The Status of Lao Literature and Nation Building: The moral and aesthetic structure of human adaptation[1]

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Introduction

There are two main points to this paper. The first is conscious, that the literary heritage of the Lao language is impressive, but that it needs to be made available to the reading public of Laos, and it needs to be made available to the world, in the same way that the city of Louang Prabang has been made available as a world heritage site. The second point is more of an unconscious one, that the function of literature in cultures and societies is corrective of a too purposive view of the world, a view that has been perpetrated, I am afraid, by the anti-aesthetic bias of the West, particularly in the form of the separation of Mind and Body. We need to keep both of these points in mind when we are discussing the role of literature in nation building.

I would like to begin by noting that Lao is a language particularly rich in classical literature, a fact that is all the more significant given the relatively small population.[2] The first list of literary manuscripts was made by a French researcher (Finot, 1917) and consisted of 1,163 titles. A more recent list (Khampheng, 1988) was compiled that referenced 1,634 titles. Now, following the more massive efforts in the cataloging of Lao manuscripts, we learn from the final report that there are 7,417 "important and old" titles put onto microfilm, selected from among 368,260 latania manuscript bundles that have been catalogued, and 8,973 mulberry paper books. This figure is enormous, even taking into consideration that some duplication may have occurred. Furthermore, we learn that only 30 percent of the temples in the country have been surveyed so far. Per capita, this indicates that Laos has the richest literary heritage in all of Asia, and perhaps in all of the world.

Literature in the Lao language falls into a great many genres that are in need of additional explication. Some of these are treated in works on *mo lam*, for example in

[1] I have stolen this subtitle from the name of a conference held in the summer of 1969 at Burg Wartenstein, Austria, sponsored by the Wenner-Grenn Foundation and organized by Gregory Bateson.
[2] It should be remembered, however, that there are more Lao speakers in Thailand than in Laos, perhaps as many as 12 million, compared to less than 2 million in Laos.

(Compton, 1979). But from an international perspective, perhaps the most celebrious work is the epic of *Thao Houng Thao Cheuang*, the only truly indigenous epic poem in all of Southeast Asia, a work as important to the history of Civilization as the Homeric epics of Greece, or the Indian epics of the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata*.[3] That the Lao literary heritage includes such a masterpiece should truly be a source of national pride.

Now it also should be borne in mind that Laos is a country of many ethnic groups, and most of those groups will not have the same appreciation for literature in the Lao language as ethnic Lao speakers since the images and associations that are evoked in literature tend to be language specific. The groups belong to four ethnolinguistic families: Lao-Tai (Tai-Kadai); Mon-Khmer (Austroasiatic); Hmong-Mien (Miao-Yao), and Sino-Tibetan (primarily Tibeto-Burman). Lao proper of course belongs to the Lao-Tai family along with Phouan, Phou Thay, Lue, Tai Dam, Tai Deng, Tai Done, Tai Moey, Tai Theng, Tai Pao, Tai Mène, Yay (Nhang), Sek, and so on. So for purposes of clarity it is useful to keep the various languages separate when we are discussing literature. This is not always a simple task because the Lao and Tham alphabets that we think of as being the systems used in the writing of Lao literature have also been used by other groups such as Phou Thay, Phouan, and Thay Neua. On the other hand, Lue, Noe, Kheun, Tai Dam, Tai Deng, Tai Done, and others have their own alphabets and distinct literary traditions which should be referred to separately, for example as Tai Dam literature or as Lue literature. This not only accords the various groups their own dignity and cultural pride, but is useful analytically when we are trying to trace origins of the various literary works and the direction of influences.

In Laos the constitution prescribes Lao as the national language, that is to say the Lao alphabet since there is no prescribed pronunciation. This is an ideal situation as speakers of regional dialects such as Louang Prabang, Vientiane or Paksé may all read and comprehend the same syllables even though they may pronounce them differently. It does present a conundrum in that we don't know the limits of the pronunciation variation that would be defined as "Lao". Take the case of the aspirated stops of the Low Class series in Lao proper /ph, th, kh/, which are reflexes of /p, t, k/ in Tai Dam, Lue, and many other Lao-Tai languages in Laos. All of these descend from /*b, *d, *g/ in the mother language known as Proto-Tai. The pronunciations of Yay and Sek vary even more. So the question becomes,

[3] Chamberlain, James R. 1991. A Lao epic poem: Thao Hung or Cheuang. (Keynote Address). *Mon-Khmer Studies XVII-XIX*:14-34. ; Chamberlain, James R. 1986. Remarks on the origins of Thao Hung or Cheuang. In *Papers from a Conference in Honor of William J. Gedney*, ed. Robert Bickner. Ann Arbor: Michigan Papers on South and Southeast Asia, No 25. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan. ; Chamberlain, James R. 1996. A critical framework for the study of Thao Houng or Cheuang. (Keynote Address). Paper presented at *The First International Conference on the Literary, Historical, and Cultural Aspects of Thao Hung Thao Cheuang*, Bangkok, Thailand.

is there a "Lao" pronunciation, and if so, how is it defined linguistically. And ultimately, what is Lao language?

When we broaden the discussion to other ethnolinguistic families the situation becomes even more complex. The Ethnic Group Policy of 1992 authored by the former President of the Lao PDR, H.E. Kaysone Phomvihane is entitled, *Resolution of the Party Central Organization Concerning Ethnic Group Affairs in the New Era,* and remains the cornerstone of ethnic policy today. Here the directive is given for the relevant organizations to "urgently research the writing systems of the Hmong and the Khmou using the Lao alphabet as was formerly used in the old liberated zones for use in areas occupied by these ethnic groups, to be studied together with the Lao language and alphabet." Thus the languages of Hmong and Khmou have been recognized as having a national status as well. And their literatures, one would logically assume, as well as those of other language groups would have to be accorded the same status.[4] To date however, this aspect of the Party Resolution has not been implemented.

This is the broader context in which we need to view the status of Lao literature, a term which we see has many possible meanings and interpretations. With respect to the literatures of non-Lao ethnic groups, much of which falls into the category of what has come to be known as oral literature, most of the research has been carried out in other countries. A great deal of research on Khmou literature has been undertaken by the American scholar Frank Proschan and six volumes of Khmou literature have been published by researchers in Sweden. Studies of the various Tai literatures have been done in France, the US, Vietnam and Thailand. Research on the literatures of the Hmong-Mien peoples has been done in the US and in China.

With respect to Lao literature in the narrower sense, much work has been done in northeastern Thailand which shares the same literary traditions and where in some universities graduate degrees are now offered in Lao literature.[5] French studies began in 1917 with the work by Louis Finot mentioned above, and include at least two other major works, one on Lao legends (Archaimbault, 1980) and one on the classical Lao romance (Peltier, 1986). A dissertation in English was produced in London as well (Koret, 1994). Undoubtedly there are other works that should be cited here, including especially studies on traditional versification that may be applied to a wider range of Tai languages than just Lao and Siamese, for example (Gedney, 1967 (1978)) or (Bickner, 1991).

[4] An example of an area where Lao and Khmou literature overlap is the epic of Thao Hung Thao Cheuang, see: Proschan, Frank. 1996. Cheuang in Khmu Folklore, History, and Memory. In *Tamnan kiau kap Thao Hung Thao Cheuang* (in Thai), ed. Sumitr Pitiphat, Bangkok: Thammasat University.

[5] Lao literature in Thailand, for nationalistic reasons, is usually referred to as the literature of Isan or, more controversially, of Lane Xang.

Within Laos the study of Lao literature was begun by French educated Lao scholars under the *Comité Littéraire* which eventually became the Lao Royal Academy, again following the French tradition of the Academie Française. Perhaps the most diligent and productive of the original members of the Literary Committee was Mahasila Viravong who was responsible for bringing many Lao titles into publication and providing some of the first literary analyses of Lao works in Laos. These were published in the Journal of the Literary Committee. As with the study of Siamese literature in Thailand, the study of Lao literature in Laos has been primarily a prescriptive rather than a descriptive endeavor focusing on the rules for syllable counting and tone placement in the various verse forms. This has lent an aura of static-ness to the field as a whole.

With respect to nation building, it is generally agreed that literature is an important element in establishing national identity. In Laos, the literary traditions, many of which are oral, are shared by all of the ethnic Lao speakers found along the Nam Ou from northern Phongsaly to Louang Prabang, and on along the Mekong to Champasak, and by those in northeastern Thailand and northeastern Cambodia. Many of these same traditions are also shared by Neua, Phouan, Nyo, and Phou Thay speakers of Eastern Laos from Houa Phanh through Xieng Khoang, Borikhamxay, and Khammouane south to Savannakhet. This group is also represented in Thanh Hoa and Nghê An provinces in Vietnam. The Jataka-based literature is often shared with other Buddhist groups such as the Kheun and the Lue. Only a few literary pieces, in some cases classified as myths, are known to occur throughout the Southwestern branch of (Lao-) Tai, including *Khoun Lou Nang Oua* and *Cheuang*. (The Southwestern branch of Tai includes the Tai and Lao languages of northwestern Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Yunnan, the Shan States in Burma, and Assam.)[6]

Literacy and Literature

Since written literature is dependent upon literate readers for its propagation, it is interesting to look at the characteristics of the potential reading public. And here we see some disturbing statistics. The recent Lao National Literacy Survey based on a random sample of the population conducted by the Ministry of Education, UNICEF and UNESCO arrived at the following conclusions:

1. The reported adult literacy rate for the entire population is 68.7% with 77.0% for male and 60.9% for female.

[6] There is considerable evidence linking the mythological traditions of ancient China with myths found among Tai speakers. Cf. Chamberlain, James R. 1989. Heavenly Questions. Paper presented at *Folklore of the Tai Peoples*, Bangkok, Chulalongkorn University. And, Maspero, Henri. 1924. Légendes Mythologiques dans le *Chou King*. *Journal Asiatique* 1.1-100.

2. But tests show only 47.8% of participants attain “basic literacy” comprised of reading, writing and numeracy skills. That is, 52.2% of the test participants who have been classified as “literate” are, in fact, illiterate.
3. When the test results are translated into literacy rates, the following tested literacy rates are obtained for population aged 15-59:

		Male	Female	Total
a	**Illiterates: Total**	**46.3%**	**63.1%**	**54.8%**
b	Illiterates: urban	28.3%	42.9%	36.0%
c	Illiterates: rural	50.4%	67.8%	59.2%
d	**Literates: basic literacy level**	**53.7%**	**36.9%**	**45.2%**
e	Literates: functional literacy level	45.2%	30.3%	37.7%
f	Literates: secured functional literacy level	37.4%	24.5%	30.8%

4. Only three out of 18 provinces, namely, Vientiane Municipality, Champasak and Vientiane Province, have a functional literacy rate of over 50%.

A more detailed breakdown is shown on the table below. Of particular interest is the secured functional literacy rate for Lao-Tai speakers indicating that of the potential reading public of approximately 66 percent or 3,300,000 people for whom literature in the Lao language may have some appeal, only 40 percent or 1,320,000 people are literate.

Furthermore, in the urban social survey conducted by the Ministry of Information and Culture, Institute for Cultural Research (ICR, 1998), it was found that 86.3 percent of the Vientiane city population had not read a book in the last year. And, of the 13.7 percent who had read a book, 55.7 percent of the books were in Vietnamese; 27.9 percent were in Lao; 10.1 percent were in English, 5.8 percent were in Thai, and 0.4 percent were in other languages. In other words, of the Vientiane urban population which has the highest secured functional literacy rate in the country, only 3.8 percent had read a book in the Lao language in the year prior to the survey. And this figure, of course, includes students, so it must be assumed that many of these were textbooks.

But there is another statistic that would be interesting to have, which is not available, and that is, of the number of extant titles that we now have, especially those that are now available from the *bay lane* cataloguing that has been carried out over the past decade, how many have been published and made available to the reading public? Even though we do not

have an exact figure, a walk through the State Book Store or the book stores in the morning market is sufficient to see the paucity of available titles.

Literature in school curriculums is sadly underdeveloped. Even in the university students majoring in the humanities rarely read an entire work but are rather dependent upon textbooks featuring only short extracts.

Therefore, taken together, the three low indicators for (1) the literacy situation; (2) the reading situation; and (3) the availability of reading materials, form the basis of what I have referred to as intellectual poverty (see Table at the end of this article).

Implications of Intellectual Poverty for Governance

The function of aesthetic experience throughout human history has been much discussed, but rarely approached from the point of view of cybernetics or systems theory, branches of science that are more often associated with mathematics or physics. One of the few individuals to have approached this subject from this perspective was Gregory Bateson.[7]

Recognizing the role of the unconscious mind, in the Freudian sense of the distinction between primary and secondary process, Bateson reasons that aesthetic experience is a necessary element in human evolution that controls the effects of runaway conscious purpose, or greed.

> …Consciousness is necessarily selective and partial, i.e. … the content of consciousness is, at best, a small part of the truth about the self. But if this is selected in any systemic manner, it is certain that the partial truths of consciousness will be, in aggregate, a distortion of the truth of some larger whole.

That is to say,

> …what the unaided consciousness (unaided by art, dreams, religion, and the like) can never appreciate is the systemic nature of mind. (Bateson, 1972b)

[7] Especially: Bateson, Gregory. 1942. Social planning and the concept of deutero-learning (commentary on a paper given by Margaret Mead entitled, "The comparative study of culture and the purposive cultivation of democratic values."). In *Science, Philosophy, and Religion, Second Symposium*. New York: Haper and Row, Bateson, Gregory. 1972a. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. New York: Ballantine, Bateson, Gregory. 1972b. Style, Grace, and Information in Primitive Art. In *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. New York: Ballantine, Bateson, Gregory, and Bateson, Mary Catherine. 1987. *Angels Fear: Towards an Epistemology of the Sacred*. New York: Macmillan. Bateson, Mary Catherine. 1972c. *Our Own Metaphor: A Personal Account of a Conference on the Effects of Conscious Purpose on Human Adaptation*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Aesthetic experience, in the ecosystemic sense, becomes the corrective feedback loop that prevents systems from running amok.

> …mere purposive rationality unaided by art, religion, dream, and the like is necessarily destructive of human life; … its virulence springs specifically from the circumstances that life depends upon interlocking circuits of contingency, while consciousness can see only such short arcs of such circuits as human purpose may direct. (*ibid.*)

In this way we are able to discern that in an appreciation for the value of aesthetic experience and the impact it may have on the development of a nation, there is a systemic need for literary appreciation in the area of governance, because in the modernizing state the temptation for human conscious purpose to dominate is always present. Aesthetic experience, such as that gained from literature, acts upon the unconscious mind to correct this tendency.

Bateson (1979) wrote:

> The reply to crude materialism is not miracles but beauty – or, of course, ugliness. A small piece of a Beethoven symphony, a single Goldberg variation, a single organism, a cat or a cactus, the twenty-ninth sonnet or the Ancient Mariner's sea snakes. You remember he "blessed them unaware," and the albatross fell from his neck into the sea.

There is much more to be said here, but in the interest of brevity, I will conclude. All nations treasure their literary heritage. We could not imagine an English literature without Chaucer or Shakespeare, a French literature without Racine or Molière, a German literature without Goethe or Schiller. In the same way we should provide for the citizens of Laos a development of literary appreciation through careful studies and research, and above all, by making this wondrous corpus available to the public to be read and enjoyed by all. In this way literature may be allowed to play its natural role in nation building, that of correcting a too purposeful view of the world. At the same time, development agencies, especially those who are concerned with the state of governance, should take heed, and act accordingly in helping Laos to make available to its people the literature of the country.

Table: Tested Literacy Rates for Different Sub-Population Groups and Areas (Aged 15-59)

(n=26,246)

Groupings	Basic Literacy			Functional Literacy			Secured Functional Literacy		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Lao PDR (15-59)	53.7%	36.9%	45.2%	45.2%	30.3%	37.7%	37.4%	24.5%	30.8%
Urban	71.7%	57.1%	64.0%	65.3%	50.4%	57.5%	59.7%	45.6%	52.4%
Rural	49.6%	32.2%	40.8%	40.6%	25.7%	33.0%	32.2%	19.5%	25.7%
North	44.4%	28.0%	36.1%	36.2%	22.5%	29.2%	28.9%	17.7%	23.2%
Central	64.0%	48.0%	55.8%	56.3%	41.1%	48.5%	48.8%	34.6%	41.5%
South	52.1%	32.8%	42.5%	41.6%	24.9%	33.2%	32.1%	18.4%	25.2%
Lao-Tai (Tai-Kadai)	63.5%	48.1%	55.6%	55.9%	40.1%	47.7%	47.6%	33.5%	40.3%
Mon-Khmer	45.3%	28.5%	36.7%	36.0%	22.7%	29.1%	28.6%	17.2%	22.7%
Sino-Tibetan	32.2%	19.7%	26.0%	26.4%	16.3%	21.4%	22.1%	14.6%	18.3%
Hmong-Mien	49.6%	13.2%	32.2%	38.5%	11.9%	25.5%	28.7%	6.8%	18.1%
Income Lowest 20%	26.1%	11.7%	18.8%	18.8%	8.8%	13.6%	12.7%	5.1%	8.7%
Low-Middle 20%	44.3%	25.1%	34.7%	33.4%	18.3%	25.9%	24.5%	13.2%	18.8%
Middle 20%	55.2%	37.2%	46.1%	44.1%	28.9%	36.4%	33.5%	20.4%	26.8%
Up-Middle 20%	62.3%	43.3%	52.7%	54.0%	35.2%	44.4%	45.9%	28.1%	36.8%
Highest 20%	77.5%	62.0%	69.4%	71.9%	55.4%	63.3%	65.7%	50.4%	57.8%
Vientiane Mun.	82.1%	69.2%	75.3%	78.9%	64.1%	71.2%	76.1%	61.4%	68.5%
Champasak	81.0%	67.6%	74.4%	69.1%	56.6%	62.9%	56.4%	42.0%	49.2%
Vientiane Prov.	73.9%	54.4%	64.1%	63.6%	47.2%	55.3%	55.5%	37.8%	46.6%
Xieng Khoang	63.2%	53.0%	57.9%	54.8%	43.9%	49.2%	46.9%	37.5%	42.0%
Khammouane	60.2%	46.4%	53.1%	54.4%	38.5%	46.3%	40.6%	25.5%	32.8%
Houa Phanh	58.0%	41.9%	50.1%	47.0%	36.6%	41.7%	35.2%	27.4%	31.1%
Savannakhet	49.1%	41.5%	44.6%	43.9%	37.0%	39.7%	40.2%	32.0%	35.5%
Xaysomboun SR	60.4%	35.1%	47.4%	50.8%	27.9%	39.0%	38.6%	20.4%	29.3%
Xaygnaboury	57.0%	42.2%	49.3%	46.4%	31.4%	38.6%	38.7%	24.9%	31.7%
Borikhamxay	53.3%	36.9%	44.9%	42.6%	29.7%	36.0%	37.1%	25.4%	31.1%
Phongsaly	39.9%	28.5%	34.2%	33.6%	23.6%	28.6%	22.8%	17.0%	19.9%
Attapeu	52.2%	28.1%	40.6%	37.4%	18.6%	28.3%	26.2%	12.7%	19.5%
Louang Prabang	39.9%	25.5%	32.5%	35.6%	20.4%	27.8%	30.3%	18.2%	24.1%
Bokeo	40.1%	21.3%	30.2%	32.0%	17.2%	24.2%	28.5%	15.2%	21.4%
Saravanh	36.1%	18.3%	27.1%	31.8%	15.5%	23.6%	23.1%	12.1%	17.5%
Louang Namtha	37.3%	21.1%	29.1%	29.2%	17.5%	23.2%	23.6%	14.4%	18.8%
Oudomxay	39.6%	19.9%	29.7%	30.0%	15.1%	22.5%	24.7%	9.8%	17.2%
Xékong	42.6%	18.6%	30.9%	30.8%	9.5%	20.4%	25.2%	7.2%	16.3%

Source: (MoE, 2002)

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