to plant rice (a task that depends on the needs of the rice, e.g. paddies next to streams for wet rice versus unirrigated mountain gardens for dry rice), and the associated rice rituals addressing the land and spiritual 'owners' of the rice that are idiosyncratic to each society.[16]

The focus of this article is one Lanten village, Namlue, located southeast of the market town of Luang Namtha, now the administrative seat of the province of the same name.[17] Luang Namtha province is located in the far north of Laos, near the heart

[15]See, for instance, Kaj Arhem and Guido Sprenger (eds), *Animism in Southeast Asia* (London; New York: Routledge, 2015). The concept of spiritual ownership is widespread; for Southeast Asia, see Georges Condominas, *Nous avons mangé la forêt de la Pierre-Génie Gôo (Hii saa Brii Mau-Yaang Gôo). Chronique de Sar Luk, village mnong gar (tribu proto-indochinoise des Hauts-Plateaux du Viet-nam central)* [We have eaten the forest of the Stone-Genie Gôo. Chronicle of Sar Luk, a Mnong Gar village, Proto-Indochinese tribe of the highlands of Central Vietnam] (Paris: Mercure de France, 1954); also G. Condominas, *L'Espace social. A propos de l'Asie du Sud-Est* [Social space. Regarding Southeast Asia] (Paris: Flammarion, 1980).

[16]Estevez develops this idea in: Estevez 'On the Lanten methods to fetch the Hon'.

[17]For the sake of clarity, we refer to the modern polity of Müang Luang Namtha as such despite its various past toponyms and foundations; these toponyms include, for instance, Müang Luang Houa Tha, Muong Luong, or Louang Nam Tha in its many transliterations into French and English. Furthermore, for a short period of time, the administrative territories of Luang Namtha and Bokeo were combined into a single province, Houakhong, also mentioned in various references included in this article. The original location of the polity was, according to its short chronicles discussed below, in the fertile basin formed by the confluences of the Nam Tha and Nam Thoung rivers. The courses of these rivers have changed over the centuries, making it difficult to locate the original settlement. And its setting has been updated various times, for instance due to seasonal flooding, with the latest flood occurring after the construction of the airport that forced the move of all the houses to their current location. The polity was abandoned

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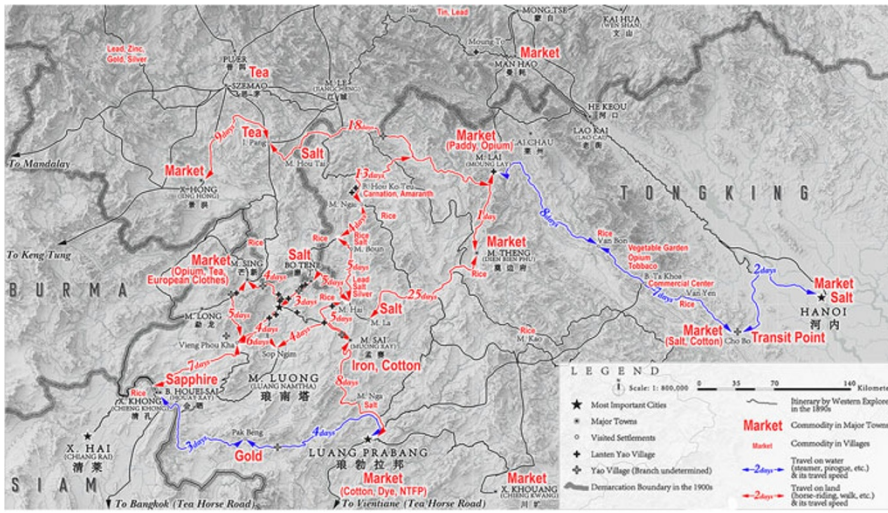

Figure 2. Markets and commodities exchanged across the highlands of the Southeast Asian massif, and the travel time needed, according to the travelogues of various European explorers and envoys in the 1890s. *Source:* Mapping by Joseba Estevez and Zhang Menting.[18]

of the 'Golden Quadrangle' (see Figure 1) where Laos, China, Thailand, and Myanmar meet. Luang Namtha is adjacent to Xishuangbanna prefecture in Yunnan (China) and Mongyawng township in East Shan State (Myanmar); and in close proximity to Chiang Rai province (Thailand) and Điện Biên province (Vietnam)—indeed, a pivotal middle-hub in the East-West corridor connecting northeast Thailand and northwest Vietnam through Laos, and the North-South corridor linking Yunnan in China with Thailand (Kunming-Bangkok highway and railway connections).

Like many other villages of the Lanten and other ethnic groups in Laos, Namlue has been founded three times. According to the orally transmitted stories, the first foundation took place around the second decade of the nineteenth century;[19] the second foundation took place in the early 1890s; and the third in the early 1970s. Multiple re-foundations of the Lanten villages result from the cyclical migrations of this society, whose members, traditionally, would move on to open new villages in the forests, but return to old sites after a few generations. Their cycle of re-foundations also relates

for almost 80 years (from 1812/1813 to 1891/1892). Estevez found buried architectural structures made of bricks that local stories link to the original foundation—amateur excavations (indeed, plunderers) discovered votive offerings made of gold in these structures, which in the present-day, exhausted of these historical clues, are covered by a rubber plantation. This archaeological site (20°57'39.9'N 101°26'12.6'E), not far from Ban Nam Thoung Village and the current confluence of the Nam Tha and Nam Thoung rivers, deserves further study.

[18]Based on Lefèvre, *Travels in Laos*; Lefèvre-Pontalis, *Voyages dans le Haut Laos*; McCarthy, *Surveying and exploring in Siam*; Pavie, *Travel reports of the Pavie Mission*; and d'Orleans, *From Tonkin to India*. For details on this mapping project and high-resolution maps, visit https://yaodao.hku.hk/maps, [accessed 10 October 2024].

[19]The date and place of production of various Lanten manuscripts seems to support this early arrival. J. Estevez, 'The Lanten manuscripts: Ritual objects in the transmission of ritual knowledge', in *Manuscript Cultures* (Hamburg: Centre of the Study of Manuscript Cultures, forthcoming).

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to the Lanten concept of the person: the 're-opening' of the village ideally takes place every 60 years or so, resonating with the cycle of life and death and the qualification of a person as an ancestor. A 'good' location can be reborn again—the selection of village sites is not based on pure contingency but rooted in cosmological views. 'Bad' locations (manifested, for instance, in fire destroying homes, diseases killing people and livestock, natural disasters such as flooding affecting the crops, and war) were abandoned for they signified the failure of the Lanten settlers to 'seize' those territories from their original spiritual 'owners'—the local deities.

In the case of Namlue, each time the village was founded it became part of significantly different infrastructural commons in the vicinity of Luang Namtha. The first foundation saw the Nam Tha River Basin as a major node of transportation for horse caravans of the regional trade, amid expanding opium production in the hills, with the polity having been relatively recently forsaken after a forced relocation.[20] The second foundation occurred when Luang Namtha was re-established as a strategic location for reviving Tai müang (local polity) in the midst of the 'Great Game' between the declining Chinese empire and the expanding French and British colonial empires. The third foundation saw Luang Namtha subject to socialist state planning as a multi-ethnic community during the Cold War period of closed boundaries, increased remoteness, and declining opium production.

Traces of each of these foundations have become sedimented in the oral stories of the Lanten of Namlue, as well as in the ritual infrastructure of the village, notably the village shrine (see Figure 3). Namlue village's shrine is located outside the village's boundary, inside a private rubber farm protected by bamboo walls, next to one of the three official gates leading to the village. The shrine was resettled and renovated in 2018, during a new phase of the transformation of the infrastructural commons, when opium cultivation was eradicated, to be replaced by rubber. The main road was widened into a major highway to Thailand, and the high-speed railway to China was under construction not far away.[21] This represents a fourth historic phase in the history of the village.

Lanten migrations, between the Chinese empire and the Southeast Asian mandala polities

According to the oral accounts, it was in the early nineteenth century that members of the Lee 李 clan of the Lanten founded Namlue village for the first time. Originating in the Lai Châu province of Vietnam, these Lanten paid tribute to their müang overlord in northern Vietnam; they then migrated through Điện Biên Phu and Müang Xai in present-day Laos. Their history and oral stories tell of how their own story is tied in

[20]Müang Luang Namtha ('Moung-long-nam-ta') and Vieng Phukkha ('Vienpouka') were described as 'two small independent territories' whose populations were forced to relocate to Müang Nan in 1813, according to Xieng-La, 'Le Haut-Laos, Français et Anglais dans le Haut-Laos' [Upper Laos: French and English in Upper Laos], *Revue Indochinoise*, no. 191, 16 June 1902, pp. 538–544. Available at https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k44108068/f2.item, [accessed 10 October 2024].

[21]See Pierre Petit's insightful study of the 'territorial cults' in the Tai territoriality in Houaphan. Pierre Petit, *History, memory, and the territorial cults in the highlands of Laos: The past inside the present* (Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2020).

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Figure 3. Front and side views of the shrine of the Deities of the Village in Namlue. *Source:* Photos by Joseba Estevez.

with the drawing of boundaries between shifting polities, as well as how the rulers of cities were situated within their moral universe.

A comparable case is the patrilineage of Chao La, born in 1912 and a prominent Yao Mien military leader during the Lao Civil War. His story details an analogous migration path (see Figure 2), further confirming the early arrival of Yao communities from Vietnam into the region, while providing valuable historical notes on local governance.[22] Chao La counted 11 generations: the first one originated in Guangzhou, China, where his forefathers moved from, to müang, with Chao La's grandfather being born in 1840 in Müang Xai (modern-day Oudomxay), around a hundred kilometres from the Nam Tha River basin and Namlue itself. He moved into the Nam Tha River basin in 1867 where eventually he became a local ruler, under Müang Nan's suzerainty, overseeing the Yao (both Mien and Lanten), Hmong, and Lahu communities.[23]

The Lanten settlement in Luang Namtha was the outcome of a migratory process that had lasted several centuries, during which their forbears had migrated out of what is now China's Hunan province and settled in the mountainous areas along what are currently the boundaries between China, Vietnam, and Laos. During this history, the Lanten were part of the periphery of the Chinese empire—a reality that is deeply embedded within Lanten cosmology and ritual.

[22]Frederic C. Benson, 'History and ancestors of Chao Mai, Chao La: 10 April 1972', in *Indochina war refugees in Laos. Vol. 6: Lao culture and ethnic groups* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Digitized Collections, 1972). Available at https://search.library.wisc.edu/digital/AQNLMI5PCVSGNJ8T/pages/AZ32TJC2PC2SGL8Z, [accessed 10 October 2024].

[23]See also Le Jiem Tsan, Richard D. Cushman and Hjorleifur R. Jonsson, 'Highland chiefs and regional networks in mainland Southeast Asia: Mien perspectives', *Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2016, pp. 515–551.

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Lanten religion reflects a mode of relating to imperial Chinese infrastructures of sovereignty and administration characteristic of a marginal, semi-nomadic ethnic group at the fringes of the empire. The semi-nomadic Lanten have developed an entirely mobile religious infrastructure, whose permanent objects are limited to portable manuscripts, painted scrolls, and seals. The Lanten priests and masters inscribe documents and persons with Chinese imperial-like brass seals, replicating the actions and source of authority of the Chinese imperial bureaucrats. But whereas the imperial seals were bestowed by the Chinese emperor, the Lanten produced their own seals and ascribed their authority to particular deities. There are neither temples nor deity statues. Elaborate altars are made of paper and bamboo and are entirely burnt after each ritual.[24]

Lanten religion mediates with what Hertzman, in her contribution to this special issue, calls the 'shadow infrastructure' of Lanten society, derived from the 'imperial metaphor' of Chinese religion.[25] The main deities are officials of the heavenly bureaucracy headed by China's Jade emperor, and the core rituals, orchestrated by priests and masters, take the form of imperial audiences at which the celestial officials are invited, honoured, and entertained, and documents and petitions are submitted to them. This is the 'yinfrastructure' of the Chinese empire,[26] which is concerned with the government of the *yin* world of the dead, of deities, spirits, and demons, all of whom continue to influence the *yang* world of the living. The religious infrastructure provides the means for managing the relations between the *yin* and *yang* worlds. The difference between the yinfrastructure and the external political infrastructure of the Chinese empire, however, is that the religious infrastructure is not a top-down, centralized hierarchy in this world but is controlled by decentralized local communities—such as the Lanten.

Lanten religion reflects the positioning of the Yao in relation to the Chinese empire, and the types of interactions they had with imperial Chinese infrastructures of sovereignty and administration. On the one hand, the ritual practices involve the performance of submission to a Chinese-style celestial imperial sovereign authority, providing an idiom with which to imagine and express relationships with all forms of authority. On the other hand, they involve creating a localized imperial cosmos, in which each community pacifies and governs its own surroundings, appropriates Chinese imperial power and regalia to establish its own sovereignty, and manipulates higher imperial celestial officials for its own ends. This is notably the case in rituals to open the forest for the foundation of new villages, in which the 'wild' demons of the forest are conquered and pacified. The location of each home in the settlement is

[24]The destruction of the altars has ritual and functional aims. For instance, the paper and ink (writing) become gifts and ritual payments for those deities invited to attend the ceremony; the smoke symbolizes the dissemination of the news on the event to the entire universe. The destruction of the altars prevents external interference by minimizing the opportunity for others to 'correct' or 'improve' them to conform to local orthodoxy or intellectual or religious movements in the neighbouring cultural centres.

[25]Emily Hertzman, 'In the shadow of the BRI: The figurative infrastructure of Chinese religion along the Maritime Silk Road', in this special issue; Stephan Feuchtwang, *The imperial metaphor: Popular religion in China* (London; New York: Routledge, 1992); Emily M. Ahern, *Chinese ritual and politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Arthur P. Wolf (ed.), *Religion and ritual in Chinese society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974).

[26]See Hertzman, 'In the shadow of the BRI'.

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ritually inscribed as the centre of a Chinese imperial cosmology, by means of ritually activating it as a yamen or administrative headquarters of the celestial officials to rule over the territory. In this ritual setup, the Lanten replicate the Chinese political cosmology to establish themselves as the imperial centre of their village territory, over which they rule and pacify the barbarian spirits of the surrounding forests and ethnic groups.[27] The ritual system structures the Lanten village commons as a space of autonomous but interconnected households that marks the human habitat as a civilizing centre in relation to the rice fields, gardens, communal land, and wild forests surrounding it.

The successive migrations into present-day Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand of different ethnic groups from China over the past centuries are the direct and indirect results of territorial expansions of Chinese dynasties and the colonization of their borderlands by Han Chinese. During the period 1700–1850, the population in China multiplied four-fold to 400–450 million inhabitants, propelling a spiralling competition for land and its resources in which each new wave of Han Chinese (both military and civilians) and wealthy migrants forced poor natives and poor migrants further out, expanding the de facto border of the Chinese empire.[28] Intensive silver and copper mining and the supra-regional exchanges based on the specialized production of rice surpluses and cash crops enhanced the trading networks on the Southwest Silk Road and favoured the increase of numbers of merchants and traders.[29] During the nineteenth century, numerous wars, rebellions, and turmoil in China further triggered the forced migration of growing populations from China into Southeast Asia.[30]

During the nineteenth century, as in previous centuries of migration, the Lanten of Luang Namtha were surrounded by intermittent warfare and banditry, if not participating in it or fleeing it. The roads near their settlements, and the lands beyond, could be as dangerous as the forests of demons, and demanded the ability to fight. For the Lanten, as with many other local societies, war was a ritual endeavour that demanded inviting the spiritual support of one's masters, ancestors, and several deities. The Five

[27]See Estevez, 'Conquering demons'.

[28]Kent Deng and Sun Shengmin, 'China's extraordinary population expansion and its determinants during the Qing period, 1644–1911', *Population Review*, vol. 58, no. 1, 2019, pp. 20–77; William T. Rowe, *China's last empire: The Great Qing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

[29]James Lee, 'The legacy of immigration in Southwest China, 1250–1850', *Annales de démographie historique*, 1982, pp. 279–304; J. Lee, 'Food supply and population growth in Southwest China, 1250–1850', *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 41, 1982, pp. 711–746; Volker Grabowsky and Andrew Turton (eds), *The gold and silver road of trade and friendship: The McLeod and Richardson diplomatic missions to Tai states in 1837* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2003); V. Grabowsky, 'The Tai polities in the Upper Mekong and their tributary relationships with China and Burma', *Aséanie*, vol. 21, 2008, pp. 11–63; Bin Yang, *Between winds and clouds: The making of Yunnan (second century BCE to twentieth century CE)* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

[30]Jean Michaud, *Turbulent times and enduring peoples. The mountain minorities of the South-East Asian massif* (London: Curzon Press, 2000); J. Michaud, 'The Montagnards in northern Vietnam from 1802 to 1975: A historical overview from exogenous sources', *Ethnohistory*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2000, pp. 333–368; Bruce A. Elleman, *Modern Chinese warfare, 1795–1989* (London: Routledge, 2001); Frederic Wakeman Jr., *Strangers at the gate: Social disorder in South China, 1839–1861* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Robert D. Jenks, *Insurgency and social disorder in Guizhou: The 'Miao' Rebellion, 1854–1873* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994); Henry McAleavy, *Black flags in Vietnam: The story of a Chinese intervention. The Tonkin War of 1884–85* (New York: Macmillan, 1968); Bradley C. Davis, *Imperial bandits: Outlaws and rebels in the China-Vietnam borderlands* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017).

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Marshals commanding the armies of the five directions are invited to possess the thorax and limbs of the ritual experts who act as military commanders. Spiritual armours articulate the necessary protections and, as when hunting, a narrative operationalizes the invisible world to oblige a propitious outcome in the visible. Weapons such as the priest's sword contain copper inserts on the spine of the single-edged blade to 'cut/kill' in both worlds. Combat in the visible-world warfare constitutes a redirection of the unceasing state of spiritual warfare with the demons of the forest. In this cosmology, one's spiritual assets—spirit armies, ancestors, celestial support, and magic and ritual knowledge—are as important as physical strength and weaponry. The Lanten Daoist master lineages function in this spiritual warfare context as an organic hierarchy organizing all the men in the village, with the members of the households becoming 'squads' led by the households' owners, and the villages forming 'platoons' aggregating these 'squads' under the command of one or more local grandmasters.

The militias' leaders were given the title of 'general', reflecting the titles of 'Three Generals' (Tam Kiang 三相) of the initiating deities of the lineage of ritual masters. The leadership of the Lanten militias was in the hands of a dozen of these 'generals' since not every village provided a charismatic commander with an abode.

These cosmologies need to be seen in the context of the macro-social morphology of the Indochinese massif, in which political hierarchies and economic circulations overlay networks of rivers, tributaries, and mountain chains. Empires and kingdoms were centred in lowland river basins and expanded their influence upwards into river valleys through conquest or ritualized tributary relations. A river system maps a political hierarchy in which each town and village is a mediating node between the more 'civilized' centres further downstream and the more 'wild' lands further upstream and uphill. These hierarchies map onto sacred cosmologies, with imperial and royal centres identified with cosmic centrality and moral order, and the mountainous peripheries and their peoples identified with violent, demonic forces. The further up, the more tenuous the political authority of the centre, with the uncultivated forest signifying the limits of the known cosmological order—the realm of demons where the humans have little agency and qualify as easy prey.

The highlands of the Indochinese massif were linked to several lowland polities and civilizations, leading to a dynamic system of highland communities often being simultaneously connected to multiple political centres, giving rise to what is called the 'mandala model'.[31] In this model, each node of the infrastructure of transportation was organized in the form of a local polity, which maintained roads and markets, and coordinated the relationships between villages, towns, kingdoms, and empires. The mandala (Sanskrit for circle) model presents each local polity (müang), as a mandala or circle of influence shaped by patterns of strong and soft power, organized around and managed by the müang's central core, namely the ruler of the polity, which we translate in the Luang Namtha case as 'City Lord', and his court.[32] The notion of the

[31]V. Grabowsky, 'Forced resettlement campaigns in northern Thailand during the early Bangkok period', *Orient Extremus*, vol. 37, no. 1, 1994, pp. 45–107; reprinted in the *Journal of the Siam Society*, vol. 87, no. 1, 1999, pp. 45–86; Randi Jerndal and Jonathan Rigg, 'Making space in Laos: Constructing a national identity in a "forgotten" country', *Political Geography*, vol. 17, 1998, pp. 809–831.

[32]The Lao term ເຈົ້າເມືອງ *Chao Müang* (Thai: เจ้าเมือง *chao [also cao] müang*) refers to two different ideologemes: ເຈົ້າ *Chao* identifies a ruler, in this context, administrating a Müang, and can be translated as

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mandala builds on Hindu and Buddhist cosmologies and a non-cartographic approach to the reality of a wild landscape that could not be tamed: it was the social space and its inhabitants that mattered, based on a ritualized infrastructure of sovereignty. A mandala's gravitational pull expresses its sphere of influence, including the villages orbiting it and its affiliation with the other mandalas.[33] The villages (*ban*) developed tributary relationships with the müang, and the small and frailer müang did so with the big and strong ones.

The relationships between a müang and its *ban* or periphery were complex and transitional at its margins. Whereas the centre was relatively permanent, its periphery was highly mobile: ethnic groups such as the Lanten, which practised swidden cultivation in the highlands, remained in the same location for only around five to ten years, freely moving around the centre, and seeking good locations in the forest or mountains. Their idea of a good location included the landscape (e.g. fertile soil, abundant game, streams, or cool weather) and cosmology (i.e. good relations with the spiritual 'owners' of the land) but also the müang—the 'right' polity being another factor to consider—as they had the freedom to move within the mandala system and to migrate whenever a polity failed to produce a relational system that they judged to be beneficial to them. Thus, the Lanten religious system creates a 'mobile commons' that, thanks to the portability of the ritual infrastructure, enables the Lanten to establish their society as a cosmological centre in a new locality, even as they retain ties to other localities along their migration route.

The Lanten thus moved into a 'Müang Belt' comprising Tai polities along the uplands of the Southeast Asian massif—an axis linking the Tai Lü müang of *Sip Song Pan Na* ('twelve township rice-fields'; Xishuangbanna in modern-day China) with the Black, Red, and White Tai müang of *Sip Song Chau Tai* ('twelve Tai cantons', modern-day Northwest Region in Vietnam) along with other Thai, Lao, and Tai Yuan müang to the

king, prince, governor, noble, or lord, meaning the head of a more often than not hereditary nobility system. ເມືອງ *Müang* roots in the *müang fai* or canals-and-gravity based irrigation infrastructure used for wet-rice cultivation, and objectifies the sociopolitical, religious, and administrative territorial-based organization necessary to create and maintain the irrigation systems, namely a polity that in pre-modern times translated as a more or less independent and often walled city-state or a principality. In present-day Lao PDR it translates as district, hence *Chao Müang* means head of the district, a position that ranks below the ເຈ້າແຂວງ Chao Khoueng or governor of the province. Colloquially, Laos is referred to in Lao language as ເມືອງລາວ *Müang Lao* or 'homeland of the Lao people' (*Müang Thai* for Thailand), attesting to the contextual linguistic complexity of the term. See Jana Raendchen, 'The socio-political and administrative organisation of müang in the light of Lao historical manuscripts', in *The literary heritage of Laos: Preservation, dissemination and research perspectives*. Collected Papers in Lao, Thai and English from the International Conference in Vientiane, 8–10 January 2004, (eds) David Wharton, Kongdeuane Nettavong, Harald Hundius, Dara Kanlaya and Khanthamaly (Vientiane: National Library of Laos, 2005). Also, Vanpen Surarerks, 'Muang Fai communities in northern Thailand: People's experiences and wisdom in irrigation management', *Journal of Developments in Sustainable Agriculture*, vol. 1, 2006, pp. 44–52.

[33]For the 'galactic' and 'gravitational' approaches to the Tai polities, see Stanley J. Tambiah, 'The galactic polity in Southeast Asia', in *Culture, thought, and social action*, (ed.) Stanley J. Tambiah (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 3–31; Victor Lieberman, *Strange parallels: Southeast Asia in global context, c. 800–1830. Vol. 1: Integration on the mainland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Deborah E. Tooker, 'Putting the mandala in its place: A practice-based approach to the spatialization of power on the Southeast Asian "periphery"—The case of the Akha', *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 55, no. 2, 1996, pp. 323–358.

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south and north of it. All these müang enabled the circulation of non-Tai communities and also travelling and trade around their 'orbits' thanks to a well-maintained infrastructure of transport and a cultural commons based on Tai culture(s) and language(s). Centuries of processes of social and cultural integration, hybridity, and migration favoured the increased development of the necessary cultural commons to travel and settle along the Müang Belt. The travels of the Lanten brought them as far as Luang Prabang and Van Vieng or Müang Nan (in Siam, modern-day Thailand), where some communities settled for a while.[34] Luang Namtha, linked to Müang Nan after its re-foundation in the early 1890s, had been part of a network of Tai müang-based morning markets and trade interconnected with Yunnan and, therefore, connecting Yunnan with regional and international markets (Figure 2). A thriving infrastructure of production and trade had transformed Yunnan into a major hub for the Silk Road caravans, providing a stable centre for the production and commerce of tea, cotton, opium, salt, and silver and other metals.[35] Figure 2 is informed by the reports of European travellers who documented the trade network and the products available as they journeyed and mapped the highlands of the Southeast Asian massif. This map attests to the mobility and dynamism existing at that time, to which Luang Namtha quickly became a central node after its re-foundation. The Müang Belt further south created a familiar infrastructure of transportation to move around in which the rivers and roads served as an exchange web with tributary elements (e.g. sharing the maintenance works of the roads and providing payments to one's overlords) that linked the peaks of the mountains with the basins, and these with the regional and international trade routes. The availability of expensive Western commodities, such as dyes, watches, and firearms, was documented by various European explorers whose works inform the map and attest to the extended range of the network. Within the region, socioecological, socioeconomic, and ritual infrastructures facilitated the emergence of a commons within which collective production was coordinated, hierarchical relationships were negotiated between tribes and polities of different scales, and trade was conducted between networks and polities nearby and afar.

The Lanten's ritual connection with the infrastructure of roads and navigable rivers and the müang demands some clarification, since it is deeply rooted in their cosmology. While the Lanten communities presented a pattern of penetration and dissemination into the forest following the tributary systems of the fertile basins, and of unending expansion as they moved from müang to müang as a means to maintain their own cultural agency as a society, their ritual system integrates the commons by means of three ritual rules that maintain the social integration of the Lanten in spite of their constant geographic dispersion. One rule defines 'good' locations for siting a village that is informed by cosmological conceptualizations of the topography, with the rivers and roads playing a major role. Another rule is rooted deeply in the Lanten Daoist ordinations of all young men as Dao Kong or 'priest' and Tai Kong

[34]The Lanten oral (hi)stories tell of these migrations paths, which reached Vientiane; the Lanten presence in this cities is noted, for instance, by Joel Halpern, *Geographic, demographic, and ethnic background of Laos—Laos Project Paper No. 4* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1961), p. 17.

[35]Nanny Kim, *Mountain rivers, mountain roads: Transport in Southwest China, 1700–1850* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), Ulrich Theobald and Jin Cao, *Southwest China in regional and global perspectives, c. 1600–1911* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

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or 'master', which established pseudo-kinship relationships with the six leading ritual experts and their wives who become the master-fathers and master-mothers of the ordinand. Finally, affinal kinship relationships called for inter-hamlet bride-and-groom exchanges.[36] These rules are sustained by the awareness of the risks of being divorced from one's kin and have, for centuries, enabled the Lanten to maintain inter-village, often trans-regional, ritual ties as part of affinal kinship networks based on surnames/patrilineages and master-lineages chains. The latter also served as a social matrix that articulated the organization of the Lanten militias and their participation in conflicts as a form of ritual warfare. The tension between dissemination and integration is core to this society—and also explains why there are so many 'branches' as some of the rhizomes ended up developing their own unique ethnic identity (a process that sometimes was intentional and linked, for example, to charismatic leaders).[37]

Luang Namtha between mandalas and colonial regimes

By the end of the nineteenth century, through a process of infrastructural sedimentation, colonial and modern states overlaid their infrastructures of sovereignty and administration onto the mandala system, which continued to operate while becoming increasingly incorporated into modern state systems. Eventually, the heads of clans and the 'cooked' ethnic communities were integrated once the modern states were strong enough to subdue them into its administrative structure.[38] National/colonial territory and its well-defined borders constituted a fundamental element of the new nation-building paradigm, eventually leading to an increased 'infrastructural splintering'[39]—the division of infrastructural formations—manifested in the multifaceted practices of detachment, re-attachment, and rebundling of the mandalas that needed to fit within state borders.

During the 1880s and 1890s, the mainland Southeast Asian massif had become an interstitial territory in which the British and French expanded their colonies and encroached on China. Siam, backed by the British, was a functional buffer state between the British and French. All of these modern entities tried to map and, thus, claim and secure their borders. With the Treaty of Tientsin following the Sino-French

[36]See Estevez, 'Conquering demons'.

[37]The Lanten of Luang Namtha ascribe the use of their blue trousers to a grandmaster who, having picked up his daughter-in-law's trousers by mistake in the early light of the morning as he hurried to conduct a ceremony, decided that men should wear a lighter shade of indigo blue to avoid similar mistakes in the future. When the authors visited a village of the same branch of Lanten Yao in Vietnam they noticed that all the men in this community wore very light blue, almost white, trousers—yet they still consider themselves 'blue trousers people' and attributed their colour to the modern blue dye that their wives purchase nowadays in the local market, which does not maintain the colour for long.

[38]For imperial China, see Wolfram Eberhard, *China's minorities: Yesterday and today* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1982); John E. Herman, *Amid the clouds and mist: China's colonization of Guizhou, 1200–1700* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Jennifer Took, *A native chieftaincy in Southwest China: Franchising a Tai chieftaincy under the Tusi system of Late Imperial China* (Leiden: Brill, 2005). For central/lowlands and periphery/uplands relationships with a focus on the Yao Mien, see Richard D. Cushman and H. R. Jonsson, 'Mosquito-relish diplomacy: Emperor Ping's charter and hill-valley dynamics between China and Thailand', *Journal of the Siam Society*, vol. 108, no. 2, 2020, pp. 87–121.

[39]Orlando Woods, 'Infrastructural splintering along the BRI: Catholic political ecologies and the fractious futures of Sri Lanka's littoral spaces', in this special issue.

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War (1884–1885), France had gained full control of Vietnam and completed demarcating the border with China in 1887.[40] In 1888, the bandits of the Chinese Black Flag Army attacked Luang Prabang, an event that prompted the French to provide military aid and resulted in the designation of Luang Prabang as a French Protectorate in 1889.

These developments raised protests in Siam, of which Luang Prabang was a vassal state at this time. In 1891, the ruler of Müang Nan in Siam dispatched groups to re-establish a müang in the Namtha basin with the aim of securing and expanding the trading routes. The new müang was orbited by numerous *ban* or villages of diverse ethnic provenances, including both Mien and Lanten Yao.[41]

As the leader of a new polity, Sitthisan Kummanjang tried to extend his sphere of influence by attracting and coercing these local groups. For instance, the Lanten community in Souanya village (along the road between Luang Namtha and Boten), which pre-dated the newly founded polity, acknowledged the authority of the re-founded müang but refused to subject themselves to it by not granting their obeisance to any overlord.[42] The City Lord employed elephants and vassals to assist the Lanten of Namlue during the second foundation of their village. The animals assisted in clearing the forest, enabling the re-founding and expansion of the village. This substantial assistance in 'opening' the forest qualified them as Deities of the Village in Namlue. The village tablet (Figure 4) lists the City Lord, his wife, and various Tai Yuan noblemen among the communal ancestors. Interestingly, two ritual names on the tablet acknowledge other regional local leaders, including a Yao Mien leader and a representative of the Tai Lü ruling Sibsong Panna. This heterogeneous group of non-Lanten people maps out the local political players at the second foundation of the village, and illustrates the ritual connection between the Namlue commons and that of the Luang Namtha polity.

In 1894, representatives of the French, British, and Siamese governments visited Müang Luang Namtha and announced its new status under the administration of the French Protectorate and the King of Lan Xang (Laos).[43] A French flag was given as a token of French rule.

[40]Lloyd E. Eastman, *Throne and mandarins: China's search for a policy during the Sino-French controversy, 1880–1885* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967).

[41]On the foundation of Müang Luang Namtha, see also the important contribution by Nathan Badenoch and Shinsuke Tomita, 'Mountain people in the Muang: Creation and governance of a Tai polity in northern Laos', *Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2013, pp. 29–67; also N. Badenoch, 'The uplands of northern Thailand: Language and social relations beyond the Muang', in *Routledge handbook of highland Asia*, (eds) Jelle J. P. Wouters and Michael T. Heneise (London: Routledge, 2022). On the müang, see also Benjamin Baumann, 'Reconceptualising the cosmic polity: The Tai mueang as a social ontology', in *Social ontology, sociocultures, and inequality in the Global South*, (eds) B. Baumann and Daniel Bultmann (New York: Routledge, 2020).

[42]Lefèvre-Pontalis, *Voyages dans le Haut Laos*, p. 202.

[43]V. Grabowsky, 'Introduction to the history of Müang Sing (Laos) prior to French rule: The fate of a Lü principality', *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient*, vol. 86, 1999, pp. 233–291; V. Grabowsky, 'From buffer state to market place: Migration, ethnicity and development in the Lao border town of Müang Sing', in *Parts and wholes: Essays on social morphology, cosmology and exchange in honour of J. D. M. Platenkamp*, (eds) Laila Prager, Michael Prager and Guido Sprenger (Zürich: LIT Verlag, 2016), pp. 437–462; Renoo Wichasin, *Chronicles of Chiang Khaeng: A Tai Lü principality of the Upper Mekong* (Honolulu: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Hawai'i, 2008). For a comparison with the post-colonial period, see Pierre-Bernard Lafont, 'La plaine de Muong Sing' [The Plain of Muong Sing], *Les Cahiers d'Outre-Mer*, vol. 26, no. 101, 1973, pp. 39–53.

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Figure 4. A Daoist master using, in the ritual context, the tablet listing the Deities of the Village in Namlue. *Source:* Photo by Joseba Estevez.

The French envoy Lefèvre-Pontalis visited the new müang in September 1894, after the establishment of the French Protectorate. He met the City Lord who unrolled for him the polity's chronicles and presented a short summary of its old history—displaying it as a symbol of the müang's status (i.e. one having its own chronicles), describing its old golden days, and attesting to its expected bright future. They also discussed various issues regarding the demarcation of the border and the location

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of the boundary stone that marked the officially agreed border.[44] The border stone, inscribed in Tai Lü and Chinese with the text 'Moung Luong Bo Luong' (corresponding to present-day Luang Namtha and Boten, respectively), had been moved and destroyed several times (e.g. in 1887) by members of different interest groups as means of provocation and local bravado.[45] As key objects in the infrastructure of sovereignty and conceptualization of territory, the border stones were often the sites of symbolic struggles.[46]

These incidents are important to the story of the Lanten, as a famous Lanten hero is ascribed by the Lanten community in their oral stories as the leading actor in resolving this issue. Various Lanten villages in Luang Namtha province count Dang Yun Hak 鄧玄学, his brother, and his father (three brothers in some variants of the story) as communal ancestors and the founding fathers of the Lanten community in this region. The Lanten oral stories describe how the local hero Dang Yun Hak and his group moved from Yunnan into the Nam Tha River basin in the 1870s/1780s,[47] joining other local Lanten communities already settled on the margins of the basin along the road to Müang Sing. Dang Yun Hak was a natural leader whose charisma and reputation earned him great respect among all the local communities. According to the Lanten, he challenged the Tai Lü elites in Sipsong Banna (now Xishuangbanna, China) and engaged them in a competition to determine the final place for the border stone to determine the territory's fate. In the story, Dang outsmarts the opposing party and meets them where the current international border with China stays today: at Boten. The story constitutes an amusing account that presents Dang Yun Hak as a cunning leader playing a significant role as the representative of the müang.

According to this oral story, Dang Yun Hak singlehandedly demarcated the current Sino-Lao border. The victory displaced the boundary marker further into the north to include various profitable salt mines within the müang's territory. Although the moving of the boundary marker and the significance of the salt production has been recorded in various chronicles, only the Lanten stories refer to this cultural hero. The same oral stories ascribe to him a pivotal role in the conversations between the French

[44]Lefèvre-Pontalis, *Voyages dans le Haut Laos*, pp. 197–198. This chronicle embodied the political and historical significance of the müang together with that of its Tai Yuan overlords and their legitimacy over the place as the direct descendants of the original founders. The chronicles were destroyed during the fire caused by the French bombing in 1954. Maha Khamsan Vongchaiya transcribed them from memory into five volumes. Estevez and his collaborators from the National Library of Laos met him at his house in Vientiane and, upon agreement with the family, arranged for various copies to be made to allow for the dissemination of this important historical record. These copies are curated by the National Library of Laos, the leaders of the Tai Yuan community in Luang Namtha, the University of Münster, and the University of Hong Kong. The pdf digital files, including the five volumes comprising the chronicles and their summaries in Lao and English, together with the context of their compilation are available at https://yaodao.hku.hk/ethnohistory, [accessed 10 October 2024].

[45]Ibid., pp. 198–202. Raquez also reports on these happenings: Alfred Raquez, 'Au Laos' [In Laos], *La Revue Indochinoise*¸ vol. 1, 1906, pp. 535–543. Available at https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k4410891m/f542.item, [last accessed 22 March 2024].

[46]On this matter, see Holly High, *Stone masters: Power encounters in mainland Southeast Asia* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2022).

[47]One manuscript, according to its colophon commissioned by Dang Yun Hak, was completed in 1888, thus testifying to his presence before the foundation of the müang in the early 1890s. In Estevez, 'The Lanten manuscripts'.

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and British empire's representatives in the region during discussions on the agreement of the location of their border. However, he is given too much credit for shaping the Sino-Lao borders, which were agreed upon at a higher level between the Chinese and French empires as part of the general agreement about the boundaries between Indochina and the Qing dynasty.

In these and other episodes, the structure of the commons appears in circles of subjection, as follows: colonial power > müang > villages > hamlets. Each sphere retains a quota of power and agency. France established its sovereignty over the territory while competing with other powers (such as Britain, Siam, and China); the local elites did so over the müang and its basin and the villages around it; and the heads of the villages and hamlets 'ruled' over the forest, which constituted their backyards—a wild space to travel across, to go into for hunting and gathering, and to open new settlements within their competence to do so (slash-and-burn, expressed through a language of 'conquest' in the Lanten cosmological view). During this time, mutual acknowledgement established the hierarchy and kept the system running. Disputes and negotiations over boundary stones, which involved both müang rulers and colonial officials, exemplify the entanglement of two types of infrastructures of sovereignty. Both are sedimented into the ritual life of the Lanten of Namlue, through the deification of the City Lord into the Tablet of the Deities in the village shrine, as well as the incorporation of the incidents into the community's heroic lore, which includes deities and communal ancestors.

Horses, opium, and the Lanten ritual economy

The newly established Müang Luang Namtha became a node in the trade routes linking what are now Yunnan, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar. These exchanges involved large numbers of Panthays and Hui Chinese merchants who used these routes and largely dominated the long-distance armed caravan network of southern China and northern Southeast Asia, a part of the Southwest Silk Road.[48] These large caravans of horses and mules could employ up to 100 mules and 15 drivers, and provided extra services such as money transferring, posting, and body guarding. Bamboo rafts served the fluvial connections. The transport of goods into the Luang Namtha region included iron ore, gold, silver, silk, spices, copper vessels, tea, jade, ponies, mules, and other items. Products such as raw cotton, ivory, salt in the form of blocks from the local salt-wells, lead from the local mines, rice, opium, tobacco, indigo, and lumber were exported. Local ethnic groups used these networks too, with each group engaged in its own specialties of production and trade: the Lanten in Luang Namtha partook in the long-distance trade of raw cotton and opium.[49]

[48]John Anderson, *Mandalay to Momien: A Narrative of the Two Expeditions to Western China of 1868 and 1875, Under Colonel Edward B. Sladen and Colonel Horace Browne* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1876); Andrew D. W. Forbes, 'The 'čīn-hǭ' (Yunnanese Chinese) caravan trade with North Thailand during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries', *Journal of Asian History*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1987, pp. 1–47; A. D. W. Forbes and David Henley, *The Haw: Traders of the Golden Triangle* (Chiang Mai: Asia Film House, 1997).

[49]McCarthy tells of the opium cultivation in Luang Namtha during his journey: 'On February 29 [1892] I set out from Muang Luang Puka [Müang Luang Namtha] for Muang Sai. After passing through some Lanten villages, where tobacco, indigo, opium, corn, and hillside rice were cultivated, we crossed the ridge which

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As an infrastructure of transport, the caravans constituted information networks transporting goods, news/ideas, and people. This network of routes also played a crucial role in maintaining the cohesion of the communities scattered all over the territories crossed by the network of roads. Lanten villages had been historically settled not far from the trade hubs and routes, building symbiotic relationships. The relationship with the caravan's organizers provided information on the routes (e.g. fertile land for relocation), allowed the placing of orders (inkstones, Daoist paintings, manuscripts), and closed agreements with payments in advance for opium or in exchange for cotton and salt. In the Lanten case, introductory letters and inter-village invitations for available brides and grooms were common items circulating along the networks. Their role is essential to understand the Yao migrations, as they were often part of this phenomenon as equine-breeders and hired guides and strongmen. These letters were usually copied and returned to the route, empowering a long-distance exchange and communication system between Lanten communities who remained close and united despite their migrations and fragmentation.[50] Caravan routes and letters thus enabled the interconnection of Lanten villages into a wide network.

The Lanten ritual system demands that the villages be settled near the highroads to allow the horses of deities and ancestors to reach the community directly—the same rule favours proximity with caravan-routes and polities, preventing social isolation and the disintegration of Lanten society. As horse caravans were an important part of the Lanten social infrastructure, so they play an essential role in their ritual system. Horses are intertwined with the Lanten rituals at various levels. First, deities and ancestors travel by horse, a symbol of their status that informs the requirement for the Lanten villages to be near a main road—'so the horses can easily reach the households sponsoring a ceremony'. As part of the secondary mortuary ritual, the priest confers the dead with a spirit horse. It is, however, the ceremony to teach divination and healing that conveys the most important role of horses in the Lanten ritual system.[51] The ordained men subject to this ritual become part of the 'herd' after receiving a gift of a spirit horse from their ancestors or the deities. The spirit horse enters their 'bones', becoming an integral part of the person and allowing the ritual experts to ride the universe and to visit all the cosmological domains—echoing ownership of a horse and the ability to travel with it in the times of the caravans.

One of the main commodities shipped along these infrastructures of transportation was opium. For over a century, Lanten economic life, political agency, and ritual prosperity were defined to a high extent by this commodity and its trade. For the Lanten, who reside at the riverbanks of streams, not far from basins and main roads, opium production demanded extra land, hands, and specific locations to grow it (for instance,

separated the waters that drained down into the plain of Muang Luang Puka, and marked the limit of the Lanten settlements'. McCarthy, *Surveying and exploring in Siam*, pp. 155–166.

[50]See also Jacob Cawthorne, *Letters without capitals: Text and practice in Kim Mun (Yao) culture* (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

[51]J. Estevez, 'Learning "shamanistic healing" among the Lanten (Yao Mun) of Laos' (a photo essay), in *Global modernities and the (re-)emergence of ghosts*. Special issue of the Global South Studies Centre, (eds) Oliver Tappe, Tijo Salverda, Andrea Hollington, Sinah Kloß and Nina Schneider (Cologne: University of Cologne, 2016).

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nor far from the mountain gardens where they grew cotton and indigo), transforming every household into an entrepreneurial unit and defining a socioecological commons that ultimately pervaded the culture.

By the 1850s, opium was traded along all the caravan routes and became both a good for consumption and a currency to trade, with its market exchange value functioning like silver. Opium could be grown wherever the necessary conditions were met, and anybody could become adept at its cultivation. Early accounts by explorers and missionaries describe how the Lanten and other local societies began purchasing their opium from Yunnan. Soon after, they became producers themselves and sold it in exchange for silver that their women and children wore ostentatiously. For many societies in the highlands, silver and gold can embody ancestors and celestial protections. If necessary, the silver jewellery can efficiently fund running away. Growing opium for consumption and trade, and wearing silver jewellery became a signature for the Lanten and other highlanders. Rice as the staple subsistence crop and opium as the cash crop created a particular demand for land and human resources due to their conflicting crop cycles and soil needs. Whereas in the past, the Lanten and other ethnic groups had migrated to have access to land to grow rice that was free of taxes, opium cultivation triggered fragmentation as these populations expanded in all directions, with the mountains becoming ideal sites for opium production. Opium transformed the mountains into 'silver mines' and the Yao, Hmong, and Lolo households into entrepreneurs. The peaks of the mountains, favoured by these societies as their residence, provided an even better setting to grow opium, as the same fields could yield rice and opium in sequence during the agricultural year.

As a result of this development, migrating ethnic groups spread across the highlands all around the margins of the empires, devoted to the production and trade of opium. 'Good' locations had free fertile soil to support both rice and opium cultivation, and were rich in fish and game in peaceful regions beyond the reach and supervision of landlords and tax officers. The transport infrastructures of caravans and their networks served as the vascular system, circulating information about suitable locations, pumping people into them, and moving the opium and silver around, functioning as a currency exchangeable for products and their potential production.

Fuelled by the competition between the imperial powers (i.e. the Chinese, British, and French empires), this lucrative business gave local actors greater agency. The monopoly of opium financed the British and French occupations and the operations of their Asian colonies, as well as rebels who fought the Chinese. Opium could fund armies and administrations and make opium farmers relatively rich within a farming season. The wealth associated with the opium trade permeated all the exchange nodes, including all the participants engaged in the production, distribution, and taxation chain.[52]

[52]Hans Derks, *History of the opium problem: The assault on the East, ca. 1600–1950* (Leiden: Brill, 2012); Hao Gao, *Creating the Opium War: British imperial attitudes towards China, 1792–1840* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020); Diana Kim, *Empires of vice: The rise of opium prohibition across Southeast Asia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020).

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Opium cultivation and trade were integrated into the ritual economy. The production of opium is straightforward given the right soil and climate; the profits allowed for high levels of material prosperity that were invested in more lavish rituals and silver ritual implements—with the latter being treated as a seat for the ancestors of the household and a manifestation of their support. Unlike rice, the Lanten do not ascribe opium with a life-force (*hon* or 'soul') of its own, but silver and gold are seen as endowed with it. Thus, cultivating poppy enabled the Lanten to transform the forest into gardens, and these into opium that could be sold for silver. Silver could be used to create an everlasting body for ancestral component parts in the Lanten jewellery, or invested in sponsoring rituals such as ordinations and frequent homages to the deities and ancestors of the households. Opium thus triggered the transformation of socioecological and socioeconomic infrastructures, and underwrote the maintenance and expansion of the Lanten ritual infrastructure and inter-village trade and communication.

The Indochina wars and the splintering of the Yao

The re-foundation of Luang Namtha in 1891 was followed by a few decades of peace as the French, British, and Thai colonial and national regimes stabilized rule over their respective and clearly delineated territories in the region. Each regime consolidated its infrastructures of modern sovereignty and administration. In the case of French Indochina, Laos was comparatively ignored compared to Vietnam, with little colonial infrastructure of transportation, government, education, or modern medicine to be found outside the main towns of Vientiane, Pakse, and Luang Prabang—with the exception of the telegraph lines. Luang Namtha continued to be a hub of the horse caravans and opium trade, while the traditional mandala system of governance continued. On the Chinese side, efforts to build the infrastructures of a modern state took place in fits and starts, following the collapse of the Qing dynasty (1912) and the subsequent power vacuum and civil wars that paved the way for the emergence of the Communist Party of China.

Various localized conflicts erupted in the region during and following the Second World War, involving local polities and kingdoms, Japan, France, Britain, and the United States. The First Indochina War (1946–1954) started as the Anti-French Resistance War in Vietnam; the Second Indochina War (1955–1975) followed as the United States took over France's role in Vietnam, where it faced comparable anti-colonial opposition. The Lao Civil War (1954–1975) saw a similar evolution, beginning as an anti-French resistance that became a so-called Secret War due to the unofficial but general involvement of the United States in the conflict, echoing the war in Vietnam. The Third Indochina War (1975–1991) entailed a series of interconnected armed conflicts in mainland southeast Asia, engaging China, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, and international players supporting different factions.

Luang Namtha came under brief Chinese control in 1945, when the Chinese army entered Laos in the midst of the power vacuum created by the Japanese departure from Laos in August 1945. Chinese troops entered Müang Sing on 31 August and proclaimed that the northern Lao territories (corresponding to the present-day Luang Namtha,

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Phongsali, and Bokeo provinces) were, from now on, part of Yunnan.[53] Nevertheless, despite Chinese attempts and a short-lived independence proclamation, by August 1946 Laos had been declared a constitutional monarchy within the French Union, and once the Chinese army returned home, the old Sino-French boundaries were maintained. This reinstatement of the French Protectorate (1946–1953) would not last long since insurgents in Laos (e.g. Lao Issara 'Free Laos' movement), armed by the Vietnamese and infused with Chinese revolutionary ideas, started attacking the French-Lao forces.[54]

In China, the purges against the Chinese Nationalist Party or Kuomintang (KMT) after the communist takeover in 1949 resulted in massive migrations and the relocation of KMT troops into the Golden Quadrangle area, mainly in Thailand and Burma.[55] A significant new influx of Mien and Lanten Yao, Hmong, Akha, and Tai Lue communities in Yunnan entered northern Laos, seeking refuge from the ongoing mayhem. The refugees coming from China to Luang Namtha numbered around 14,000 people.[56] In addition, around the same time, several villages of 'black-trouser' Lanten crossed the border, joining their kin or establishing communities in the peaceful neighbouring Phongsali province, in the northernmost Laotian region. This migration explains why there are so few Lanten villages on the Chinese side of the border between China and Phongsali province, while there are about 30 Lanten villages on the Lao side.[57]

As the Lao Civil War gained steam, Luang Namtha experienced a period of deceptive calm, as the different actors expanded their military infrastructures into the region, entangling the Lanten and other ethnic groups. On the anti-communist side, the United States and France coordinated and integrated their strategic, logistical, and tactical systems in Indochina, using Lao Royalist forces as their proxies. By 1950, in northern Vietnam, French Marshal Jean de Lattre de Tassigny (1889–1952) started implementing his Four Points counterinsurgency plan, which entailed forging alliances with local ethnic groups to train them to become disciplined mountain guerrilla forces and to grow and trade opium to sponsor tactical operations and warfare. This inspired the US Army to develop similar programmes in Laos.[58] As a result,

[53]Jean Deuve [Michael Caply], *Guerrilla au Laos* [War in Laos], University of Wisconsin-Madison Digital Collections, p. 27. Available at https://search.library.wisc.edu/digital/ABKWLMXZVENTE48Q, [accessed 10 October 2024]. Michael Caply is the pseudonym of the French colonel Jean Deuve (1918–2008).

[54]For a summary of the background and war development in northern Laos, see Victor B. Anthony and Richard R. Sexton, *The war in northern Laos* (Washington, DC: Center for Air Force History, 1993).

[55]Wen-chin Chang, 'From war refugees to immigrants: The case of the KMT Yunnanese Chinese in northern Thailand', *International Migration Review*, vol. 35, 2001, pp. 1086–1105.

[56]Bernard B. Fall, *Anatomy of a crisis: The Laotian crisis of 1960–1961* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969), p. 96.

[57]Georges Albert Aymé documented his encounters with Lanten communities (Man Lan Tien) of Phongsali province; he refers to their population at that time (around a thousand people) and states their reluctance to be subjected to external political influences or taxation, and their suzerainty to their Tai Lü overlords in Sip Song Pan Na. Their numbers increased as most crossed the border fleeing China. Georges A. Aymé, *Monographie du Ve territoire militaire* [Monograph of the 5th Military Territory] (Hanoi: Impr. d'Extrême-Orient, 1930), p. 59.

[58]Alfred W. McCoy, *The politics of heroin in Southeast Asia: CIA complicity in the global drug trade* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), pp. 98–109.

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entire ethnic groups, notably the Hmong and the Yao Mien, were targeted to be integrated into the American infrastructure of war (with different levels of success at the local community level across the country).[59] In Laos, the US-French infrastructure of war also included military advisers and other experts in international development, as well as anthropologists.[60] These envoys gathered rich ethnographic information and intelligence and assisted in organizing local militias.[61]

The siege, battle, and defeat of the French by local insurgents in Điện Biên Phủ (1954) brought an end to French colonial rule in Vietnam.[62] The Điện Biên Phủ polity was a strategic stronghold in the region that served to oversee northeast Laos and northwest Vietnam. Its annual rice production could feed an army for months, and that of raw opium had a market price of up to 10 million piasters (then about US$1 million; with inflation, about US$11 million today). Control over opium production and trade was critical for the financing of both the French colonial regime and anti-communist guerrillas, but also for securing the national independence of the newly formed Democratic Republic of Vietnam.[63] Thus, following the North Vietnamese takeover of Điện Biên Phủ and the dismantling of the French opium trade infrastructure, many pro-French opium-growing White and Black Tai, Hmong, and Yao (including Lanten) communities fled to Laos.

The French defeat emboldened anti-colonial forces in Laos. This was the case in Luang Namtha, where a small group of about 170 soldiers attacked official buildings, prompting an armed response by the Royal Lao Armed Forces supported by the French Air Force. The French deployed fighter aircrafts to bomb Luang Namtha in 1954 with napalm, which had tactical and psychological effects, to support the ground operations.[64] Events such as these marked the start of the civil war in Laos (1954–1975).

On the anti-colonial front, Laos was regarded as a secondary military theatre to Vietnam. The Pathet Lao depended heavily upon political-military support from

[59]F. C. Benson, 'Genesis of the Hmong-American alliance, 1949–1962: Aspirations, expectations and commitments during an era of uncertainty', *Hmong Studies Journal*, vol. 16, 2015. On the Yao Mien, refer to H. R. Jonsson, 'War's ontogeny: Militias and ethnic boundaries in Laos and exile', *Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 47, 2009, pp. 125–149; Ian Baird and Paul Hillmer, 'Veterans from Laos: War, remembrance, ritual, rank, racism, and the making of Hmong and Lao America', *Hmong Studies Journal*, vol. 21, 2020, pp. 1–37. For the Hmong, see Mai Na M. Lee, *Dreams of the Hmong kingdom: The quest for legitimation in French Indochina*, 1850–1960. New Perspectives in Southeast Asian Studies (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2015).

[60]The hidden agendas of these 'experts' have since then brought suspicion to any researcher trying to carry out studies in Laos.

[61]Jan Goldman (ed.), *The Central Intelligence Agency: An encyclopedia of covert ops, intelligence gathering, and spies*, 2 vols (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2015), pp. 116–118; Hugh Wilford, *The mighty Wurlitzer: How the CIA played America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), pp. 173–174. Wilford refers to Thomas Anthony Dooley III, the founder of the first hospital in Luang Namtha.

[62]Christian C. Lentz, *Contested territory: Dien Bien Phu and the making of northwest Vietnam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019). Also, Christopher Goscha, *The Road to Dien Bien Phu: A History of the First War in Vietnam* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2022).

[63]Christian C. Lentz, 'Cultivating subjects: Opium and rule in post-colonial Vietnam', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 51, no. 4, 2017, pp. 879–918.

[64]From 'Refugee interviews—Houa Khong 1970/1971 Muong Luang Namtha', reports to Frederick (Fritz) Benson, the University of Wisconsin-Madison Digitized Collections. Available at https://search.library.wisc.edu/digital/AUUF3DZOKQXHDD8Q/pages/ANWXQLA3M534UC8H, [accessed 10 October 2024]. Also Fall, *Anatomy of a crisis*. It was this bombing that destroyed—by fire—the original chronicles of Luang Namtha.

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North Vietnam, and was deeply integrated into the political infrastructures of the Vietnamese Communist Party, which was itself part of the Communist International in Moscow.[65] North Vietnamese and Chinese operatives followed the old migration routes across mountains, recruiting members of various ethnic groups, including Lanten, to maximize the impact of their message by using locals to talk to locals in their language. They provided them with political ideology, military training, motivation, and connections with the Vietnamese and Chinese armies, which, in turn, delivered the necessary military supplies.[66] Vietnamese Lanten militias arrived in Luang Namtha in three different phases in the 1950s and 1960s.[67]

Thus, while in Luang Namtha many Hmong, Mien Yao, and Black Tai joined the American-backed loyalist guerrilla forces, with some exceptions, most of the Lanten Yao and other local ethnic groups joined the Pathet Lao. The ethnic fabric of northern Laos was splintered through the recruitment of all the coexisting ethnic groups (including, for instance, the locally dominant Tai Yuan and Lü, but also the Khmu, Akha, Samtao, Rmeet, and so on) into opposing infrastructures of war, resulting in strong ethnic divisions and clashes; indeed, for the Hmong-Mien speakers in this region, an ethnic 'civil war' raged within the Laotian Civil War (1954–1975).[68]

Various vital battles took place in Luang Namtha at different times, the most critical clashes being in 1961–1962 and 1967.[69] For the first two decades of the civil war, China had also supported the Pathet Lao and treated them as 'younger brothers' undergoing revolution, but China was not directly connected to the infrastructures of war. China publicly supported both sides to avoid a direct conflict with the United States and France. Most of Chinese aid to Laos was mediated by the North Vietnamese; the officers kept the lion's share and delivered only a small portion, which was branded as Vietnamese aid. After several complaints by the Lao commanders, China decided to

[65]Xiaoming Zhang, 'China's involvement in Laos during the Vietnam War, 1963–1975', *Journal of Military History*, vol. 66, 2002, pp. 1141–1166; Chen Jian, 'China's involvement in the Vietnam War, 1964–69', *China Quarterly*, vol. 142, 1995, pp. 356–387.

[66]Cristopher E. Goscha, 'Vietnam and the world outside: The case of Vietnamese communist advisers in Laos (1948–62)', *South East Asia Research*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2004, pp. 141–185.

[67]The authors interviewed the last two survivors, now elders, in their home villages in Northwest Vietnam in 2018.

[68]The Western version of the conflict in Laos has been documented by several authors, some of whom participated actively in the war: notably, French Colonel Jean Deuve and the war correspondent Bernard Fall. Cf. Deuve, *Guérilla au Laos*; and Fall, *Anatomy of a crisis*. See also the digital archives on the war in Laos 1946–1973, which contains some of their original notes, including the debriefings of the fleeing refugees that convey their version of the conflict. Available at the University of Wisconsin-Madison Digitized Collections: https://search.library.wisc.edu/digital/ABKWLMXZVENTE48Q, [accessed 10 October 2024].

[69]John C. Pratt, *The Royal Laotian Air Force 1954–1970*. PACAF: Project CHECO Report (Christiansburg, VA: Dalley, 1970); Victor B. Anthony and Richard R. Sexton, *The war in northern Laos* (Washington, DC: Center for Air Force History, United States Air Force, 1993); Kenneth J. Conboy and James Morrison, *Shadow war: The CIA's secret war in Laos* (Boulder, CO: Paladin Press, 1995); James E. Parker, *Codename mule: Fighting the secret war in Laos for the CIA* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1995); Roger Warner, *Back fire: The CIA's secret war in Laos and its link to the war in Vietnam* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995).

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deliver aid to Laos directly in 1966.[70] This development demanded (re)building infrastructures of transport and procurement across the Sino-Lao border, marking the start of Chinese involvement in Lao infrastructures.

In 1967, China dispatched more than 4,000 troops, around 200 trucks, and a caravan of about 600 equines carrying weapons, ammunition, food, and medical supplies. This support secured the Pathet Lao's victory in Luang Namtha.[71] China perceived Luang Namtha as a strategic central junction and the host of many ethnic groups with deep connections all around the highlands. The CIA acknowledged this strategic importance in their internal reports: 'Nam Tha is a key point in the control of northwest Laos and there are clear military reasons for a Communist decision to seize and hold it.'[72]

The war affected all the ethnic groups in Luang Namtha. The bombing of various Lanten hamlets by the French 'Avion de Chasse' and American forces and, according to Lanten informants, unprovoked attacks and killings by the Yao Mien, raised up most of the Lanten community ('a thousand'),[73] which was very sympathetic to the Pathet Lao message. A significant proportion of Lanten adults and young men joined the Pathet Lao, expressing both their anger at the betrayal by their cultural 'brothers' and their engagement with the political movement.

The Lanten people were divided into combatants and refugees, as were many others during this time. The former, most of the Lanten population, joined the armies, with a dozen Lanten 'generals' leading the guerrilla groups in hybrid warfare that involved the visible and the invisible worlds. The refugees hid from the conflict near the mountains' most distant streams, living in temporary hunters' camps or migrating to refugee camps along the Mekong River, near the Thai-Lao border. It was time to dig dry holes in which to hide their ritual manuscripts and tools, and to invite the deities to enhance the ritual protections. Some deities occupied particular parts of the body (e.g. the deities known as the Five Marshalls occupy the four limbs and the thorax).[74] During this period, death in battle was often interpreted as a failure to abide by ritual rules or to engage the deities. This was, for instance, the case for one of the Vietnamese Lanten envoys assisting the Lanten militias in Luang Namtha: his comrades attributed his death (after being wounded in battle) to his breaching of

[70]Yanchi Quan and Weidong Du, *Gongheguo mishi* [Secret mission dispatched by the Republic] (Beijing: Guangming ribao Press, 1990), p. 64; Zhengqing Hu, *Yige waijiaoguan de riji* [Diaries of a diplomat] (Jinan: Yellow River Press, 1991), pp. 97–98.

[71]Zhang, 'China's involvement in Laos', p. 1158.

[72]F. C. Benson, 'China and Laos, 1945–1979: A kaleidoscopic relationship', 2019, p. 52. Available at https://www.academia.edu/39750943/China_and_Laos_1945_1979_A_Kaleidoscopic_Relationship, [accessed 10 October 2024].

[73]Although some Lanten families for different reasons fought on the Loyalist/US side, most of the Lanten community in Luang Namtha united as a front. This large number for such a small population is confirmed by both the Lanten war leaders and those Mien who fought them and had to flee later on, reporting their experiences and views as part of their debriefing at the refugee camps; for instance, see https://search.library.wisc.edu/digital/AUUF3DZOKQXHDD8Q/pages/AWCWNXKO54BLH28L, [accessed 10 October 2024].

[74]See J. Estevez, 'On becoming a ritual expert among the Lanten Yao Mun of Laos', in *Integrating strangers in society: Perspectives from elsewhere*, (eds) Jos D. M. Platenkamp and Almut Schneider (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

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the ritual rules by engaging in sexual intercourse with a prostitute, thus disrespecting those deities he was the living embodiment of.

The attacks by Royalist forces on local villages were followed by a retaliation that forced a massive migration of Hmong and especially of Mien to Thailand.[75] The formerly close relationship—'elder-younger' brothers—between Yao Mien and the Lanten Yao in Laos was completely broken at this point. From the 'thirteen Yao clans' that once populated Luang Namtha,[76] only the Lanten remained. The confrontation with the Mien brothers was bitter and left a deep scar in the Lanten collective memory. The enmity between the Laotian Mien and Lanten remains to this day.

Most reports convey that the Pathet Lao and its most active members were well received by the 'winning party' (including the Lanten) during the first year after the war—while the 'other party' remained expectant, waiting for the changes to come and concerned about the odds of retaliation for their participation in the war. In the second year after the war, the winning party tried to build a socialist infrastructure of production that organized the hamlets as 10-house units to manage collective work, and arranged many associations to assemble the community into clusters with specific functions and rules, such as women's and men's associations for different age groups. Collective work ensured an infrastructure of transport that was key to interlinking and modernizing the region, thus securing the Pathet Lao's control.[77] In Muang Sing, this included building a road to China to facilitate the trade and transport of Chinese military equipment and medical supplies supporting the Pathet Lao. Reports describe caravans of mules, up to 50 every day, carrying these items back and forth. These developments, which affected the internal organization of the local societies, along with mandatory active engagement in group activities (e.g. theatrical performances, dancing, singing), and the requirement to contribute rice and livestock to the Pathet Lao, forced many to flee to the refugee camps along the Thai-Lao border following the Mekong River.[78]

During this period, which lasted 45 years, the social ecology of Luang Namtha was repeatedly penetrated and torn apart by competing infrastructures of warfare emanating from France, the United States, Vietnam, Japan, and China. While Luang Namtha was less affected by the American carpet bombing and the bloodshed of the Laotian Civil War than other provinces in Laos, local populations were drawn into competing military infrastructures and mobilized to fight on different sides, ultimately leading to major displacements of different groups, followed by the construction of the

[75]Some communities returned from Thailand to Müang Sing in the early 1990s, but there has been almost no Mien presence in Luang Namtha since the war.

[76]McCarthy, *Surveying and exploring in Siam*, pp. 150–151.

[77]Benson, 'China and Laos', pp. 93–100.

[78]See the many interviews with refugees from different ethnic backgrounds, in particular the sections about their 'reasons for moving' and their 'life under the Pathet Lao within one year'. University of Wisconsin-Madison online archives—MR1 refugee interviews—Houa Khong 1970/1971. Available at https://search.library.wisc.edu/digital/AUUF3DZOKQXHDD8Q/pages/ABLRQ5RQJI4BM79E, [accessed 10 October 2024].

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state infrastructures of the Lao Peoples' Republic.[79] The commons were splintered and scattered.

Pacification and sedentarization under socialism

All of this turmoil resulted in the technical decolonization of the region and the rise of socialist one-party rule in China, Vietnam, and Laos. It also produced a period of contraction, especially during the last decade of the Cold War, ushering in a geopolitics of self-isolation objectified in the reinforcing and militarization of the borders, which imposed an all-time low on the movement of peoples, goods, and ideas across the region.

By 1968, most of the north of Laos was under the control of the Pathet Lao. With American disengagement from the Vietnam War, the Royalist forces collapsed; on 2 December 1975, the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) was established. The formation of the Lao PDR marked the end of the colonial era. France and the United States were suddenly substituted with Vietnamese and Soviet allies, who provided political and economic aid to the newly formed state. Nevertheless, the new state needed to manoeuvre its genesis under the direct influence of many geopolitical players. The Lao PDR was in close proximity to its neighbours and critical supporters; among them, Vietnam was an 'elder brother', a relationship exemplified in the 25-year Lao-Vietnamese treaty of friendship signed in July 1977. The new state was increasingly integrated into the military and administrative infrastructures of Vietnam, which sent troops to assist its junior ally, trained its bureaucracy, built its education system, and dominated its foreign policy.

Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in December 1978 prompted a strong response from China, which invaded North Vietnam. Laos was then instructed by Vietnam to reduce its relations with China. The disruption of the Sino-Lao friendship was finally manifested in the expulsion of the Chinese workers building the roads near Luang Prabang in March 1979, during the Sino-Vietnamese War that took place between 17 February and 16 March 1979. This event constituted a game-changing moment in Southeast Asia that forced all the local actors to take a position.[80] The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN, formed in 1967) was half relieved as the Sino-Vietnamese antagonism served the common interest of preserving Southeast Asia's agency as a separate political entity from China, hence encouraging a balance of power.[81] Nevertheless, the Vietnamese sphere of influence in Laos and Cambodia also generated concerns in the region, with fears of the revival of the former French Indochina under Vietnamese control.

[79]See Channapha Khamvongsa and Elaine Russell, 'Legacies of war: Cluster bombs in Laos', *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2009, pp. 281–306. Further reading is available at https://www.legaciesofwar.org, [accessed 10 October 2024].

[80]For a general framework of Laos, its national development process, and its dyadic political relationships with Vietnam and China, see Martin Stuart-Fox, 'Laos: The Vietnamese connection', *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 1980, pp. 191–209; M. Stuart-Fox, 'Laos in China's anti-Vietnam strategy', *Asia Pacific Community*, vol. 11, 1981, pp. 83–104; M. Stuart-Fox, 'LAOS: The Chinese connection', *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 2009, pp. 141–169.

[81]Sheldon W. Simon, 'ASEAN's strategic situation in the 1980s', *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 60, no. 1, Spring 1987, pp. 73–93.

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Meanwhile, far from the capital in Luang Namtha, the 1970s saw a radical transformation of the region. Most communities in Luang Namtha returned to their hamlets, re-founded old locations, found new ones, or migrated elsewhere.[82] Most of the Yao Mien left at this time and ended up settling in Chiang Rai province or emigrating to France and the United States.[83]

The last caravans in the Golden Quadrangle area lasted until the 1960s/1970s. The remnants of the KMT based in Burma, which had become a drug trafficking network, operated mule trains with up to 600 equines loaded with raw opium from the Wa states in Burma. The 1967 'Opium War' saw battles over the control of an opium caravan between the KMT and Shan and Lao forces at the present location of the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone.[84] The 1967 Opium War signalled the start of the end of all these parties—their boldness and subsequent exposure attracted too much international attention. This exposure conflicted with the end of the Thai Royal Opium Monopoly, disbanded in 1958 as part of an international framework of constriction of opium cultivation, and reverberated with American President Nixon's 'War on Drugs' public health crusade (1971), triggered by the growing heroin epidemic among American servicemen in Vietnam. In Thailand, which dominated the global illegal opiate trade at the time, the opium production suppression campaigns translated as violent military raids by the Thai Royal forces.[85] These incursions included the aerial bombing and seeding with landmines of the poppy fields and infrastructures of those villages, such as Yao Mien Pulangka,[86] whose sustainability was contingent on opium growing and its trade. Heroin produced in Burma, a bioproduct of opium that weights a fraction of the raw material and is thus easier to smuggle through vigilant border patrols, became the dominant commodity in the region. Without the opium trade (smuggling), there was no need for mules, and their breeding was eventually interrupted, de facto bringing to an end the caravans. The Southeast Asian massif thus lost its transnational 'neural connection', which was only reinstated with the arrival of 3G communications and the internet in the 2010s.

The 1970s started with the nation-building endeavour of the newly founded Lao PDR and the pacification of the militias. Some Lanten leaders, such as the war-commander Lao Pan (Namdee village) and Lao Tern (Namchang village), and later on their descendants, joined the newly formed political administration. Participating in the war allowed the Lao Lanten to be part of the national government for the first time. Once normality returned to the communities and geopolitics seemed reasonably

[82]Olivier Evrard and Yves Goudineau, 'Planned resettlement, unexpected migrations and cultural trauma in Laos', *Development and Change*, vol. 35, no. 5, 2004, pp. 937–962.

[83]Some returned in the 1990s to (re)found two villages nearby Müang Sing with the support of various international projects sponsoring local handicrafts. Nevertheless, except for a few small hamlets in the mountains, there is barely a Mien presence in Luang Namtha.

[84]The development of this war is detailed by McCoy, *The politics of heroin in Southeast Asia*; also, Richard Michael Gibson, *The secret army: Chiang Kai-shek and the drug warlords of the Golden Triangle* (Singapore: Wiley and Sons [Asia], 2011).

[85]Pierre-Arnaud Chouvy, *Opium: Uncovering the politics of poppy* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009).

[86]Douglas Miles carried out fieldwork in this village during this time and experienced first hand these developments. Douglas Miles, 'Doug Miles on the violent suppression of opium cultivation', *New Mandala*. Available at https://www.newmandala.org/doug-miles-on-the-violent-supression-of-opium-cultivation/, [accessed 10 October 2024].

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calm, most weapons were confiscated, leaving the villages with only the old hunting rifles employed for hunting and rituals. Any promise of ethnic or regional-based autonomy beyond the state-promoted administrative structure was reversed, leaving the Lao state as the sole owner of the land. As a modern state, the Lao PDR prioritized the sedentarization of its population, enforcing policies that prevented mobility and facilitated the carrying out of a national census and administrative-based centralized governance. In this matter, land concessions played a fundamental role in transforming the village infrastructures of communities such as the Lanten: most Lanten households in Luang Namtha (as happened with other ethnic groups in the region) received three hectares of land for housing, farming rice, and livestock. The number of Lanten villages has declined drastically in northern Laos since the start of the sedentarization process which was initiated in the early 1990s and promoted by the grant of land titles by the Lao government as the households concentrated around those settlements with better access to infrastructures (e.g. roads, electricity, water supply, schools).[87] As stated in Article 17 of the Lao Constitution, the land belongs to the national community, with the Lao state in charge of centralized and uniform management. At the same time, modern land titles signify a de facto right to use, a novelty for the formerly semi-nomadic Lanten and many other minorities who now reside only in allocated villages and towns. But for the Lanten the 'spiritual ownership' of the land, nevertheless, continues to lie in the hands of the deities and ancestors.

Land policy in Laos had a significant social and cultural impact as it ended shifting cultivation and prompted the fragmentation of the old household structure that, before the Lao Civil War, had agglutinated several generations and extended in-law families within longhouses. Lanten houses became smaller in size but grew in number to gain access to more land titles. Administrative units of several houses selected representatives to meet with the three official Naiban or mayors, each with a function (i.e. politics, economic, social). This approach fitted well with the traditional Lanten system, which was based on a council of elders formed by the heads of the clans, who were all senior ritual experts—basically echoing the new administrative approach. The major development was that the political Naiban had to be integrated into the Lao Party and be literate in the Lao language, which demanded some local adjustments. Once again, the Lanten communities coped well with this requirement, as their past relationship with the müang and their ritual systems had included these features and similar demands.

The end of the civil war also had an impact on ritual knowledge. The violence associated with the pervasive wars of much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had become part of the culture of the ritual lineages, with belligerent ritual experts frequently employing their ritual knowledge to attack each other. This spiritual warfare entailed using sorcery to send the spiritual body of the opponent to remote locations in the cosmological landscape, far away into mountains, to rivers across the Three Realms, or even beyond them into the unchartered Void or to Netherworld, as if the

[87]Olivier Ducourtieux, Jean Richard Laffort and Silinthone Sacklokham, 'Land policy and farming practices in Laos', *Development and Change*, vol. 36, 2005, pp. 499–526; Ian G. Baird and Philippe Le Billon, 'Landscapes of political memories: War legacies and land negotiations in Laos', *Political Geography*, vol. 31, no. 5, pp. 290–300.

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victim had already passed away.[88] A successful ritual would result in disease and, if untreated, eventually, in death. Counter-rituals are described in several manuscripts devoted to fetching the dispersed spiritual body of the patient. The current peaceful situation in Laos has made these manuscripts redundant since these attacks rarely happen now. The end of the war in the Lao PDR entailed the end of spiritual warfare between the ritual masters.

It was in this context that Namlue village was re-founded at the start of the 1970s, bringing together many Lanten families from different provenances in the region, some from villages that had ceased to exist during the long civil war, following a consolidation process of aggregation. The fragmentation and penetration into the mountains that had previously characterized Lanten society was inverted by a reality moulded by the state-promoted selective development of infrastructures of transport, education, and health that favoured particular locations, inviting grouping communities into larger villages—often composed of various ethnic groups following Lao-state policies to promote inter-ethnic understanding and to favour cultural hybridity.

The sealing of the state borders also impacted on the local populations, whose social cohesion and cultural identity were now increasingly restricted to communities within the same national boundaries. Previously, when the borders were open and the caravan trains interconnected the highlands like a syntactical network, these societies had formed ethnic networks that connected distant territories; now, each local network was on its own, integrated into different infrastructures of national state-building. The interwoven network identities that the local societies had previously enjoyed, existing as small mandalas of their own, were substituted by splintered identities as their members were incorporated into different national structures. The infrastructures of official language education and usage, as well as educational policies and economic markets, among other factors, have also influenced these identities. These changes affected the highland communities that were cut off from their transnational networks and cultural origins, transforming them, as in the Lanten case, into isolated cultural micro-islands with language(s), rituals, and manuscript cultures and beliefs unrelated to any of those around them, becoming a tiny 'minority' even if their kin could be counted in the hundreds of thousands beyond the borders.

Thus, Lanten in Laos, Vietnam, and China were cut off from each other, and were forced to develop a double identity articulated around the nation-state in which they resided, and around their own community. One identity is entirely Lanten and exists in the village, where the people wear traditional clothes, eat Lanten food, practise Lanten rituals, and speak Mun language; another identity exists in the city or when Lao representatives visit the village: the same people wear modern clothes and trendy accessories, consume Lao and international food, speak the Lao language, and perform *baci* and *su: kwuan* (Lao: ບາສີ and ສູ່ຂວັນ) rituals. These rituals, practised by all Laotians, thus function as a national 'ritual commons' that harmonizes religious differences by 'tying up' not only souls but also the 'hearts and minds' of those participating,

[88]The Lanten Netherworld provides expiatory purification for the dead once they are subjected to their first mortuary ritual. In this location, described as a 'prison', the dead are cleansed and re-educated for a period of—ideally—three years, so they can qualify as ancestors of their households. The rescue of the dead and their transformation into ancestors occur during the second mortuary ritual; see Estevez 'Conquering demons'.

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under the aegis of the Lao state.[89] Border closing and socialist state-building pushed an alignment between local society and the infrastructures of the state, so that the commons became homologous to conventional definitions of relatively self-contained communities framed by state infrastructures of administration and embedded in the hierarchical structures of governance.

New infrastructures, from the NEM to the BRI

The strictest period of isolation in the region lasted for a decade. In the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of its aid to both Vietnam and Laos, socialist orthodoxy was abandoned in 1991 with the promulgation of a new constitution of the Lao Peoples' Democratic Republic.[90] The policy shift signalled the end of near-total dependence on Vietnam, with the opening of the borders to both China and Thailand, as well as integration into the infrastructures of neo-liberal financing by seeking aid from the World Bank and Western development organizations. Under the 'New Economic Mechanism' (NEM), which had already been launched in 1986 in imitation of China's market reforms and the Soviet Union's perestroika, the state aimed to create conditions conducive to transforming the country into a modern market socialist nation attractive for private sector activity, especially foreign investors. The spirit of 1991 and the NEM translated into reforms implemented under the 'Chintanakan Mai' or 'New Thinking' and 'Kanpianpeng Mai' or 'Renovation'.[91]

A primary result of these developments was the construction of friendship bridges over the Mekong River, built using foreign aid, that started to connect Laos with the surrounding countries. The First Friendship Bridge between Laos and Thailand (Vientiane prefecture/Nong Khai province), supported by Australian Aid, was opened in April 1994. Since then seven of these friendship bridges have been built or are being built, some including road and rail links, connecting Laos to Thailand and Myanmar over the Mekong River. The year 1991 also saw the formation of a Lao–Chinese Joint Border Committee to increase trade and commercial investments.

The economic corridor approach was adopted by the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) countries in 1998 to help accelerate subregional development. Economic corridors are areas, usually along major roadways, that host a variety of economic and social activities. Northern Laos is part of the North-South Subregion Economic

[89]Mayoury Ngaosyvathn, 'Individual soul, national identity: The "baci-sou khuan" of the Lao', *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1990, pp. 283–307; Singh Sarinda, 'Religious resurgence, authoritarianism, and "ritual governance": Baci rituals, village meetings, and the developmental state in rural Laos', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 73, no. 4, 2014, pp. 1059–1079.

[90]M. Stuart-Fox, 'Political patterns in Southeast Asia', in *Eastern Asia: An introductory history*, (ed.) Colin Mackerras (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1992), pp. 94–107; Simon Creak and Keith Barney, 'Conceptualising party-state governance and rule in Laos', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, vol. 48, no. 5, 2018, pp. 693–716; and, for more recent developments, cf. Soulatha Sayalath and Simon Creak, 'Regime renewal in Laos: The Tenth Congress of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party', in *Southeast Asian Affairs 2017*, (eds) Daljit Singh and Malcolm Cook (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2017), pp. 179–200.

[91]Norihiko Yamada, *Re-thinking of 'Chintanakan Mai' (New Thinking): New perspective for understanding Lao PDR* (Chiba: Institute of Developing Economies, Japan External Trade Organization, 2013); and N. Yamada, 'Legitimation of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party: Socialism, Chintanakan Mai (New Thinking) and reform', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, vol. 48, no. 5, 2018, pp. 717–738.

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Corridor, which aims (as all corridors do) to facilitate better connectivity through physical infrastructure, market integration, and the facilitation of cross-border trade and travel—building in the process a transnational commons. The development of the corridors requires the construction of transport infrastructures that fundamentally impact on local societies, no matter their proximity to the roads or rails. The map of Luang Namtha and its connections with the countries around it has been radically transformed during the last decade of Chinese infrastructural investments.[92]

The new infrastructures have stimulated the transformation of Laos at the macro level. Key to Luang Namtha is the construction of friendship bridges connecting it with Thailand (through Huay Xai in Bokeo province) and Myanmar (Müang Long), the upgrading of three international checkpoints (two with Thailand, one with China), and the creation of various bilateral checkpoints with China and Myanmar (open to locals and goods). Airports with affordable flights and low-cost air cargo have also been transformative for connecting the capital and all the major cities in Laos, with flights lasting less than one hour from Vientiane to Luang Namtha (compared with the 22-hour bus trip). The Chinese-built high-speed rail line started operations in December 2021; the expressway to reinforce the outdated highway NR3 (to be devoted to local transport) is under construction at the time of writing. Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, the opening of the rail line ended Luang Namtha's slow-motion past, bringing into reality the corridors across the Great Mekong region in which Luang Namtha province is again in a strategic position.

Chinese efforts to promote the corridor have two key rationales. First, it extends China's Great Western Development Strategy to open up China's landlocked west, which economically lags behind the country's globally connected eastern coast. Further, the Sino-Lao border is expected to function as the enabling 'golden gate' to make possible China's interconnections with Thailand, Vietnam, and Cambodia, which were historically non-supportive of the expansive Chinese plans. In these efforts, Luang Namtha constitutes the first milestone in China's land transport hub to Southeast Asia.

The China-Laos Cross-Border Economic Cooperation Zone (ECZ) was announced in 1993, resulting in 1995 in the designation of a commercial area near the Sino-Lao border to foment Chinese enterprises—the seed of what would become in 2003 the Boten Special Economic Zone (SEZ).[93] The SEZs were created as social experiments designed to boost international cooperation and economic liberalization under controlled conditions. The ECZ are bilateral agreements (granting autonomous sources of law) between the partnering countries; the SEZ can be private, public, or hybrid

[92]Jessica DiCarlo, 'Grounding global China in northern Laos: The making of the infrastructure frontier', PhD thesis, University of Colorado Boulder, 2021; Seth Schindler, and J. DiCarlo (eds), *The rise of the infrastructure state: How US-China rivalry shapes politics and place worldwide* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2022); Seth Schindler and J. DiCarlo, 'Road, river, and rail: An infrastructural history of the *Mise En Valeur* of Laos', in *The Routledge handbook of contemporary Laos*, (eds) Holly High, Simon Creak and Oliver Tappe (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

[93]Government of Laos (Prime Minister Office), 'Prime Ministerial Decree 162 on Border Trade Zone at Boten, Louangnamtha Province', 2002. Available at https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/acc_e/lao_e/WTACCLAO5A1_LEG_6.pdf; and Government of Laos (Ministry of Planning and Investment), 'Special economic zones in Lao PDR', 2021. Available at https://laosez.gov.la/pdf/SEZ_PCL_2021_en.pdf, [both accessed 11 October 2024].

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enterprises. In Laos, full planning, regulatory authority, and judicial autonomy are granted to the zone developers, creating liminal spaces close to a 'state of exception'. The SEZs in Laos and beyond were established under the aegis of the Free Trade Area (FTA) agreement signed by ASEAN and China in November 2001 as part of the Chinese economic diplomacy agenda and ASEAN's strategic development plan. Through the free trade agreement, China and ASEAN aimed to stimulate the development of the former's southwest provinces and the latter's northern region.[94]

There are two Sino-Lao SEZ projects—Boten Beautiful Land in Luang Namtha province and the Golden Triangle SEZ in Bokeo province. Each has an international checkpoint. The latter was built (after relocating its population) over the village where the last Opium War (1967) took place. Scandals, controversy, openings, and closings have surrounded these two notorious projects.[95] When the Huay Sai-Boten Expressway is completed, Boten SEZ will become a central transportation hub, while the Golden Triangle SEZ aims to become a touristic centre hosting the only legal casinos in the Golden Quadrangle. The expressway, a vital development of the Kunming-Bangkok highway, will reduce the Lao route between China and Thailand to less than two hours, instead of the current five hours with deplorable road conditions that make it prone to accidents. A third project comprises the planned Japan-Thai invested AMATA Smart and Eco Cities in Natuey, Luang Namtha, and Na Mor, Oudomxai, both to be built on Lanten-owned land—a US$1 billion industrial complex built next to the new railway station will become a model for modern industrial parks in Laos. These three projects are setting up the social dynamics that will drive the region for the next decades.

The full impact on the Lanten communities is yet to be seen and studied. The low population density and the lack of economic resources have prevented faster development for Luang Namtha, which remains an agriculture-based economy. The most likely impact is the outmigration of youth to work in the new SEZs and beyond—and the acceleration of aggregation processes that have for decades depopulated small villages, especially those hamlets in the periphery of the müang. The new infrastructural and economic developments opened a new type of commons, centred around SEZs populated by migrants from different countries, occupying different social strata—entrepreneurs and managers from China and the Chinese Southeast Asian diaspora, office support staff from Laos, and construction workers and labourers from Myanmar—circulating back and forth from their villages following the rhythms of festivals and commercial boom and bust. These commons also include Chinese infrastructures of online banking and eCommerce to which Chinese language, social

[94]Daojiong Zha, 'The politics of China-ASEAN economic relations: Assessing the move toward a free trade area', *Asian Perspective*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2002, pp. 53–82. See also Simon Rowedder, *Cross-border traders in northern Laos: Mastering smallness* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022).

[95]J. DiCarlo, 'Boten special economic zone: Boten Beautiful Land'. The people's map of global China, updated 15 March 2022. Available at https://thepeoplesmap.net/project/boten-special-economic-zone-boten-beautiful-land, [accessed 11 October 2024]. See also Josto Luzzu, 'Dealing with the future experimental governance in the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone', PhD thesis, The University of Sydney, 2021; A. Rippa, 'Zomia 2.0: Branding remoteness and neoliberal connectivity in the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone, Laos', *Social Anthropology*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2019, pp. 253–269; and A. Rippa, 'From boom to bust—to boom again? Infrastructural suspension and the making of a development zone at the China–Laos borderlands', in *Development zones in Asian borderlands*, (eds) Mona Chettri and Michael Eilenberg (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021).

media, and currency are central; hence, setting the foundation for a new layer of infrastructural sedimentation.

The end of the opium economy and the politics of cultural heritage

While the impact of the new infrastructures of economic development is only beginning to be felt, the dismantling of the infrastructures of opium production and consumption is a work in progress.[96] The instability in the Shan states in Myanmar, directly neighbouring northern Laos, under the control of drug lords and guerrillas, may constitute the last redoubt of the old paradigm—this region continues to produce most of the opium and methamphetamines traded in the Golden Quadrangle.[97] The shadow infrastructures of governance fuelled and sponsored by illicit drugs delay the full implementation of the Upper Mekong Region Corridor, and, to a certain extent, keep it anchored to its boisterous past. As a result, the Lao-Myanmar Friendship Bridge in Müang Long is only open to locals for safety reasons, preventing the projected circulation across borders within the Golden Quadrangle that will deliver the long-promised prosperity.[98]

At the micro level, the illegalization of opium cultivation has entailed a radical change for the Lanten. For decades and for many, opium cultivation had remained a stable cash crop, with the surplus production being sent to Thailand and Vietnam as opium or heroin. Many adult Lanten were producers and consumers, but even if one was a buyer, local production served as a mechanism to keep the price of opium low.[99] The USAID aerial surveys on poppy cultivation in northwestern Laos in 1973/1974

[96]Olivier Ducourtieux, Silinthone Sacklokham and François Doligez, 'Eliminating opium from the Lao PDR: Impoverishment and threat of resumption of poppy cultivation following "illusory" eradication', in *Shifting cultivation policies: Balancing environmental and social sustainability*, (ed.) Malcolm Cairns (Boston: CABI, 2017), pp. 593–616.

[97]Jinhee Lim and Taekyoon Kim, 'Bringing drugs into light: Embedded governance and opium production in Myanmar's Shan state', *Oxford Development Studies*, vol. 49, no. 2, 2021, pp. 105–118.

[98]The Luang Namtha–Xiengkok Lao-Myanmar Friendship Bridge across the Mekong River is core to the NR17 (140 km), part of the ASEAN-India transport corridor, which starts in Luang Namtha and passes through Myanmar, enabling a loop of roads interconnecting the Golden Quadrangle.

[99]Lacroze, an agronomist present in Luang Namtha from 1946 to 1954, describes the Lanten he met as consumers of opium, not cultivators. The production of opium among the Lanten often depended on contingency (e.g. relocation or recent migrations). But, more importantly, due to their proximity to the müang, Lacroze's perception would have also been shared by any foreigner visiting the Lanten villages in Luang Namtha in the early 2000s or even in 2010; meanwhile, many small opium fields were hiding in the mountains at a few hours hike from the households taking care of them—as Estevez has documented himself. Growing opium constitutes a straightforward and inexpensive process provided one has the necessary means and resides near the right location to do it so, while purchasing it for daily consumption demands a steady amount of cash (it is an expensive habit) and entails some risks during the trading. It was only through state control, the deforestation process, and especially the active aerial opium surveillance that opium production came to an end among the Lanten and many other communities engaged in its production and trade (with a few Akha communities being unofficially allowed to produce small batches catering for those elders haunted by their addiction). Luc Lacroze, 'Monographie de deux provinces septentrionales du Laos: Phongsaly et Houa Khong' [Monograph of two northern provinces of Laos: Phongsaly and Houa Khong], in *Les Cahiers de Péninsule*, no. 1 (Metz: Olizane, 1994). For this same historical period and location, see also Eric Pietrantoni, *Population du Laos de 1912 A 1945* [Population of Laos from 1912 to 1945] (Paris: White Lotus Press, 1953); and E. Pietrantoni, 'La population du Laos en 1943

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reported annual production of between eight and 53 metric tonnes,[100] a potential average of 20 metric tonnes, making Laos a top poppy producer worldwide. After its defeat in Vietnam and Laos, the United States changed its attitude towards opium production, now moving to promote its eradication in the region.

With the end of the opium caravans in the 1970s, horses and ponies were no longer a livestock familiar to most local societies. They became a mythical element in the Lanten ritual system, impacting on the performance of ritual expertise: ritual possession by horses, once a fundamental trade signature of the Lanten ritual experts, and the associated ceremonies have been increasingly fading.

In 2005, it became illegal to cultivate opium poppy in Laos, leaving those communities devoted to its production without the means to make a living, but still living with their addiction. The price per kilo of opium tripled from 2002 to 2005, reaching 5.461.000LAK per kilo,[101] without alternative cash crops to deal with the demand. This had a devastating impact on the ritual economy and society. Without opium as a cash crop and the necessary trade network to maximize the profit of its cultivation, many Lanten households lost their major source of silver and the capacity to sponsor ceremonies with the splendour and frequency that they had been accustomed to for over a century.

This development deeply affected the Lanten villages: without opium profits but subjected to their habit, many families resorted to selling (and sometimes stealing to sell) their heirlooms to hawkers based in Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai. Most of the unscrupulous art dealers paid in opium for the ritual objects that they purchased in Laos. Silver jewellery, ritual weapons, Daoist robes, paintings, and ritual manuscripts flooded the market.[102] According to some Lanten elders, the itinerant traders based in Chiang Rai who acted as intermediaries for collectors and art galleries in Chiang Mai, and who played a fundamental role in the depletion of the Lanten material heritage in Laos from the 1980s to the 1990s, were Yao Mien. This contributed to further deepening the animosity between the Lanten and their Yao Mien ethnic 'brothers'. The sinking of a boat that was illegally crossing the Mekong River full of cargo (all ritual paraphernalia, including many manuscripts) ended this trade since at least one of the principal Mien traders died in the event.

This marked a low point for the Lanten, who were now relatively isolated, and cut off from the circulatory commons that had been facilitated by the opium trade, unable to afford the cost of rituals, and stuck with addiction. Without a viable substitute for opium, many Lanten became the workforce in watermelon and banana plantations

dans son milieu géographique' [The population of Laos in 1943 in its geographical environment], *Bulletin de la Société des Etudes Indochinoises*, Nouvelle Série, XXXII, 1957.

[100]1973 and 1974 surveys of poppy cultivation in northern Laos by Heng L. Thung for USAID, digitized by University of Wisconsin–Madison Libraries. Available at https://search.library.wisc.edu/digital/A5YKWHIG5BUG4H9B/pages/ANUWD4P47BKCEW8M and https://search.library.wisc.edu/digital/A5YKWHIG5BUG4H9B/pages/AMLH5Y6CIENPVB9D, [both accessed 10 October 2024].

[101]United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 'Laos Opium Survey 2005', June 2005. Available at https://www.unodc.org/pdf/laopdr/lao_opium_survey_2005.pdf, [accessed 10 October 2024].

[102]Hjorleifur Jonsson, 'Yao collectibles', *Journal of the Siam Society*, vol. 88, no. 1 and 2, 2000, pp. 222–31.

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owned by Chinese companies or led by Chinese entrepreneurs.[103] The jobs generated were short term and entailed health-related risks as most companies overused chemical fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides.

The poverty of the most disadvantaged Lanten families led them to send their children, wearing traditional clothes, to Theravada Buddhist temples in Luang Namtha at the time of major morning alms ceremonies to collect food offerings that accidentally fell to the ground. Ceremony participants light-heartedly pointed at those children as the embodiments of the hungry ghosts to which the offerings were ritually presented.

The 'rubber boom' in Luang Namtha during the late 2000s finally offered an effective transition from opium to modern cash crops.[104] Almost every Lanten household participated in this market, dedicating one-third of their land to it; the other two-thirds was earmarked for farming rice and vegetables, and building the household, which provided space for farming livestock (primarily chickens and swine). Rubber trees need seven years to mature enough to enable tapping; the income is relatively steady once this stage is achieved. At the start of this study, the prices were substantial (20.000LAK or around two euros per kilo in 2010), providing the Lanten households with a monthly income—and one that was legal and available to every household willing to plant rubber trees. The rubber farms also allowed farmers to apply to banks for credit. Rubber cultivation, tapping, and selling were straightforward in Namlue village as a rubber company was established nearby, and the villagers owned the land and the trees, which they purchased as seedlings, assuming all the risk-related costs of the investment but then also all the benefits.[105] As a result of the seven-year growing gap between planting and first tapping, in the early 2000s most of the families in Namlue village were struggling economically, which resulted in the postponement of major

[103]Antonella Diana, *Navigating the way through the market: A first assessment of contract farming in Luang Nam Tha (Lao PDR)* (Vientiane: GTZ [German Organization for Technical Assistance and Cooperation], April 2008); Chris Lyttleton, Paul Cohen, Houmphanh Rattanavong, Bouakham Thongkhamhane and Souriyanh Sisaerngrat, *Watermelons, bars and trucks: Dangerous intersections in northwest Lao PDR. An ethnographic study of social change and health vulnerability along the road through Muang Sing and Muang Long* (Laos: Institute of Cultural Research of Laos and Macquarie University, 2004).

[104]Miles Kenney-Lazar, 'Rubber production in northern Laos: Geographies of growth and contractual diversity', Fieldwork Report, 2009; Anna-Klara Lindeborg, 'Where gendered spaces bend: The rubber phenomenon in Northern Laos', PhD thesis, Uppsala University, 2012; Shi Weiyi, *Rubber boom in Luang Namtha: A transnational perspective* (Vientiane: GTZ, February 2008); W. Shi, 'Rubber boom in Luang Namtha: Seven years later', Fieldnotes, 27 April 2015. Available at https://landmatrix.org/media/uploads/pagesucsdeduw3shirubber_boom_in_luang_namtha_seven_years_laterpdf.pdf, [accessed 10 October 2024].

[105]During that time, the role of the German International Cooperation Agency (GIZ) and their projects on microcredits and land title mapping were very relevant for many families for it enabled guidance and a model for a safe transition into the market-oriented economy. The microcredits assisted many in buying tractors and seedlings, and the properly mapped land titles secured their historical access to their land. See, for example, Souphith Darachanthara et al., *Microfinance in the Lao PDR* (Vientiane: GTZ, 2009). Available at https://www.giz.de/en/downloads/giz2009-en-microfinance-loas.pdf; Vera Scholz and Carsten Gloeckner, *GIZ Land Program Laos: Impact study* (Vientiane: GIZ, 2017). Available at https://data.opendevelopmentmekong.net/en/library_record/we-are-feeling-safe-about-our-land-now-giz-land-program-laos-assessing-the-contribution-to-changes-; Information and Knowledge Management Unit, *Village land management a few years on—what has changed? An impact study of GIZ-supported land use planning and land registration in Lao PDR* (Eschborn: GIZ, 2019). Available at https://landportal.org/fr/file/46989/download [all accessed 10 October 2024].

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ceremonies such as ordinations marking the coming-of-age of male youth. A period of ritual contraction lasted from 2005 to 2010, with normality in ritual performance returning in the early 2010s. These periods of economic contraction-and-expansion are well addressed by the Lanten ritual system, which allows for postponing major ceremonies in exchange for ritual contracts and minor rituals that cater for basic ritual payments.

Modern times, characterized by nation-states and state-borders, have signified the end of the shifting cultivation of the Lanten and many other Upland groups, and, thus, of their past mobility. The Lanten perceive sedentarization as a lack of self-governance: on the one hand, they have land titles, partake in local governments, and are proud citizens of the Lao state. However, they are no longer free to settle in the forest; cutting the trees and hunting is illegal, and there are now mostly only rubber trees around their villages. The socioecological commons, defined by the interactions between villages and the forest, is transformed. The perception of the forests—now National Protected Areas (NPA)—has thus also changed. As the interactions of the younger generations with the primary forest decrease and the rubber farms expand, the forest demons are described as failing—'their armies are not so strong now'. Tiger attacks, frequent in the 1970s, are rare nowadays. People do not get 'sick' as they used to, notably with diseases ascribed to deities of the forest such as extreme cases of influenza-like symptoms that quickly evolved into an often-irreversible sudden state of coma followed by death, all in less than 48 hours. Hospitals can deal effectively with many diseases of the body, while those of the 'soul' still require healing rituals. The lack of wild forest around the Lanten villages has thus signified the end of spiritual warfare against the forest and its spiritual inhabitants. As a result, many specific rituals have become obsolete and their performance has been interrupted, since there is no need for them in the current environmental situation. 'Taming' the forest has resulted in the pacification of its cosmological order. Even then, the spiritual 'owners' of the land, in spite of the state-granted land titles, still need to be ritually honoured.

Easier travel connections have led to the development of eco-tourism in Luang Namtha. While they have been on the receiving end of eco-tourists seeking the most 'authentic' local ethnic groups, few Lanten villages have benefitted from this industry since most of the profit has flowed to the eco-tour companies despite their marketized 'community-based tourism'. The villages and hosting households receive modest cash payments, but the lion's share of benefits has remained in the city-based travel offices. Lack of communication with visitors has minimized interaction beyond the basic translation provided by local guides who have minimal understanding of Lanten culture. Despite the little exchange, one of the main impacts of eco-tourism has been the depletion of the Lanten material culture, including ritual manuscripts, which are sold to eco-tourists and collectors as souvenirs.

The development of eco-tourism and its associated issues have become part of the growing infrastructures of cultural heritage, which are mobilized by both the Lao and Chinese states for political and economic reasons, and appropriated by the Lanten for their own purposes. On 18–19 November 2016, an International Convention of the Yao Nationality took place under official patronage in the Bama Yao Autonomous County, Guangxi province, China. Three Lao Lanten representatives from Namdee village were invited to join, along with many other overseas Yao from Thailand, Vietnam, France, and the United States. The Convention performed a welcome ceremony to honour the

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deities, and worked to promote the (re)establishment of relationships among the Yao in China and all around the world. Modern academic books produced in China portraying songs and the histories and traditions of particular branches of Yao were given as presents to the overseas participants. The Namdee villagers brought them back home, where they attracted much interest from ritual specialists who tried chanting the ritual texts contained therein. All these developments signify the end of isolationism and denote the start of a new era of supranational re-connections, promoted by the Chinese state to capitalize on its ethnic minorities as part of the BRI. Similar invitations were received by the Lanten community in Luang Namtha in 2023 to join Yao festivals in Hunan and Guangxi provinces in China—the travel costs being covered by the organizers for a selected group of Lanten representatives.

In 2021, on behalf of the Lao government, the Luang Namtha Tourist Office conferred on Namlue village the title of 'Cultural Village', which serves as a formal label of exemplary civility. Local government officials and villagers are together responsible for monitoring behaviour that violates the tenets of the accepted moral codes: a Cultural Village serves as a model to others, in this case, as an example of Lanten culture. In addition to this development, all the Lanten villages in Luang Namtha were invited by local representatives of the Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism, to create a Lanten council comprising seven senior members to represent, promote, and preserve Lanten culture—an important acknowledgement for such a small society in northern Laos.

December 2022 saw Lanten women wearing traditional garments invited to participate, together with several other representatives of local ethnic communities, in the Great Celebration for the People of the Lao-China Border 2022. This event, which took place in Boten, was hosted by the Chinese People's Association of Yunnan Province for Friendship with Foreign Countries, the Information Office of the People's Government of Yunnan Province, the People's Government of the Xishuangbanna Prefecture, and the Consulate General of the Lao PDR in Kunming with the pivotal collaboration of the Yunnan Haicheng Industrial Group Company Limited, the project developer of Boten Special Economic Zone/Boten Beautiful Land since 2012 (with a 50-year lease of the area).

Infrastructures of cultural heritage, with their mobilization of political, economic, and academic resources and networks to produce a mode of ethnic minority culture that is politically legible and economically marketable, inscribe the Lanten of Luang Namtha into a type of commons defined by new forms of relating to both the state and the market.[106] In this regard, the state-sponsored infrastructure of ethnic minority heritage promotion is far more developed in China than in Laos, which has only recently begun to follow a model similar to China's. Within this model, the Lanten of Luang Namtha, previously one of the smallest and most marginal of ethnic minorities in Laos, find a new status, visibility, and legitimacy within both Lao state-building

[106]On this matter, see also Michael Kleinod, *The recreational frontier: Ecotourism in Laos as ecorational instrumentality* (Göttingen: Göttingen University Press, 2017); and Floramante S. J. Ponce, 'Moving away from the margins? How a Chinese hydropower project made a Lao community modern and comfortable', in *Extracting development: Contested resource frontiers in mainland Southeast Asia*, (eds) Oliver Tappe and Simon Rowedder (Singapore: ISEAS, 2022).

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as one of several ethnic minorities whose culture is recognized by the state alongside other ethnic minorities; and in relation to transnational relations with China, as a branch of the formally recognized Yao nationality with roots in China.

Integration with the modern Lao state has changed the religious significance of the imperial metaphor that structures the Lanten Daoist ritual system. Historically, the Chinese imperial bureaucratic structure of Lanten ritual served as a 'role game' providing training and insight to novices and ritual masters on how to operate, interact, and negotiate with imperial Chinese officers and bureaucratic infrastructure. Ritual literacy in Lanten Chinese constituted a practical advantage in the borderlands of South China, which could be put to use in other domains such as contracts and records. After they had migrated into the dominions of the Tai müang in the region of Luang Namtha, the language of official interactions became Tai Yuan, but the modes of interaction with the local rulers was analogous to those with Chinese imperial officials, for which the ritual system retained its relevance as a template. But with the founding and expansion of the Lao PDR, Lao, with its own script, became the mandatory language in the transmission of knowledge in the modern school system that non-Tai societies such as the Lanten had to acquire to be better integrated. In this new context, the Lanten ritual language, a variation of Chinese, became an exclusively religious language, only employed in the ritual context to communicate with the deities and ancestors. With Lao as the lingua franca and official language of the state and its administration, wedding contracts, census, education, and markets demanded literacy in Lao language. For decades, Chinese literacy was made obsolete in northern Laos. But now, with the growing Chinese presence in the wake of the BRI, and with increasing opportunities for scholarships in Chinese universities and employment in Chinese enterprises, the Chinese language is becoming popular again, reinforcing the interest of the young generation in learning Lanten Chinese as a bridge to Mandarin.

The Lanten have a new opportunity to gain agency and benefit from the new geopolitical Great Game unfolding around them. Will their Chinese literacy and past imperial heritage constitute an advantage, or will Mandarin and the Chinese market jeopardize the reproduction of their ritual system?

Conclusion

Following the civil war, the closing of international borders, and the sedentarization of the Lanten through the construction of a socialist state, the Lanten in northern Laos had become an isolated micro-cultural island—a relatively closed commons that corresponded to conventional definitions of the 'village community'. In the past decade, with the increasingly rapid construction of new infrastructures of transportation and economic development, the social morphology of the Lanten is undergoing yet another profound transformation: the Lanten are joining new mobilities and circulations. Increasingly, the younger generations seek employment beyond Namlue village, finding work in Luang Namtha town, in the Special Economic Zones of Boten or of the Golden Triangle, or even further afield in Vientiane, Vietnam, Thailand, or China. Ease of transport has allowed the Lanten to reconnect with their ethnic brethren in Vietnam and China. While the Vietnamese 'elder brother' has long been a destination for Laotians seeking higher education, China has joined the soft-power competition by

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making university scholarship opportunities abundantly available. Lanten high school graduates can now easily obtain scholarships to study in either Vietnam or China. While Vietnamese education is still an important ticket for access to jobs in the Lao civil service, Chinese language skills offer an advantage for higher-paid jobs in Chinese businesses in the Special Economic Zones or elsewhere in Laos.

In some ways, the expanding circulations are a reversion to the highly mobile and circulatory social morphology of Lanten society, which, until the Indochinese wars, was semi-nomadic and spread along routes of commerce and communication that connected the borderlands of present-day China, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand. The new highways, railways, and transport corridors overlay the old trade routes and facilitate the revival of historic ties—but at an exponentially higher speed and intensity.

The impact on the Lanten ritual system is likely to be profound. We have already discussed how the 'Laotization' of political relationships, the pacification of the society, the dismantling of the opium culture, and the domestication of the forests have led to certain elements of the ritual infrastructure diminishing in prosperity, fading away, being sold off, or becoming forms of sedimented memory rather than tools for mastering the idioms of imperial political ritual, engaging in spiritual warfare, or ostentatious displays of wealth and spiritual power through silver ornamentation purchased with opium.

But the new infrastructures of transportation and communication introduce another, perhaps even deeper, change, at the level of temporality and spatiality. Lanten ritual is synchronized with the temporalities and rhythms of rice cultivation within the local ecosystem. This involves not only the timing of ritual cycles, but, crucially for the transmission of ritual knowledge, the periods of time required for ritual specialists to learn their trade from their masters: a task that involves years of learning through imitation and of constituting one's own store of 'religious capital' and charisma by learning, copying, and constituting one's own collection of manuscripts and ritual tools. The dry season defining those few months between harvest and planting (roughly October to February) was devoted to this endeavour in the past. The years of investment of time required for this cultivation of ritual knowledge and capacity are incompatible with the temporality of migrant labourers who move to larger towns and cities for extended periods of time, returning to the village for shorter periods between jobs or for brief family visits. This trend is only beginning in Namlue and the other Lanten villages in the region, and it is too early to draw conclusions about its long-term effects on the Lanten ritual system. One can assume, however, that the ritual system will undergo more simplifications, and/or that ritual knowledge will become more concentrated among a smaller number of specialists who will become increasingly professionalized. The link between the ritual infrastructure and the socioecological commons is gradually becoming tenuous.

On the other hand, the growing infrastructures of minority ethnic identity and cultural heritage, which are facilitated by the transport, economic, and political connections of the BRI, imply a reformatting and repackaging of traditional culture and ritual, giving it a new value and salience for performative engagement with both the Lao and Chinese states as well as tourist operators, opening opportunities for negotiating and acquiring economic, social, and political resources. However, the infrastructures of heritage involve the translation and representation of an embodied

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ritual tradition into modern media, such as political discourses, academic publications, photos, documentary films, exhibitions, performances, ethnic fashion, and experiential visits, which embed the tradition into political and discursive ecologies other than the natural ecology of the forest. These situate the Lanten within new symbolic and performative contexts such as line-ups of national ethnic minorities, global networks of the Yao, or lineages of Daoism. In these expansions of the infrastructural commons of the Lanten, other actors such as state officials, development organizations, eco-tourist entrepreneurs, scholars, members of other ethnic groups, members of other branches of the Yao, or practitioners of other branches of Daoism will become key interlocutors in relation to which Lanten culture and religion are presented, performed, interpreted, repackaged, and reshaped.

The emerging infrastructural commons of cultural heritage involve a profound reorientation of the ritual system, which, traditionally, is internally oriented within the Lanten communities and externally oriented against the dangers of the forest. The emerging configuration implies an external performative orientation towards the new actors listed above. But this external orientation can be compared to the political cosmology embedded within the Lanten ritual system itself: a modality for engaging with external powers, represented in the form of a Chinese emperor and his bureaucracy. The method for engaging with these powers, which we have elsewhere called 'imperial magic',[107] involves inviting the imperial agents in an act of performative submission, appropriating their power in the service of one's own local agency, and then sending them off. In that sense, the Lantens' willing participation in the new forms of external orientation through cultural heritage involves the creative deployment of this modality towards the new agents who can be accessed through the new infrastructures that extend deeper into Laos, into China, and even overseas: officials, businesses, tourists, scholars, cultural producers, distant Yao, and distant Daoists.

The story of the transformations of Lanten society and religion that we have narrated in this article could be seen as one of a tumultuous transition from tradition to modernity. To be sure, the hyper-modern world that the Lanten are currently entering as they reconnect to China through the BRI is radically different from the world of mandala polities and caravans that they entered when they migrated to Luang Namtha in the early nineteenth century, along a route that had originated in China. But, by adopting an infrastructural frame, we reveal how the ritual system of the Lanten has always been deeply tied with the shifting infrastructural commons of imbricated natural, economic, and political infrastructures. The ritual system, as a means of mediating the Lantens' relationships with these infrastructures, has been entangled with all of them.

As a 'portable infrastructure' that the Lanten took with them along their migrations and that enabled their 'mobile commons', the ritual system provided a means to integrate and engage coherently with the multiple powers they encountered in a chaotic, dangerous, war-torn human and non-human world. For the Lanten, European colonialism and its aftermath in the form of the Indochina wars, which raged for much of the twentieth century, were primarily marked by the expansion of the infrastructures

[107]Estevez, 'Conquering demons'; David Palmer, 'Warriors of the city state: Chin Wan, Chinese religion, and Hong Kong localism', *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 83, no. 2, 2024, pp. 347–359.

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of opium cultivation and transportation, allowing the Lanten to prosper materially, to enrich their ritual life, and to maintain links through mule trains with fellow Lanten dispersed in the highlands under different regimes. Ironically, it was the gradual pacification of society and of the forests under the Lao Peoples' Democratic Republic that turned parts of the Lanten ritual system into the remnants of a past that was no longer operative, that isolated them through sedentarization and the closing of international borders, and that reduced the economic basis of ritual flourishing through the banning of opium cultivation. Sufficiency and sustainability existed in the microcosms of the villages, but joining the city life implies dependency and being part of the cash/market economy—Lanten clothes demand time, know-how, and a forest (i.e. cotton and dye plants), and anything else costs money. Now, the new infrastructural connections of the BRI once again place the Lanten in the midst of networks of transportation and communication. This time, they facilitate their transregional and transnational circulations, but also their dispersed outward migration, leading to a potentially irreversible dissolution of the intricately complex Lanten ritual system, whose existence is likely to be maintained through its conversion into cultural heritage, offering a different type of symbolic resource for the Lanten to draw on, and a new articulation with the rapidly evolving infrastructural commons. It remains to be seen to what extent this cultural heritage will become part of the identity of the Lanten as they find their way in the new world of the Belt and Road.

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