Chao Anou 1767-1829 pasason lao lee asi akhane ['Chao Anou, 1767-1829, the Lao people and Southeast Asia]. By Mayoury and Pheuiphanh Ngaosyvathn. Vientiane, S.P.P. [Printing office of the D.P.R.] Lao, August 1988. Pp. 159. Authors' curriculum vitae. Errata. Afterword. Three maps, one table, five illustrations in text.

[Published in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 21, 2 (September 1990), 441-45]

The period from 1778, when The Kingdom of Vientiane was defeated by King Taksin's army under command of the future King Rama I, to 1827-28 when the last King of Vientiane, Chao Anou, failed in his attempt to regain independence from Bangkok and his city was almost totally destroyed by the Thai army has remained a time of trauma in Lao tradition. The degree of persistent trauma, however, and the importance of these events in the constantly renewed Lao collective memory may have been screened from western students who have only read of these events through Bangkok records, or who in writing about them have decided to treat them as minor side issues ('revolt of Vientiane') in the glorious Chakri 19th century.

Now Lao historians are beginning to present the Lao perspective on these events. The authors of the present new work on this crisis period of early modern Lao history are a wife and husband team with degrees in law and government from Paris who since 1975 have occupied responsible positions in the Lao government.[1]

In the book under review they have put together a commemorative volume for Chao Anou, who attempted unsuccessfully in 1827 to recover from Bangkok the Lao independence which had been lost since 1778. There are four chapters, all of which have been published earlier as separate articles, the two longest, 1 and 3, in English; and it is thus of more interest to Lao readers for whom these studies are now available in translation than as a source of new information about Laos for foreign scholars.

The first chapter, entitled "Background to the war to annihilate the Lao nation provoked by Siam in 1827", was presented at the International Thai Studies Conference in Canberra in July 1987 under the title "160 Years Ago: Lao Chronicles and Annals of Siam and the Lao" (Conference *Proceedings*, vol 3, part 2, pp. 467-476); and the third chapter, "Great Powers and the Triangular Regional Conflicts Among England, Bangkok, and the Lao People at the time of the missions of John Crawfurd (1821-22)

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1. More on their background post-1988.

and Henry Burney (1825-26)", has appeared in *Journal of the Siam Society* (JSS), vol 76 (1988), pp. 126-133. Page references to these chapters below, except where noted, will be to the English versions.

"Background to the war", draws upon the standard Bangkok chronicles and British envoys' reports which have furnished the details for the 'Chao Anou Rebellion' in Western and Thai histories to date, but retells the story from a Lao point of view; and this point of view is strengthened by new use of Lao chronicles and several recent studies by Thai and Lao researchers, both on chronicles and on folk traditions of the northeastern provinces (Isan) of modern Thailand (see notes 13, 37, 39, 41, 49, 54, 60, 61, 64, 67). It is in the attention to these new publications and the chronicles on which they are based that western scholars will find this study of most value for further research.

The authors' purpose is to demonstrate that Chao Anou was not merely a disloyal vassal leading an unjustified rebellion, but a nationalist prince trying to save his nation from the cultural, even physical, annihilation to which the aggressive Thai policies of the previous 40 years were leading. During that period, and particularly after the accession of King Rama III (1824), Bangkok set out to systematically take full control of the Isan through reduction of Vientiane royalty to vassals, removal of traditional Isan leaders, tattooing the population for corvée, and enforced enslavement accompanied by large-scale massacres, with the main culprit, as seen by the Lao, being the governor of Korat who may have exceeded his orders for his own profit. This story is quite in contrast with the standard version of Bangkok forced to go to war to defend itself "against the treachery of rulers in the Cambodian and Lao tributary states who took advantage of periods when the central Thai Kingdom appeared weak in order to revolt or attack it", (468) in the case of Chao Anou at the moment when Bangkok was under pressure from the British in the form of the Burney Mission.

An example of Bangkok expansionism emphasized by the authors is the statistics gathered in 1827 by E. Malloch from Thai sources showing the populations of Lao towns such as Vientiane and Luang Prabang composed of only 'Siamese' and Chinese, with no Lao (470). Although this was obviously an inaccurate official version, it is, however, difficult to follow the authors in their comment that "we suspect this to be an organized leak", for surely British purposes would not have been influenced by the ethnicity of the Isan population. It was more likely a simple example of Chakri ideology, known from the attitude of Prince Damrong some 70 years later in his refusal to allow the term 'Lao' in reference to the Isan or northern provinces.

An interesting theme running through this and other chapters is the prominence of Anou's son Chao Ratsavong in the organization of the Isan population for the struggles of 1827-1828. Some of the new sources suggest that he provided valuable inspiration for his father's struggle against Bangkok, and in several Isan folk traditions he even appears as a more important hero than Chao Anou (472-3, 476).

The third chapter is a short discussion of the diplomacy of Crawfurd and Burney as it concerned Laos, emphasizing the importance of the Lao provinces to Bangkok economically and strategically. The British wanted direct access to these areas, the Thais wanted British arms, and Chao Anou, who it seems met Crawfurd in 1822 (Lao text p. 96), not in 1827 (JSS, p. 125, an evident typographical error), hoped to break out of encirclement via diplomatic contacts with other powers. By 1823 London authorized the arms trade which saturated Bangkok with the weapons which would eventually defeat internal enemies; the Burney treaty in 1826 gave Britain some of the trade concessions they wanted; and Chao Anou's apparent misunderstanding of that situation led him to claim that his troop movement on Korat was to aid Bangkok against an imagined British attack. The Lao-centric conclusion is that Rama III signed the Burney Treaty in 1826 in order to free his hands to counter the growing threat from the Lao provinces which James Low reported as "ever ready to assert independence" (127); his dealings with the British had secured the armaments required; and the Burney treaty represented "the modus vivendi to invade and finally annex Laos a year later" (127).

Chapter 2, by Mayoury Ngaosyvathn alone, first appeared as an article in the Lao Revolutionary Peoples Party newspaper *Pasason*, 8 June 1987; and it develops a theme introduced in chapter 1 (476). Based on new studies by Thai scholars of Isan folk culture, it demonstrates the deep-rooted Vientiane-centric traditions of the northeast, particularly among descendants of those Lao groups deported by force from trans-Mekong Laos to the Isan during the 40 years from Taksin's invasion to the defeat of Chao Anou. In particular it appears that Chao Ratsavong, Anou's son and deputy who led many of the campaigns in 1826-1827, is a folk hero, illustrated by lullabies and other types of folk songs found among the Phuan of Yasothon in Ubol Province. The published work on these traditions is also cited in notes 40, 41, 64-67 of the English version of chapter 1. The title of this chapter is a proverb, "Fruit never falls far from the tree", intended to illustrate the "quasi-mystic attachment of the Lao to their land" (Canberra *Proceedings*, p. 476).

Perhaps the most original chapter is the fourth and last by Dr. Mayoury on "The candelabra of Wat Sisaket", also published in part in the Lao journal *Vannasin*, February 1988. Wat Sisaket in Vientiane was built during 1818-1819 and consecrated in 1824 in the reign of Chao Anou. Its intricately carved wooden candelabra excited the admiration of the early French explorers Louis de Carné and Francis Garnier; and later on the art historians Henri Parmentier and Henri Marchal gave high praise to the artistic qualities of the piece. They are all amply quoted, the last two in particular with respect to what they considered as unusual arrangements on the candelabra of depictions of Indra, his elephant Eravata, the serpent Vasuki, and the two nagas with intertwined tails which form an upper crossbeam across the width of the candelabra.

Dr. Mayoury's purpose is to demonstrate, in addition to the artistic qualities of the candelabra, a "political content" (143) related to the life and times of Chao Anou. The reasoning is intricate, but on the whole convincing. Indra is the god of war, and here symbolizes the struggle of the Lao to throw off Thai suzerainty. The eternity symbolized by the serpent Vasuki is the eternal duty of the Lao, from the time of Chao Anou's father King Siribunyasan (1730-1780) to Chao Anou, to fight for independence. The seven vertical wooden spokes on either side of the central panel, which with a fifteenth central piece form a pyramid, symbolize the seven Lao regions which the Vientiane kings were to unite against Bangkok, and a listing of the seven (Lom[sak], Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Phuan [Xieng Khouang], Phrae, Nan, Chiang Mai) in an article published in 1836 by the French missionary Mgr. Pallegoix is provided to confirm the number (149).

Finally the very orientation of Wat Sisaket suggests the same 'political content'. Its orientation is different from all other *wats* in Vientiane, which are situated parallel to the river, an arrangement which in fact gives them an orthodox generally west-east direction with the Buddha image facing east. Wat Sisaket, however, faces "40 degrees south of east" (151), precisely in the direction of Bangkok.

The conclusion which suggests itself is that Wat Sisaket was constructed as a piece of sympathetic magic to help defeat the Thai enemy against whom Chao Anou was planning to wage war, in cultual terms analogous to a voodoo doll stuck with pins.

Since 1970 events in Cambodia, Sri Lanka, and Burma have put paid to western Buddhalatrous romanticism, and the Buddhist states of Southeast Asia stand revealed as politico-economic regimes no more governed by high principle than any other, of whatever religious or ideological persuasion. It is interesting, with this in mind, to see how scholars from Southeast Asian

Buddhist countries, using forms of western scholarship to write about their own cultures, but liberated from western intellectual hegemony as well as from the need to satisfy traditional royalist or elite prejudices, will treat these matters. Dr. Mayoury's discussion of Wat Sisaket is a valuable example of what may be a new current of interpretation, and the symbolism of Wat Sisaket, together with a Buddhist formula which Chao Anou "must have often recited", *Attahi Attano Natho* ("One should help oneself and nobody can know and help us as ourself", *JSS*, p. 128), a political principle which would not have been disavowed by any European *realpolitiker*, may provide new insight into what Buddhism, whether as a regime ideology or a way of life, really is for those peoples who have practiced it unselfconsciously for centuries.

In addition to the newly revealed historical sources and Thai and Lao-language secondary materials which may not yet have come to the attention of western historians, there is material here to catch the eye of linguists and Thai/Lao literary specialists. In chapters 3-4 there are allusions to the Lao literary work *Sān leuphasūn* (or *Leuppasūn*), attributed to Chao Anou, but of such obscurity that there has never been agreement among Lao *littérateurs* on even the meaning of its title. In his 1954 article cited by Drs. Mayoury and Pheuiphanh, Maha Sila Viravong wrote that its author, place and date of composition were unknown, and opined that the title should be emended to *Nophasun*, 'nine points', or 'trident', the latter preferred by Maha Sila because the text comprises three parts. By 1960, however, attribution to Chao Anou had been accepted, and in his textbook on Lao literature of that year Maha Sila no longer suggested emendation of the title, but cited two more interpretations for it, 'Ineradicable', and 'Effacement of the sun'. The latest treatment, from 1984, has again emended the title, to *Sān leup bo sun*, 'Deciphering the everlasting message', which in itself appears as arbitrary as Maha Sila's emendation of 1954. The relevant literature is cited in the *JSS* article, notes 63-66.[2]

In chapter 3 verses from *Sān leuphasūn* are interpreted as indicating Chao Anou's desire to unite all the Lao, while remarking that the British are too far away to be of help (128); and in chapter 4 it is evoked in its newest sense of 'everlasting' in connection with the eternal duties of Lao rulers symbolized by the serpent Vasuki.

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[2] See more detailed treatment in Peter Koret, "*Luep Phasun* (Extinguishing the Light of the Sun…"), in Christopher E. Goscha and Sören Ivarsson (eds.), *Contesting Visions of the Lao Past Lao Historiography at the Crossroads*, Copenhagen, NIAS Press, 2003, pp. pp. 181-208

No allusions to current politics have been made by Drs. Mayoury and Pheuiphanh, but the reader cannot avoid being intrigued by the publication of this volume right after the Lao victory over the Thai army in the Ban Rom Klao dispute of November 1987 to February 1988. This incident was "one of the most costly wars in modern Thai history....eventually cost[ing] 3,000 million baht and hundreds of lives" (*The Nation*, Bangkok, 4 October 1988). Although at first treated in Bangkok as a Lao incursion across the border which had to be repelled, it turned out to be a case of Thai businessmen and soldiers engaging in illegal logging in an ill-defined border region, and the Thai generals not only had to backtrack from claims about Lao violation of Thai sovereignty, but the military still has a problem in "justifying its poor performance in the Ban Rom Klao battles" (*Ibid.*), a performance that was embarrassing not only because they were unable to win against an opponent whom they had despised, but were only saved from worse defeat by timely U.S. logistical support, while the Lao operated without any Vietnamese intervention.

And of course since it was written before these events began, Dr. Mayoury's "Fruit never falls far from the tree" could not have drawn inspiration from them, but its pointed allusion to the two burnings of Vientiane by the Thai (1827 and 1828) in connection with the deep Lao cultural nationalism in Thailand's Northeast now seems directed at Maj. Gen. M.R. Kukrit Pramoj's assertion "that troubles with Laos 'will never be over unless Vientiane is burned to the ground'" (reported in *The Nation*, 22 August 1989).

A few corrections and quibbles:

Footnote 18 of chapter 1, in both Lao and English, contains an error. The "Inventaire des manuscrits des pagodes du Laos", *BEFEO* 1965, was by P-B. Lafont, not Louis Finot, who, however, had provided another manuscript inventory in his 1917 *BEFEO* article "Recherches sur la littérature laotienne". It may be noted that soundings which I took in search of texts in Vientiane in 1966-67 showed that Lafont's inventory was nearly useless. The manuscripts had been borrowed and never returned, borrowers' names were not recorded, or they simply could not be found and there was no record of their fate.

This may indicate some considerable exaggeration in "the oral tradition of Luang Prabang as reported [in 1987] by the patriarch of the buddhist monks [that] it took at least seven elephants in 1827 to carry the most important manuscripts from Vientiane to Bangkok" (Canberra *Proceedings*, 468). Such traditions are common all across Southeast Asia, in

Cambodia relating to defeats by Ayutthaya, and in Thailand in connection with Burmese invasions.

It is unwise to base scholarly conclusions on these traditions, and moreover, no wars are necessary to account for real dispersion of known manuscripts. As an example, by the end of the 19th century no complete set of the Thai law code of 1805, ordered in three copies by the first king of the Bangkok dynasty and consigned to the offices of the most important ministries, could be found, the losses evidently due to lack of respect for written records, even on the part of officials responsible for them, and in principle dependent on them in carrying out their duties.

It is likely that both the numbers of manuscripts existing before the wars, and the numbers carried away, are exaggerated, otherwise more would have turned up in the libraries and treasuries of the victors. One that did, however, was *Sān leuphasūn*, whose very existence as formal written literature, rather than as Isan folk poetry, seems to have been revealed to modern Lao scholars when Maha Sila Viravong discovered the first known complete extant manuscript in the Thai National Library in 1942. Perhaps the Thai in 1828 recognized its magical potential and made certain that it, at least, would not be left for future Lao use. Rather than trying to burn Vientiane again, perhaps Maj. Gen. M.R. Kukrit Pramoj could ask the police to round up all copies of *Sān leuphasūn*.