

Shedding light: on entangled discourses of development in Laos

Convener(s): Simon Creak, Assistant Professor of History, NTU, Singapore (simon.creak@nie.edu.sg) and Al Lim, PhD student, Yale University (al.lim@yale.edu)

Participants: Floramante Ponce, PhD candidate, Max Planck Institute (ponce@eth.mpg.de); Al Lim, PhD student, Yale University; Anna Koshcheeva, PhD student, Cornell University (ak2597@cornell.edu)

Brief Description and Explanation of Chosen Format:

The format for this proposed single-session panel will follow a classical panel style with 3 presenters and a discussant. The panelists will pre-circulate their papers among themselves and the discussant. During the session, each panelist will be given 15 minutes to present their work, which will be followed by a 15-minute discussant section that talks about the interconnected themes across the three papers. Questions will be kept for general discussion at the end during a 30-minute Q&A session.

Brief Description of Panel:

Our interdisciplinary panel investigates the inter-related notions of development and history in Laos from new perspectives. Floramante Ponce's anthropological work examines the relationships between electricity, cosmology, and state control in Laos. He explores how electric light comes to illuminate the new types of spirits in a Northern Lao village that combat darkness but also renders the hydroelectric dam resettlement projects visible to the state surveillance. Al Lim offers intervention to the historical evaluation of Chao Anou's figure. Tracing the curvatures, shadows, and lights of the statue of Chao Anou's statue in Vientiane, Lim employs the concept of reworlding to critically compare various bibliographies of the king. He pays specific attention to the official narration of Chao Anou's legacy vis-à-vis the contemporary developmental agenda of the state. Anna Koshcheeva contributes to the panel with the cultural theory perspective. Koshcheeva sheds light on the work of a prominent Lao artist, Kongphat Luangrath, and his contemplation on time, global and Asian socialisms, modern Buddhist paradises on Earth, and left nostalgia. Koshcheeva takes up Kongphat's work to theorize time and challenge its linear perception. She thinks comparatively about Marxist evolutionist time, the Soviet temporality of belated catch-up, the temporality of Asian socialisms, and Lao post-socialist socialism.

Keywords: Southeast Asia, Laos, development, history, electricity, art history, temporality.

Discussant: Simon Creak, Assistant Professor of History, NTU, Singapore

Individual abstracts:

Floramante Ponce

PhD candidate, Max Planck Institute

Lights and Gossips: The Influence of Electric Lights on ‘Spirits,’ ‘Speaking Souls,’ and the State’s Gaze in Northern Laos

Since the new millennium, scholars on hydropower-development-induced resettlement in the global south in general, in Laos in particular, have paid much attention to how the production of electricity through dam construction deterritorialized numerous remote communities. However, they have been reticent about how grid connection in relocation sites—which is usually part of compensation packages—affects the displaced villagers’ lived experience and cosmologies. To address this gap, the paper aims to illuminate how new electric light consumption of the resettled has influenced their encounters with fellow villagers, with spirits, and with state authorities. Following Gell’s (1998) material agency and leveraging data from twelve-month ethnographic fieldwork, the paper particularly sheds light on the potency of new electric lights in disempowering various types of ‘spirits’ and empowering ‘souls/life-energies’ in a Chinese hydropower resettlement community in northern Laos. The paper finds that while new light sources reinforce ‘eyes’ life energy’ (*khouanta*), it also empowers a new *khouan* in the community called, ‘*waokhouan*’ (literally: ‘speaking souls’; a euphemism for gossipers). These ‘speaking souls’ have been also used by state authorities to surveil the resettled. To unpack the relationship of lights, gossips, and state authorities contributes to ongoing debates about development-induced resettlement and materiality of lights and the Lao state.

Al Lim

PhD student, Yale University

(Re)Worlding: the past and presence of Chao Anou in Laos

The light and shadows of Laos’s worlding aspirations are embodied in Chao Anou. The 8-meter bronze statue stands in the middle of Vientiane, the country’s capital, as part of a National Park built in 2010. The statue commemorates the fallen hero of Vientiane, dying at the hands of the Siamese after a failed rebellion in the 1820s. This paper connects the historiographical work on this figure with ethnography during the current political conjuncture, through the lens of worlding and reworlding against the state-mediated management of his legacy. The first form of worlding challenges the Lao state’s hagiography and Thai sources that paint his rebellion as irrational and nonsensical. Instead, a historic lens of worlding reanimates Chao Anou by taking seriously a rational set of conditions of possibility for his actions. These are connected to geopolitical and colonial tensions in the region, drawing in key Vietnamese and British stakeholders. The second form of worlding involves a particular vision of urban development

and aesthetics, often achieved by inter-referencing and borrowing architectural tropes from other cities. Here, reworlding through the statue pushes back on this aesthetic by highlighting state-led evictions in Don Chan Island that preceded the statue's construction, as well as the contradictory projections of kingship by Laos's socialist government. In this way, historic worlding and contemporary reworlding destabilize the state's meaning-making project around the statue. The paper thus questions what it means to pursue and embody forms of national development through critically interrogating the socio-spatialities of interconnected inter-Asian flows.

Anna Koshcheeva

PhD student, Cornell University

Painting Time: Temporality of Asian Socialisms, Left Nostalgia, and Buddhist Melancholia in the Art of Lao Artist Kongphat Luangrath.

This paper attends to the art of a prominent Lao painter, printmaker, and illustrator, Kongphat Luangrath, produced between the 1980s and the 2010s. Starting with Kongphat's interpretation of his works, the paper further delves into the artist's contemplation on time, social critique, and commitment to the ideas of global and Asian socialisms. Later, the paper analyses the shift in Kongphat's work to the imaginaries of modern Buddhist paradise on Earth and left nostalgia. The paper argues that Kongphat's escape into Buddhist utopias is, in fact, his radical technology of resistance to detach from the lost socialist futurities. On a theoretical level, the paper takes Kongphat's art as a departure point to think comparatively about various temporalities: of capitalist time of progress; Marxist evolutionist time; the Soviet temporality of belated catch-up; the temporality of Asian socialisms; post-socialisms, and Buddhist conceptions of time. Lastly, the paper focuses on temporality as a methodological approach that allows us to appreciate better how it felt for an artist to live in those historical times.