Lao scholars abroad seeking worldliness at home

Education in the West as pilgrimage from post-revolutionary Laos[1]

Warren Mayes

Abstract: **Notions of belonging associated with national borders are being transformed by the diversity of overseas education experienced by urban elites from contemporary Laos. While the earlier educational journeys of colonial subjects inspired a passionate nationalism, this article argues that new pilgrimages reveal a culturally specific passion for exploration among young technocrats that circumvents the boundaries of the post-revolutionary state. The article charts the historical process of accessing, undertaking and returning from study abroad, and demonstrates that the cosmopolitan status of scholars is obtained in the context of a struggle to define Laos as a legitimate worldly space.**

Keywords: **elites; education; cosmopolitanism; pilgrimage; development; Laos**

A desire to explore

In 2004, rumours spread rapidly through the small Lao capital, Vientiane, about the delinquent son of a senior Party official who had been expelled from an elite Western university and returned home in disgrace. The incident was a particularly dramatic loss of face for his family because of the value placed on studying abroad. Their son's expulsion was a sign that he was not *tan lok*,[2] or 'in touch

[1] I am especially grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their useful comments, as well as Andrew Walker, Nicholas Tapp, Philip Taylor and Craig Reynolds for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

[2] *Tan* literally means to 'keep up with' or to stay 'in touch with' the world, *lok*, and is similar to the more commonly used term *tan samai*, modern, meaning literally 'to keep up with the era'. *Tan lok* has a slightly different nuance. In addition to being progressive, it means to lack naivety about the wider social world. It refers to an 'ability' to decipher when one is being deceived and to prevent oneself from being taken advantage of.

with the world', a status considered the domain of elites. The rumours reflected a broader set of attitudes about the social change associated with an increasingly diverse group of overseas-educated youth[3] and an increasing intolerance towards the delinquency of a new generation of elites in post-revolutionary Asian states.[4] Young women are considered to be in danger of losing their culture while abroad, and young men who return from the West are considered politically unfit to follow their Vietnamese-trained fathers into the ruling Lao People's Revolutionary Party. Older elites bemoan the 'loss of culture' in contemporary Laos associated with international influences on Lao youth. Ultimately, notions of belonging associated with national borders are being uprooted and reinterpreted through the journeys undertaken by this growing urban minority.

In contemporary Laos, international development agencies sponsor hundreds of students to attend foreign universities each year in support of the country's *chintanakan mai*, or 'new imagination' policy of transition to market economics, which began in 1986. Stuart-Fox states that recent educational pilgrimages have supported alliances within the new social elite, an amalgamation of connections within the ruling Party and old elite wealth. Such alliances were shored up by 'Party members who took advantage of educational opportunities [and] returned from overseas either to take up positions in government, or to go into business using their political contacts'.[5] This article argues that, while overseas study may strengthen such alliances, its increasing diversity produces a broadly held desire for 'exploration' which ultimately threatens the elite's monopoly over cosmopolitan experiences.

Based upon extensive ethnographic fieldwork with preparing and returned scholars in Laos between 2003 and 2006, as well as shorter periods of research with students in Australia, this article shows that the contemporary international scholarship experience reflects a transformation in the way being 'Lao' and its relationship to the post-revolutionary state is imagined. While the article primarily deals with journeys to the West, one of its main observations is that

[3] See the discussion in Souknilundon Southivongnorath (2004), 'Alone in the world: a Lao student's challenge abroad', *Vientiane Times*, 22 July, p 12.

[4] Kimina Lyall (2003), 'Asia less willing to suffer sons of the fathers', *The Australian*, 29–30 November, p 14.

[5] Martin Stuart-Fox (2004), *Politics and Reform in the Lao People's Democratic Republic*, Political Economy of Development Working Paper No 1, Program on Civil Society and Governance, The College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, VA, p 6.

distinctions between East and West are blurred by the contemporary experience of study abroad. Students experience a heightened association with Lao and Asian identities while in the West, and are considered ambassadors of Western modernity upon return to Laos. Encounters and negotiations with Asian modernity by students who travel to China, Japan and other regional centres of learning deserve further study elsewhere.

Overseas education is part of a contemporary project to strengthen the legitimacy of the Lao state, firmly ensconcing it in the global market economy. Early elites who travelled abroad to study were typically implicated in spreading the European ways of seeing the world held by their colonial masters. Just as these colonial pilgrimages had the unintended consequence of contributing to anticolonial nationalism,[6] today's global explorers are involved in uncertain transformations of their own societies. However, these transformations are produced by culturally specific motivations and manifestations of identity rather than mere imitative consumption of Western modernity.[7]

This article begins with an exploration of the educational journeys of elites from Laos in historical context, and argues that modular nationalism has always been just one aspect of a more particular desire for 'exploration' shaping their pilgrimages. The educational journeys of early twentieth century colonial subjects were conducted in dialogue with a single colonial Other, France. Despite a brief period of more diverse Western education under the post-colonial Royal Lao Government in the 1960s and 70s, those educated in the Soviet era after the new regime seized power in 1975 also supported a single international ideology, socialism (see Figure 1). These earlier journeys have given way to a broader openness to the world that the now global pilgrimages of post-revolutionary elites take for granted.

In his 'intellectual history', David Wyatt argues that movements of people have been central to the gradual enrichment of the social order in mainland South East Asia.[8] Pilgrimage as a historical form of knowledge acquisition was linked to the search for spirituality and self-improvement among Theravada Buddhist monks who renewed their commitment through re-ordination in Sri Lanka before returning

[6] Benedict Anderson (1991), *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London.

[7] Partha Chatterjee (1993), *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.

[8] David Wyatt (2002), *Siam in Mind*, Silkworm, Chiang Mai, p 8.

Figure 1. Colonial (black), Soviet (grey) and post-revolutionary (white) pilgrimages.

home.[9] This particular manifestation of pilgrimage saw it as an attempt to master the 'world' of profane materiality and desire. Pilgrims sought the attainment of merit, the prestige acquired through acts of Buddhist charity, as an important mediator of the fatality of karma, which otherwise left a person's status defined by birth.[10] Worldly exploration linked to merit was a rite of passage into positions of respect and power in the Buddhist clergy and royal elite, explained by Victor Turner as a 'liminal experience', a form of suspension between two social spheres.[11]

Colonialism fundamentally altered the trajectories of such pilgrimages, producing elites with new national desires for independence. In semi-colonial Siam, the journeys of successive kings to Europe helped them to refashion their place in the critical modernist discourse of *siwilai*,

[9] Wyatt, *supra* note 8, at p 9.

[10] Charles Keyes (1983), 'Merit-transference in the Kammanielic theory of popular Theravada Buddhism', in Charles Keyes and Daniel Valentine, eds, *Karma; An Anthropological Inquiry*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, p 265.

[11] Victor Turner (1974), *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY.

or 'civilization' produced by a new middle class of urban intellectuals.[12] As Laos develops its space in the global time-scape, a new enchantment is manifested in the desire to be *tan lok* or 'in touch with the world', having a wisdom about the world and a lack of naivety about broader social change.

Nationalism, internationalism and worldliness

While the majority of pilgrimages are made to countries neighbouring Laos, particularly Vietnam, Thailand and China, the most sought-after degrees are obtained by students who travel to Europe, East Asia, North America and Australasia. The negotiation of 'difference' is a central part of these pilgrimages. While each educational location is distinctive, this article identifies significant negotiations of difference common to the experience of pilgrimage among Lao scholars, whatever their destination. Most are from urban business and political families that have access to foreign capital and enjoy at least weak links to highly wealthy, historically dominant families or the political elite, membership of which is accessed primarily through marriage.[13] Many aspire to strengthen their links to the elite and in doing so promise to transform it.

Education abroad has expanded dramatically in the past decade, with students competing for places in the West as well as countries politically aligned with Laos. Vietnam has retained its influence as a close political ally, with 400 Lao beginning studies there in 2005 alone,[14] and many likely to gain Party and government positions on their return. A major trend is for elite families to send sons to study as apprentice political leaders in Vietnam, while sons and daughters are sent to increase economic links with China and Thailand and the exiled diaspora in the West. One of the most sought-after destinations is Australia, which provides around 40 Australian Development Scholarships.[15]

[12] Thongchai Winichakul (2000), 'The quest for "siwilai": a geographical discourse of civilisational thinking in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Siam', *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol 59, No 3, pp 528–549.

[13] Boike Rehbein (2005), 'The Lao economic field', *Sojourn*, Vol 20, No 1, pp 23–38.

[14] Soulivan Vongmany (2005), 'Students for Vietnam', *Vientiane Times*, 1 March, p 1.

[15] AusAID (2005), *General Information, Australian Development Scholarships: Information for Intakes Commencing 2006*, Website: http://www.ausaid.gov.au/publications/pubout.cfm?ID=1621_2920_782_6788_65 (accessed 23 January 2007).

Fourteen Thai universities also offer places to Lao students.[16] Scholarship programmes offered by Japan and Singapore are also highly valued as experiences of an alternative Asian modernity.[17]

The opportunity to study abroad is initially accessed through the national education system. French colonial education was 'very minimal'[18] and while the post-colonial Royal Lao Government trained the aristocracy in the 1950s, it did little to develop a national education system other than separating the school from the temple, a process that began a century earlier in neighbouring Siam.[19] The revolutionary movement placed 'more emphasis on universal education . . . even before 1975, than did the Royal Lao Government'.[20] Since 1975, education has expanded across the country, but this has been accompanied by a decrease in quality as most qualified teachers fled the new regime.[21] Government schools are still characterized by rote learning and narrow curricula that serve to inculcate the values of the new regime, teach the history of the victors, and instil a national spirit.

An awareness of the poor standard of education relative to the rest of the region[22] has led the government to open the system to private investment. The government-run National University of Laos, established in 1996, sits alongside a range of comparatively expensive private colleges staffed by a mixture of Lao and English-speaking expatriates. Provincial universities are staffed mainly by graduates of the National University.[23] Private colleges are popular among students primarily for

16 Soulivan Vongmany (2005), 'Thai unis want Lao students', *Vientiane Times*, 23 February, p 3.

17 Scholarships are provided by Australia, the UK, Brunei Darussalam, China, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Poland, Republic of Korea, Singapore, Slovakia, Thailand, USA and Vietnam. See LaoPYS (2004), *Scholarships and International Exchange Programs for Lao Students*, Website: http://www.geocities.com/laopys/scholarship4laostudents.htm (accessed 23 January 2006). See also Xayxana Leukai (2005), 'Website encourages overseas study', *Vientiane Times*, 5 May, p 2.

18 Charles Keyes (1995), *The Golden Peninsula: Culture and Adaptation in Mainland Southeast Asia*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, p 101.

19 Charles Keyes (1989), *Thailand: Buddhist Kingdom as Modern Nation-State*, Editions Duang Kamol, Bangkok, p 184.

20 Mayoury Ngaosyvathn (2000), 'Tribal politics in Laos', in Andrew Turton, ed, *Civility and Savagery: Social Identity in Tai States*, Curzon, Richmond, p 251.

21 Grant Evans (1998), *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance: Laos Since 1975*, Silkworm, Chiang Mai, pp 157–158.

22 Soulivan, *supra* note 14, at p 3.

23 Sirikul Bunnag (2005), 'Thai varsities to help less fortunate Lao universities', *Bangkok Post*, 5 October, Website: www.bangkokpost.com (accessed 5 October 2005); and Reporter (2005), 'Thailand and Laos increase education cooperation', *VNA*, 5 October, Website: www.vnagency.com.vn (accessed 5 October 2005).

English language and business management courses, two areas of access to the global economy. In 2005, just 23,000 students were in higher education (18,000 at state institutions and 5,000 at private colleges) with a government scholarship quota for the children of Party members further restricting access.[24] Another 17,000 applicants could not get places.[25] The majority do not have the primary education, financial ability or social connections to attend these schools.

Nguyen argues that university graduates have emerged as a significant group in post-socialist Vietnam due to a shift from notions of collective achievement through peasant mobilization to individual success through knowledge acquisition in the new liberal economic climate. Degrees abroad are considered 'passports to active participation in the country's process of integration into the outside world'.[26] While similar assumptions exist in Laos, the primary education required to compete for access to such degrees is hard to achieve without wealth and connections. Most of those who receive scholarships to study abroad are therefore from a privileged urban social location. These pilgrimages have a history that emerged out of colonial encounters that shaped the Lao nation-state.

Educational pilgrimages have been a core element in the construction of the modern Lao elite by providing them with the ability to negotiate and master external cultural influences. The nineteenth-century arrival of French colonialism altered the world view engendered by the pre-colonial South East Asian polity. New administrative controls on the population that identified sovereignty with territory[27] prompted the emergence of national ways of looking at the world, which Thongchai describes as 'We-Self defined negatively with reference to Others within [minority ethnic groups] and Others outside [mostly other

[24] Manichanh Pansivongsay (2004), 'Not ready to cancel scholarships, says Ministry', *Vientiane Times*, 23 July, p 2.

[25] Soulivan Vongmany (2005), 'Almost half of graduates still without a chance to study', *Vientiane Times*, 15 July, Website: http://www.vientianetimes.org.la (accessed 15 July 2005).

[26] Phuong An Nguyen (2004), 'Pursuing success in present-day Vietnam: young graduates in Hanoi', in Duncan McCargo, ed, *Rethinking Vietnam*, Routledge/Curzon, London, p 172. See also Phuong An Nguyen (2002), 'Looking beyond Bien Che: the considerations of young Vietnamese graduates when seeking employment in the Doi Moi era', *Sojourn*, Vol 17, No 2, pp 221–248.

[27] Martin Stuart-Fox (1994), 'Conflicting conceptions of the state: Siam, France and Vietnam in the late nineteenth century', *Journal of the Siam Society*, Vol 82, No 2, pp 135–144, p 139.

nation-states]'.[28] Benedict Anderson reworks a long-held assumption that Western education was central to the emergence of the national world view. Enlightened European-educated officials, creole functionaries in conflict with their European overlords, played a 'decisive historic role'.[29] Aware of being cut off from mobility within the colonial empire, they began movements to emancipate themselves from this subservience. While this contributed to the production of new national imaginings, it was a process inspired primarily by a desire to explore the world. Prominent leaders of the movement that gained independence from France during the Second World War and those who led the revolutionary struggle against the French return and then the American Cold War intervention were educated in France.

Education in the colonial motherland combined with complex regional political struggles shaped the world views and consequent perceptions of home among early Lao elites in opposition to a dominant colonial Other. Prince Phetsarath Ratanavongsa, member of a powerful courtier family in Vientiane and Lao Viceroy under the French occupation, spent nearly eight years at the Ecole Coloniale, Lycée Montaigne and Lycée Saint Louis in Paris (1905–13). In the years after his return, he attempted to 'unify' Laos, creating a civil service and eventually becoming its most powerful figure. While the French raised Phetsarath as their supreme colonial servant, his education inspired in him a desire for unity 'in order to counteract French "divide and rule" tactics of administration'.[30] After the French were expelled from Indo-China during the Second World War, Phetsarath became the leader of the *Lao Issara* [Free Lao] resistance movement against their return. Phetsarath's younger half-brother, Prince Souphanouvong, a military commander who broke with the Lao Issara in 1949 and later became the leader of the Pathet Lao revolutionary movement that seized power in 1975, was also educated in France. After travelling to Vietnam, he went on to Paris to graduate from engineering school (Ecole Nationale des Ponts et Chaussées*)* in 1937 influenced by the political convictions of progressive French students at the height of the anti-fascist popular-

[28] Thongchai Winichakul (1994), *Siam Mapped; A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, pp 8–9.

[29] Anderson, *supra* note 6, at p 65.

[30] David Wyatt (1978), *Iron Man of Laos, Prince Phetsarath Ratanavongsa by '3349'*, Data Paper No 110, Southeast Asia Program, Department of Asian Studies, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, pp xiv–xv.

front movement.[31] Souphanouvong was reported to be a reader of the French communist newspaper *l'Humanité*, although he had little concern with Marxist theory.[32]

Regional influences had a significant bearing on how the two half-brothers put their overseas training into practice. Phetsarath saw Vietnamese migration into Laos, part of French moves to unify Indo-China, as a threat to Lao national culture. Instead he promoted a confederation between Laos and Thailand that sat comfortably with attempts by the Thai military regime to expand during the Second World War.[33] He was ultimately forced into a contradictory, pragmatic alliance with the Vietnamese resistance to prevent a French return, whilst also insisting on the threat of a Vietnamese rebellion in Laos.[34] Souphanouvong, on the other hand, chose to work in the Vietnamese bureaucracy rather than return to Laos. He was a key player in Vietnamese attempts to re-orient the Lao anticolonial movement away from Thailand and towards an eastern alliance with the Viet Minh.[35] While the politics of nationalism and socialism shaped the royal half-brothers' experiences upon their return home, it was the experience of travel to the colonial metropolis, rather than ideology, that shaped their time abroad.

The value of the journey in itself was enhanced for post-colonial elites influenced by a new internationalism. Ai Pierre,[36] member of a Lao–French branch of a royal courtier family and key adviser to the new regime, argues that it was not the specific ideology of socialism at French schools that inspired his own decision to return to Laos in 1975, but the transformation he underwent as a 'student traveller':

> 'I didn't see the reality of Laos at that time, in the 60s, with the bourgeoisie. I was a student in Paris and joined demonstrations against the Vietnam War but I was too spoiled to have any political ideals. In

[31] Paul Langer and Joseph Zasloff (1970), *North Vietnam and the Pathet Lao: Partners in the Struggle for Laos*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, p 30.

[32] Langer and Zasloff, *supra* note 31, at p 231, fn 16–18.

[33] Eiji Murashima (2005), 'Opposing French colonialism: Thailand and the independence movements in Indo-China in the early 1940s', *South East Asia Research*, Vol 13, No 3, pp 333–383, p 348.

[34] MacAlister Brown and Joseph Zasloff (1986), *Apprentice Revolutionaries: The Communist Movement in Laos, 1930–1985*, Hoover Institution Press, Stanford, CA, p 27.

[35] Christopher Goscha (1999), *Thailand and the Southeast Asian Networks of the Vietnamese Revolution, 1885–1954*, Curzon, Richmond, p 151.

[36] Pseudonyms have been used to preserve the anonymity of informants.

> France I started working a little bit. We made a trip home by land. It took us four and a half months from Paris to Vientiane in 1971. 'The road to Kathmandu' it was called. Another time I bought a 99 dollar Greyhound ticket and travelled through 31 U.S. states.'

The Western-educated Pierre re-entered the pre-revolutionary elite through family links. But it was the journey that he undertook that proved to be the ultimate factor in his own involvement in the political elite after 1975, when the isolated new regime experienced a shortfall in foreign expertise.

In the years leading up to the revolution in 1975, an urban intelligentsia 'newly returned from overseas studies'[37] and detached from the corrupt US-backed elite, produced commentary in local media and organized nationalist youth political parties.[38] This new expression was silenced in the authoritarian stasis that followed the declaration of Laos as a People's Democratic Republic in 1975. The former elite and monarchy were deposed, most of the overseas-educated elite fled the country and many others were sent to be 're-educated' with new political ideals. During its period of socialist reform, Laos enjoyed links to the Soviet world and the children of Party members began studying abroad in Vietnam and the Soviet Union, returning with bureaucratic management skills, languages and collectivist economic ideals unusable in Laos. However, their journeys produced lasting attachments, with one returnee even naming his child 'Leninakone'.[39]

In August 1985, Somsavat Panthady boarded a plane for the former Czechoslovakia via Vietnam to spend five years on a special scholarship as a communist apprentice. In an account later published online, he described the challenges of studying abroad, although he did not state his area of study. Coming from 'an underdeveloped country where everything stood still . . . I felt like Alice in Wonderland,' said Somsavat. Many of his first impressions were of the 'modernity' in the communist bloc and his desire to learn from it. Once he had mastered the isolation and homesickness, during term breaks Somsavat 'would go to other cities and work in factories or on construction sites'. He also commented on the diversity of people he met and his own self-transformation due to the experience of autonomy and difference:

[37] Grant Evans (2002), *A Short History of Laos: The Land In Between*, Silkworm, Chiang Mai, p 151.

[38] Joel Halpern (1964), *Government, Politics and Social Structure in Laos: A Study of Tradition and Innovation*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, p 9.

[39] Evans, *supra* note 37, at p 191.

> 'In the dormitory, there were students from . . . Afghanistan, Congo, Nicaragua, Benin, Ethiopia, Jamaica, Angola. . . We became good friends, but because of our different backgrounds unpleasant incidents were inevitable. Sometimes we got into fights because of misunderstanding and disagreements. Those five years made me grow more confident, become less shy and make me realise what life was like in a distant land. I was put to the test and forced to learn how to live on my own.'[40]

His years spent abroad would become the best of his life, particularly when he reflected on them after having returned to a very different Laos. In 1986, Laos embarked on the development of a market economy through regional integration. The younger generation now compete to study in a myriad of countries and, while they share similar challenges, the global context in which they study differs dramatically from that of the Soviet-trained revolutionaries. While earlier pilgrimages into the dominant colonial or Soviet worlds were linked to nationalist and internationalist movements at home, contemporary pilgrimages are motivated by a desire for access to the global economy.

Prince Souphanouvong's granddaughter, Vieng, a young United Nations development worker in Vientiane, typifies the contemporary worldliness of Western-educated elites. While earlier pilgrimages were dominated by men, young women are now studying abroad in numbers, and their experiences and opportunities differ from those of their elders and male peers. Vieng's grandfather studied in Vietnam and France and her father is a senior government official educated in Russia who also speaks French, Vietnamese and Chinese. Vieng is a Fulbright scholar with a degree from New York and a young ambassador for Lao culture who has navigated the region on a Japanese-sponsored cruise ship, promoting regional identity under the Association for Southeast Asian Nations. Intensely aware of her background, Vieng has found a different pathway:

> 'In society we are famous because of our grandfather but I am just a normal person and can go along with anyone, can do anything. I don't need to go and eat in expensive restaurants or make friends

[40] Somsavat Panthady (1999), 'Forum: overseas experiences in boarding schools', *International Education – EJ*, Vol 3, No 2, June, Website: http://pandora.nla.gov.au/nph-arch/1999/Z1999-Sep22/http://www2. canberra.edu.au/education/crie/1998-1999/ieej10/forum10.html (accessed 7 May 2005).

> with people from the same family status. I want many friends. I have close friends from many Asian countries and from New York.'

Vieng's own transformation and influence on Vientiane society has more to do with the educational journey than with the political ideologies of class she has experienced. She is vocal about the inequalities between urban Vientiane and rural Laos, and particularly mourns the loss of culture brought about by social change. Unlike her father and her brothers who plan to follow him up the ranks of government, she has chosen a transnational path. Her United Nations position has helped her to reproduce a cosmopolitan work identity, but this worldliness is tinged with uncertainty about the ideals espoused by the post-revolutionary state.

An online questionnaire in late 2004 identified the critique of ideals as a common experience among Lao students abroad. The survey elicited 15 responses from students in Singapore (1), the USA (1), France (3), Australia (4), Vietnam (2), China (2) and Japan (2). A bilingual (Lao and English) questionnaire was sent out through the e-mail networks of informants. Information was sought on family background, educational status, challenges of living abroad, future aspirations and thoughts on Lao society. College, diploma, Bachelors' and Masters' degrees were being undertaken in business, politics, IT, international relations, engineering, arts and hospitality. Most respondents found that communication, cultural integration, being away from family and autonomy were key challenges abroad. Respondents said that they had learnt to 'see the world from different directions', 'learn how to live under other people's rules', and 'be aware of what things are around you'. They also had different thoughts about home: 'I've learnt that Laos as a country is just so naïve when I go out there and see the world. I become a more critical thinker.' 'When you go overseas you know what "life" really means . . . how to live . . . how to be strong. . .'; and 'when I was in Laos I was like a little girl who had not improved yet'. Some focused on what they saw as specific cultural deficiencies. 'I'm fed up with the drinking habits of Lao people. When I'm with foreigners they don't force me to drink, but Lao friends do,' said one. Dreams of home included yearning for 'food, family and friends', 'just about everything' and 'acts of kindness'. But desires to transform 'home' were also present, including 'to improve education', 'get rid of corruption', 'get rid of laziness', and give 'every person in Laos equality'.

Families of respondents were all urban-based, with a high incidence of migration by either parents or grandparents to Vientiane from the provinces. Their parents engaged in a range of professions in government, the development industry and business. Families were multilingual and spoke English, French, Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, Thai, German, Vietnamese and Czech. Respondents aspired to upward social mobility. They wanted to become: 'a provincial governor', 'a high official', earn 'a high salary', be 'an ambassador', or be 'rich (top class) in Laos'. Despite these aspirations and the privileged urban make-up of their families, every respondent described their current social status as 'normal' and all but one respondent wanted to live in Vientiane in the future. These young people were in the process of constructing a distinct 'lifestyle' – a new familiarity with economic mobility and cultural independence that differed from the rural majority.[41] This lifestyle also included a new heightened understanding of 'home', both as a source of deep attachment and also as a focus of criticism.

While global mobility is increasingly extended to the transnational working classes and ethnic diasporas, 'privileged access' to particular forms of intercultural contact is still designated as a sign of high status,[42] even if the privilege is being extended to more people. Educational pilgrimages are one example of this cosmopolitanism, producing an increasing variety of young leaders who seek to occupy key positions in government, development and business. Access to worldly exploration does not necessarily produce enlightened global elites. Pilgrimages in the post-revolutionary period create differences among the new generation in the way they imagine their relationship to the Lao state. The pilgrimage process, a particular 'global pathway'[43] is first found in Laos when students access and demonstrate cosmopolitan credentials in preparation to study abroad. This process involves the navigation of social 'connections' in order to achieve cosmopolitan status. While abroad, students undergo a challenging experience of 'difference', which often leads to a 'reversal' of their cosmopolitan status and a heightened association with Laos. This

[41] James Ockey (2001), 'On the expressway, and under it: representations of the middle class, the poor, and democracy in Thailand', in Yao Souchou, ed, *House of Glass: Culture, Modernity, and the State in Southeast Asia*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, p 316.

[42] Mary Helms (1988), *Ulysses' Sail: An Ethnographic Odyssey of Power, Knowledge, and Geographic Distance*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, p 150.

[43] Pnina Werbner (1999), 'Global pathways: working class cosmopolitans and the creation of transnational ethnic worlds', *Social Anthropology*, Vol 7, No 1, pp 17–35.

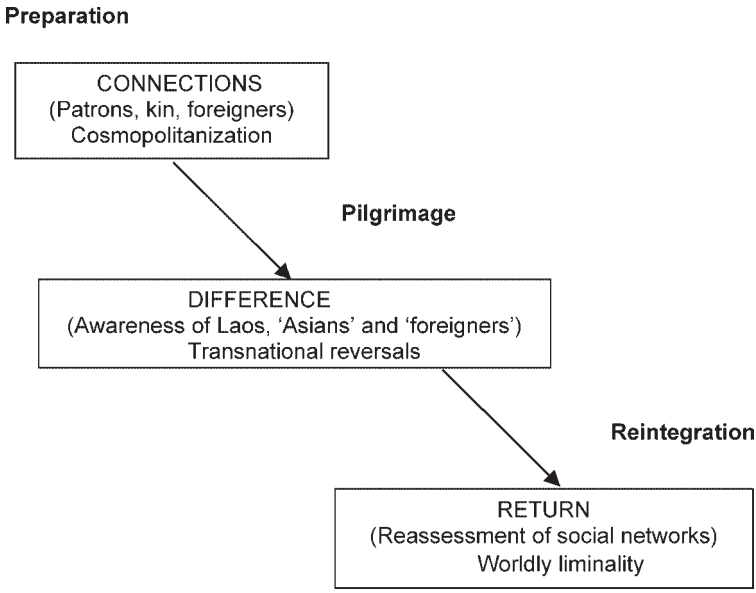

Figure 2. Personal transformations through educational pilgrimage.

'yearning for home' is realized in a new 'liminal experience' in the process of becoming cosmopolitan. It is upon 'return' that their newfound critical awareness of Laos finds its expression in a 'worldliness', which the process of reintegration can only partially defuse (see Figure 2).

Connections and access

Population controls by the Lao state and development community keen to enforce national citizenship prevent scholars from enhancing their connections to diasporic communities abroad by enforcing their 'return home' after studies. Scholarship providers such as the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), which selects 40 students to study in Australia each year, also attempt to overcome bias by improving access for provincial students and women. AusAID requires at least 50% of its scholarship places to be filled by women.[44] The scholarship also emphasizes areas of study considered

[44] AusAID (2005), *Lao PDR, Australian Development Scholarships: Information for Intakes Commencing 2006*, Website: http://www.ausaid.gov.au/publications/pubout.cfm?ID=1621_2920_782_6788_65 (accessed 7 May 2005).

to be beneficial to national development, and the process of applying is couched in terms of the applicant's potential to contribute to emancipating Laos from its low socioeconomic status. In a World Bank report echoing the assumed connection between development imperatives and national borders, Laos is noted as the third largest source of brain drain in the world, with nearly 40% of its skilled labour being lost to other countries.[45] Historically this has involved educated elites, in particular the thousands who moved abroad in the aftermath of the revolution, although it is unclear whether this international report includes those who fled Laos in the 1970s. In addition, most unskilled labour from Laos is subsumed by the larger Thai and Chinese economies that surround Laos. The report's focus on migration shows how development discourses assume national boundaries that social, political and economic actors do not.[46] While the Lao state encourages migration for education in order to build its human resource base, the cosmopolitan experiences of students abroad may challenge their loyalty to national development discourses and ultimately their desire to return home.

The scholarship is crucial to government attempts to harness and control increasingly mobile elites. While some scholarships are offered on an 'open' basis, many are attached to the government sector.[47] Application for these scholarships requires permission from the government office in which the applicant is based. Underfunded offices find it hard to retain employees after they have completed their training abroad, as salaries are very low and officials rely heavily on alternative sources of income. An official who returns with an Australian degree can find work in international development or with a foreign business. The application process gives an added measure of authority to officials, who can control access to coveted educational opportunities, ensuring that only those who agree to conditions can apply. In order to secure permission, in one office those who applied for scholarships were required to sign a form agreeing to continue to work there for at least two years upon their return, in line with a country-specific condition stipulated by AusAID, although there is no

[45] Caglar Ozden and Maurice Schiff (2006), *International Migration, Remittances and the Brain Drain*, World Bank, Washington, DC, and Palgrave Macmillan, New York, pp 173, 176.

[46] For a discussion on the political effects of national development discourse, see James Ferguson (1994), *The Anti-Politics Machine: 'Development', Depoliticisation, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN.

[47] AusAID, *supra* note 15, at p 6.

suggestion that this requirement is attached specifically to government officials.[48] In another office, those at the top of the waiting list for training abroad were the children of officials who were supporters of the head of that office.

For young people in an urban society where opportunities for advancement in the social hierarchy are shaped by having powerful relatives as patrons, being 'connected' is a matter of survival. The young elite are referred to as *dek sen*, meaning literally 'connected children', an amalgamation of *sen sai*, meaning 'threads, strings (connections)' and *dek*, the referent to childhood. The list of scholars each year includes 'big family names', as one applicant commented. The majority of respondents in this study, despite studying in many different countries, form part of a group of urban youth whose connections arose long before applying to study abroad. The students had developed links while they were still attending high school or local colleges. Kin relations also connected students. The sons and daughters of urban business and government families had built up networks of offspring studying abroad. A girl from a market-trading family in Vientiane who is currently studying in Poland has a brother in China and another in Japan. In many cases, students were continuing in their parents' footsteps. A student of international relations in Australia had parents working in the Foreign Ministry, and another studying politics in Vietnam had parents in the Interior Ministry.

The perceived need for connections is just as important as their empirical existence. Patronage is secured through interpersonal links of family, marriage, locality or schooling. The new consumer-conscious generation identifies social connectivity as a product of conspicuous wealth. This contrasts with the idyllic view of a population 'loyally bound together by traditional reverence to Buddhism . . . vertically integrated through (increasingly enlightened) relations of patronage'.[49] Elites with personal control over resources producing wealth and power inequalities require a legitimacy formerly provided by Buddhism, which interpreted such inequalities as functions of merit and karma mediated by ordination, and the redistribution of wealth as patronage. Global connectedness through travel abroad produces a similar legitimacy through the affirmation of privileged social position, paradoxically

[48] AusAID, *supra* note 44.

[49] A view criticized by Andrew Turton (1975), 'Northern Thai peasant society: twentieth century transformations in political and jural structures', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol 3, No 3, pp 267–293, p 268.

by renouncing it for overseas travel in the name of 'national development'. Those applying for scholarships feel that what needs to be 'demonstrated' along with academic ability, is evidence of the correct connections, characterized by having patrons in the right places ready to support them by dispensing their influence.

Access is also seen as requiring cosmopolitan relationships and skills. Students require a high standard of English to be eligible for study in Australia.[50] While many older Lao are fluent in French and a plethora of former Soviet languages, and Japanese is growing in popularity among the young,[51] English is the dominant elite lingua franca. Passing the International English Language Testing System is a major reflection of achievement for students, as those who score highly are praised in the local media and among their peers.[52] The desire for English skills increases the value of relationships with Western foreigners, particularly those who teach at local colleges. A student in the Australian capital, Canberra, said she felt able to live abroad because she had many foreign friends in Vientiane who helped her to understand Western culture. Some said that if they were seen associating with Westerners, others would assume that they were well-paid and connected because of the image associated with foreigners in Vientiane, driving new cars, eating at foreign restaurants and enjoying large salaries. Such relationships are seen as a marker of cosmopolitan experience.

Difference and reversal

Cosmopolitan connectivity in Laos disappears for many students when they begin their journeys abroad, a period characterized by attempts to escape isolation. Somsack spent his first year in Australia living in a house shared by Chinese students in the suburbs close to his university's campus. His main social activity was surfing the Internet. He had purchased a Web camera and microphone, and spent hours each day chatting to friends in Laos and other countries and writing contributions for the Web boards on youth Websites. Communication within the household was sometimes mediated by the Internet. Somsack's

[50] AusAID, *supra* note 44.

[51] Phonepasong Mixab (2005), 'Foreign languages more popular: why are foreign languages important for us?' *Vientiane Times*, 15 March, p 6.

[52] Phonepasong Mixab (2005), 'ADS scholar scores very high', *Vientiane Times*, 4 January, p 10.

housemates, four Chinese students, all used Internet messaging, and Somsack was even asked to do the dishes one evening via the Internet. A major topic of his online conversations with students and officials training in the Philippines, Germany, America and Poland was how hard it was to study abroad. Expressions of homesickness and 'missing' Laos mixed in with expressions of determination to succeed in life abroad reflected an underlying transformation in status, an awareness of difference.

Students also negotiate new and sometimes unwanted identities born out of cultural difference that destabilize the markers of high status they acquired in Laos. The distinctiveness of the region from which Somsack came was subsumed under the general category 'Asian' in Australia. He was identified as an 'Asian student' as most of his social interactions were with Chinese, Vietnamese and Japanese classmates, people from whom he would have differentiated himself in Laos. The influence of his household and a group of Singaporean students that Somsack studied with became apparent in his speech. He used a Malaysian–Singaporean suffix to finish his English statements, for example: 'how are you *la*,' and 'no *la*, bad idea *la*'. Expressing Lao identity became harder in a place where few people knew anything about Laos. Ten, a student in Canberra, which has a small student population, said other students looked down on her when she told them she was from Laos and on a scholarship, as if she did not have the required academic ability. At times this experience of difference became threatening due to a resurgent white racial nationalism at the core of identity politics in Australia.[53] In 2006, students in inner-city Melbourne and Adelaide reported having eggs thrown at them and being told to 'go home' by groups of white males in entertainment areas, particularly in the aftermath of the Sydney race riots involving conflicts between groups of white and Lebanese youths. Somsack has since purchased weights and started body building.

Despite coming to Australia with the intention of temporarily leaving Lao society behind, students find it easier to escape isolation through connections developed in Laos. Links to Laos through the Internet and with other Lao students mean that an 'Asian' identity remains secondary. The son of the director of the government office that Somsack had worked for arrived in Australia for a self-funded

[53] See Miriam Dixon (1999), *The Imaginary Australian: Anglo–Celts and Identity – 1788 to the Present*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney.

degree and he was able to move in with him. The Internet is no less important for them, but their pre-existing connections in Laos, their language and their shared interests help them to support each other in the experience of living abroad. Significant relationships are developed with host nationals abroad. Students develop close friendships with Australians who have had life and work experience in Laos, especially fellow students and tutors. In some cases, these transnational relationships and communications continue long after the students have returned to Laos.

The increasing penetration of the world into everyday life has led to a 'partial unbundling' of the national and non-national conditions, such that the nation has become the site of an internalized 'global' entity.[54] People now experience a dislocation from place through flexible consumer lifestyles, Internet use and relationships with foreigners within the national space, producing a dialogic imagination at the heart of contemporary processes of globalization. But when this experience of 'worldliness at home' is actualized in journeys across national borders, the local and the global are experienced as a striking oscillation, or what Nonini calls a 'transnational reversal'.[55] Thus, while worldly scholars are cosmopolitan at home, they are increasingly more Lao abroad.

While cosmopolitan values in Laos are attached to the ability to speak English and have relationships with foreigners, the experience of difference while abroad reverses these values. Tou was one of the best English-language speakers among his peers in Laos. He used English on many social occasions and took pride in associating with Europeans living in Laos, even joking about his ability to flirt with Western girls. He was an accepted member of a connected group of young people, including pop singers and the children of the political and business elite, and spent his leisure time in Vientiane nightclubs known for drawing wealthy urban youth. He could walk into these clubs and point out all the important people in them: 'that's the deputy foreign minister's son, the prime minister's son, the Party propaganda chief's son'. His

[54] Ulrich Beck (2002), 'The cosmopolitan society and its enemies', *Theory, Culture and Society*, Vol 19, Nos 1–2, pp 17–44, at p 23; Saskia Sassen (2000), 'New frontiers facing urban sociology at the millennium', *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol 51, No 1, pp 143–160, at p 145.

[55] Donald Nonini (1997), 'Shifting identities, positioned imaginaries: transnational traversals and reversals by Malaysian Chinese', in Aihwa Ong and Donald Nonini, eds, *Underground Empires: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism*, Routledge, London, p 221.

language skills and communication with foreigners formed a part of this status. In Australia, the experience was different. He said he felt less able to communicate with 'Aussies' when in Australia than he did in Laos because they spoke differently using colloquial slang and were less interested in trying to understand him. In Australia, Tou spent a lot of time speaking Lao with friends, something that helped him deal with 'missing Laos'. In Laos, he took every opportunity he could to speak English to demonstrate his status as a cosmopolitan. 'My English is getting worse since I came here,' he said in Australia. The change in value attached to Tou's language skills constituted a transformation of his social status.

Khon in Sydney interpreted changes concerning his sexuality as a similar reversal. In Laos he would often make jokes with foreigners about a Lao girlfriend being a *vachananukom phom nyaow* or 'long-haired dictionary' because foreigners could learn the Lao language with them. He anticipated similar opportunities abroad and was looking forward to flirting with all the beautiful blonde-haired, white-skinned, large-breasted, promiscuous women epitomized in the American media. He would even boast about having an affair with an American teacher in Laos. But on arrival he found himself unable to attract women in the way he could in Laos. 'Aussie chicks don't like Asian guys. I really want an Aussie chick but they are just not interested,' he said.

Khon's aspirations are shaped by common assumptions that long-distance travel is the domain of men who are expected to leave the home and come of age through worldly exploration.[56] While male promiscuity is largely tolerated as part of this exploration outside of the clergy, Buddhism and the Lao state portray women as nurturing mothers, domestic wives and cultural protectors requiring regulation, so that mobility and autonomy do not undermine their 'sexual propriety and moral safety'.[57] Andrew Walker argues that increasing numbers of women involved in long-distance trade in the post-

[56] Andrew Walker (1999), *The Legend of the Golden Boat; Regulation, Trade and Traders in the Borderlands of Laos, Thailand, China and Burma*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, p 139; Mary Beth Mills (1999), *Thai Women in the Global Labour Force: Consuming Desires, Contested Selves*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, p 93.

[57] Mary Beth Mills (1995), 'Attack of the widow ghosts: gender, death and modernity in northeast Thailand', in Aihwa Ong and Michael Peletz, eds, *Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, p 258.

revolutionary period have achieved 'innovative travelling identities'[58] which negotiate and incorporate cultural concerns over their autonomy. While men experience a devaluation of their sexual status, long-distance female scholars gain greater freedom to experiment in their relationships while overseas. Nguyen argues that liberal sexual behaviour among university graduates in Vietnam is an expression of modern selfhood, but that it is not antithetical to values considered as 'traditional' such as chastity and commitment to wedlock. The two are practised in largely separate spheres: the first among peers and the second among family members.[59] For overseas students, the distance between family and peer groups is heightened. Young women in particular find that, while this may provide them with new opportunities for relationships outside their immediate kin networks, geographical distance may also heighten concerns over their moral safety and sexual propriety.

Women can become unmoored from cultural constraints on the Internet, which offers a social anaesthetic to the experience of difference abroad. Students use it to maintain links with home and also to develop cosmopolitan relationships that cannot be found offline. Chan and Tik in Poland have found romance on the Internet. Chan chats regularly to boys in America, Australia and Laos. In one case, these flirtations led to the boy from Laos visiting her in Poland, even though they had met only when she visited home the previous summer. Chan and Tik live in a dormitory in a small Polish city with the Lao national flag hanging from the wall. The room looks out on to a typical European street (snow-covered when they showed the view via their Webcam). They have both been in Poland for three years and say they are treated differently as 'Asians'. They rarely go out in the evenings to nightclubs unless they are in a large group, but are not wary of dating Polish men as long as they are polite. In Australia, a number of young women had taken Australian boyfriends, in contrast to the lack of success at attracting 'Aussies' experienced by their male counterparts. However, continued links with Lao students, officials and communities abroad heighten their sense of belonging to Laos.

[58] Walker, *supra* note 56, at p 162.

[59] Phuong An Nguyen (2005), 'Courtship and marriage among university graduates in Hanoi: changing values in a time of economic liberalization', *South East Asia Research*, Vol 13, No 3, pp 385–415, at p 410.

Encapsulation abroad

Concerns over the autonomy of students voiced by families and government officials remind students of their Lao identity. Young women still find themselves experiencing the controlling effects of 'tradition' while abroad. At Chiang Mai University in Thailand, rumours were circulating in 2004 about a Lao girl who had dyed her hair blond, wore 'sexy' clothes and was being criticized by Lao student leaders who said she had 'forgotten her culture'. Students in Japan, some of whom had extended their studies in order to stay, received a visit from a Lao education official, who told them: 'Laos is your mother and you should not disrespect your mother by forgetting where you come from'. This process of 'forgetting' had already begun in Laos. Before travelling to Australia, a few students, particularly males, had grown their hair long and dyed it different colours and wore punk-style fashions. It was part of the construction of a cosmopolitan status they associated with study abroad. This seemed to have fewer consequences than similar actions by females, which would be seen as transgressions of their official role as culture protectors. But autonomy was a concern, regardless of gender, for those monitoring their experiences. Crown Casino in Melbourne was considered the entertainment Mecca for Lao students. Its glittering nightclubs, cinemas and gambling halls were a source of weekly Friday-night pilgrimages. The parents of one student had even threatened to send him home after hearing that he had gambled at the casino and won thousands of dollars.

Student groups also serve to monitor autonomy and enhance the attachment to Laos that students find heightened while abroad. Student groups in Australia participate in annual multicultural days, such as the one held at Swinburne University of Technology in Victoria in August 2005. The event made students aware of the obscurity in which their country was shrouded. It also served to emphasize their awareness of being Lao. 'People here don't know where Laos is so it was a chance to show Lao culture. It was so good to eat Lao food and do things we missed since we came here,' said one student. Students in Poland took similar pride in attending Lao national and religious celebrations by travelling to the Lao Embassy to help prepare and serve food, engage in traditional *lamvong* dances for officials and meet other Lao abroad.

Political divisions continue among the Lao diaspora, dispossessed of their influence in the Royal Lao Government, and who fled into

exile after the revolution. Some see contemporary students as ideologically indicted and corrupt. 'The students in Australia are the sons and daughters of the communist leaders and that's the only reason they are here. I saw the president's son and he brought his girlfriend along too. It is so corrupt,' said one Lao–Australian in Canberra. Such continuing political divisions hide a more complex social reality. Contradictory ideological views can exist alongside personal connections. Many students who come to Australia have overseas relatives to provide them with support and advice. One student in Melbourne was provided with a car by relatives he had met only upon his arrival in Australia. Another is working part-time at his relatives' restaurant while studying. Interactions also occur at community venues such as Lao temples. A journalist from the government media, training in Australia, was keen to spend time at the Lao temple. Asking the monks and laypeople at the temple the history of their personal migration, he found many of them eager for reconciliation. A younger generation of Lao raised in Australia without shared memories of the civil war politics of the 1970s are eager to explore their origins and invest in business.

Students find innovative ways to contravene attempts by the state to regulate their activities. Those who study abroad on private wealth are more likely to have relatives from the diaspora there, to provide them with financial support and allow them to live more permanently in that country. But even scholarship students can access informal labour markets that paradoxically enhance their connections to Laos. Every term holiday, Nouk and his friends travel to a vineyard in the Victorian countryside that has entered into cooperation with the local Lao community. They spend weeks *pai farm* [going to the farm], picking grapes, eating Lao food, discussing their country and living together in dormitories. 'I feel like the farm is a small Lao town where we get together seasonally,' said one student. He was reflecting on the similarities between the farm in Australia and the farmers he knew as working class compatriots in Laos. 'The main reason we go there is money but I also enjoy it a bit, talking with Lao people there,' he said. The farm is a new transnational meeting place for members of the diaspora and worldly scholars from inside Laos. It is a space where class is made problematic, where the exiled diaspora gain elite status due to their 'local' knowledge and where the new elites from Laos learn to be the farmers they never were in their predominantly rural country.

Return and liminality

During a night drinking imported Beerlao in the kitchen of a small group apartment in central Melbourne, students talked about the fears associated with going home. They said that they were afraid they would have to go home and *teh foun* [kick the dust], meaning that there were few opportunities for employment in Laos unless they had connections: *teh foun* evokes the typical image of an unemployed youth walking along a dusty village road. Thus it also evokes a fear of losing elite status among overseas-educated youth, an acknowledgment that it is not the skills they have acquired that have value in Laos, but the status they left behind. 'I've been here five years and I have a degree that can get me a job here but they will send me home. I have lost my connections in Laos. I'm afraid I won't know the right people to find a job,' said Got, a science student living in Melbourne. Others echoed his fears:

> 'They should let students stay and work in Australia because then they could go back to Laos with experience. We are just going home with a degree and we will get sucked back into those relationships and our experience will be lost. We cannot change a thing.'

'Students from Australia might get high positions in government, but the same old problems remain,' said another. This was followed by a slightly ironic toast to Laos, '*mun nyeun! mun nyeun!*' [long life! long life!] the frequently used slogan of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party.

Young scholars returning to Laos experience a gendered re-engagement with social networks of kin and patronage. Sons return to follow their fathers into government, such as a student from Vietnam working with his father in the Security Ministry and another from Australia following his diplomat father into the Foreign Ministry. While older officials have studied in France and the former Soviet Union, their young prodigies, including a number of deputy ministers, now study in the West. Daughters enter the development industry and this is also shaped by kin links. In 2004, the Head of the Lao Drug Control Agency had a daughter working for the UN Drug Control Agency, and the Foreign Minister and at least one former president had young female kin working in the UN. But even with such 'connections', graduates find themselves in a new liminal phase on their return.

A difficulty in reconnecting to elite relationships can have serious consequences. Thongsavath, a senior Party official in the Transport Ministry, married the daughter of an important official in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where he used to work before studying in Australia. In Melbourne, he met his current wife, Lampoun, who was also on a scholarship and who is now the owner of a successful business in Laos. On returning to Laos, the couple's intention to elope was discovered and the parents of Thongsavath's first wife had him sent to prison. Lampoun spent years working to save money to buy him out of prison and, after his release, Thongsavath was thrown out of the Foreign Ministry. Fortunately, his new wife's father worked for the Transport Ministry and Thongsavath was able to switch patrons. He says that without those events he would have risen be an ambassador. His inability to reconcile his autonomy with social connections and cultural assumptions in Laos led to a devaluation of his social status from which it took him years to recover.

Rather than simply bolstering their connections and skills, returnees find that their worldly experience provides them with new values. Another graduate developed a new competitiveness that stood out in her male-dominated office. From an elite political family, she is a strong proponent of equal political and social opportunities for Lao women. But unlike her brother, who is head of a powerful government committee, she could never secure a managerial position. An 'unwritten law' in Laos has ensured that few females have ever advanced in the administration beyond the rank of deputy. This graduate was provided with the position of deputy in her office and worked hard to make herself heard. On one occasion the director general of her department interrupted her at a meeting and, to the surprise of all present, she said in a loud, aggressive voice, 'excuse me older brother, I haven't finished yet!' She sometimes feels that the independence she gained from her study and travels is a weakness. However, she sees knowledge of regulations as a key attribute that she needs to improve.

Differences in perceptions about 'home' also exist between graduates from different political constellations. A group of officials were angered by a student at their ministry who had returned from America. When she came back, she could not remember where certain streets were and did not wear a traditional skirt [*sinh*] to the office one day during the week. Female government officials are required to wear the *sinh* to their offices to maintain Lao culture in the workplace. No similar cultural requirement is deemed necessary for men. 'How could

you forget your own culture?' asked the son of a deputy minister with a shout. 'She wasn't away that long. I went to Vietnam for two years but I did not forget how to "be" Lao.' Students from Vietnam expressed their admiration for the 'regulated' and hardworking lifestyles in Vietnam and saw the country as a good model for Laos. They were critical and perhaps envious of students who go to Western countries. They think they are 'too good to be Lao,' said one. Such opinions illuminate local struggles over how to be Lao within this climate of cultural interaction and exchange. Students from Australia bring home potentially destabilizing Western criticism, while students from Vietnam learn political correctness and regulations. While their experiences are more diverse in reality, these perceptions show how the cosmopolitan social status of returnees is challenged and categorized locally.

The expressions of returned scholars of all ages are now dominated by a questioning of 'home'. Somphon, a senior government official, was among the second group of Lao to graduate in Australia under the pre-revolutionary Colombo Plan in the early 1970s. He distances himself from patron–client relations, saying he is proud to be a 'non-corrupt' official. Somphon says the contemporary manoeuvring for position and money is defining a new generation of officials who know little about pre-revolutionary Laos and are guided only by their desire for wealth. 'Corruption has turned into a profession. These days young people want to be customs officers . . . because money is God. Throw money on the ground and plants will grow, throw money on a girl's lap and she will sleep with you,' he said. But underlying this manoeuvring he sees fundamental questions about place and belonging:

> 'We are in the process of groping for something that is Lao and in this muddle we are not too sure what to throw away and what to keep. We don't know what is correct or what is proper . . . we are constantly questioning whether we are doing something politically, social or culturally correct or not.'

Conclusion: once seen from afar

Early post-colonial elites returned home and contributed to the growth of the pre-revolutionary urban intelligentsia whose critiques of their own society were informed by their overseas study. The contemporary experience of pilgrimage abroad renders taken-for-granted 'Lao-ness' a contingent and constructed, self-conscious project, leaving students

to return to a post-revolutionary society dominated by authoritarian appeals to maintain 'traditional culture' and the struggle to acquire new wealth. They are thus less able to translate their cosmopolitan experiences into social criticism, although they possess a deep desire to engage in public expressions of worldliness. This was exemplified at an annual party for graduates from Australian universities held at the Australian Recreation Club on the Mekong riverbank in Vientiane in late February 2005. The Master of Ceremonies for the event was a vivacious, outspoken girl who had studied in Melbourne and is now the manager of a transnational beauty products distributor. She said the experience had made her less afraid to speak her mind, to express herself. But she was wary of an official interview and did not want to 'be in' the local media. Her expressions were accompanied by a diplomatic awareness of the need to conform to official ideals. One of the first ever graduates from the pre-revolutionary Colombo Plan, now the country manager of an international volunteer agency, said that things had changed. He said that his group of six graduates had also celebrated with a party, but that the occasion was now much larger and the young people were much more expressive than they had been in the early 1970s.

The party saw expressions of a generic Western culture. Members of the recently graduated scholarship group performed a dance routine wearing baggy pants and baseball caps in sync with a popular American hip hop song. They ended the performance with a version of Queen's song *We Will Rock You* with the chorus altered to 'we are, we are, ADS [Australian Development Scholars]'. Noy, a young pop singer who drives her father's red convertible Volkswagen and owns a guesthouse in the resort town of Vang Vieng, performed at the event. She sang a few songs, and then turned to the robust, extrovert director of the local college that prepares scholars, and said it was he who had given her the opportunity to be standing there as a singer. It is at functions like this and through the group bonds that they foster that the meaning of studying 'in' Australia is formed, ultimately as a 'Lao' experience. The expression that these graduates enjoy as a group is not found in Australia. Australia is where they recall a similar, shared, and often challenging experience of difference. It is in Laos, through preparation and return, that these young people become 'Lao–Australian students', as they are referred to in their pamphlet.[60]

[60] AusAID (2004), *Mitthaphab: Lao–Australian Students' Newsletter*, Australian Embassy, Vientiane.

While the revolutionary values that the current Lao leadership adopted in Europe informed a nationalizing project, the contemporary transfer of people, commodities and values across borders now transforms this earlier nationalism. It produces a desire not to be bounded by the locality of the nation-state. International scholarships form a particular 'global pathway' in which the experience of difference and autonomy may heighten a feeling among the elite that their 'place' in the world is marginal. This pathway involves political pilgrimages to Vietnam and economic pilgrimages to China and the West. Worldliness is seen as something that comes from the outside, in the form of commodities, relationships and travel experiences. Yet its value and meanings are produced in dialogue with a sense of belonging to Laos that becomes more critical, the more worldly its gaze. Educational pilgrimages reproduce the ambiguity surrounding the legitimacy of the post-revolutionary state as much as they reproduce the relationships that sustain it. Further research is required into the long-term influence of diverse overseas education on the state bureaucracy.

Ulrich Beck states with an unsettling certainty that 'with time, there must be invented a cosmopolitan state…founded upon the otherness of the other',[61] a global civilization celebrating difference and a replacement of the ethnic nationalist strife of the twentieth century. This article argues that, while the cosmopolitan pilgrimages of urbanites transform the nation-state, their journeys neither inspire nor reflect a new cosmopolitan world order. Instead, the nation becomes a more malleable construct as a result of global travel. Openness to cultural difference, a willingness to engage with the Other,[62] is commonly seen as the domain of elites and their specialized orders of people – political leaders, religious sects, business managers and academics. Pnina Werbner argues that, while class differences structure the experience of migration, openness to other cultures among elites can easily be transformed into cultural conservatism, just as the journeys of working class migrants can be cosmopolitan rather than culturally circumscribed.[63] This is because class and its ideologies are secondary in importance to particular experiences of worldly travel in shaping cosmopolitanism as a practice rather than a condition of humanity. Within this practice, nationalism is not an all-encompassing perspective. It is the oscillation

[61] Beck, *supra* note 54, at p 20.
[62] Ulf Hannerz (1990), 'Cosmopolitans and locals in world culture', *Theory, Culture and Society*, Vol 7, pp 237–251, at p 239.
[63] Werbner, *supra* note 43, at p 18.

between cultural constellations of openness to others and ethno-national encapsulation that shapes the experiences of this increasingly significant stratum of educated youth. Worldly scholars who travel from privileged positions in their own nation-state to the central nodes of the global economy in search of a new modernity do not find their cosmopolitanism abroad, but rather achieve a new liminality 'at home'.

Marshall Berman argues that the experience of modernity is one in which the regularity of tradition is turned into perpetual flux. It is one of extremes of joy and destruction in which all that is solid melts into air.[64] Highly mobile young people who travel abroad for education are driven neither simply by 'traditional' relationships of social status nor by the Bermanesque attractions of modernity like so many moths to a flame. Lao youth abroad retain 'all that was' solid about their home towns. But this solidity has melted, not into air, but into a malleable social status that forms their post-revolutionary experience of a more globally imagined 'Laos'. Rather than being privileged and playful, this imagination is structured by an oscillation between attempts to practise a cosmopolitan elitism at home in Laos and the heightened experience of Laos abroad. The central assumption of the integrity of the national state behind the development scholarship allows only a limited experience of life abroad and engagement with exiled Lao communities. Upon return to Laos, contemporary scholars are faced with a liminality born of a lack of opportunity to transform their connections and employ their worldly experiences within the national context. Unlike earlier elites, they have no colonial Other to strive against or socialist *Internationale* to strive for. The desire to 'journey' among so many Lao, from Party members to market traders, is a desire to turn the 'international' into Laos, to seek 'worldliness at home' and not to make Laos more foreign. But it is informed by a confusion about what Laos and being Lao actually are, an inability to be '"at home" at home'[65] by merging worldly experience with connections.

It is logical to assume that the pilgrimage is *to* a 'place' and that the value of the journey lies in obtaining knowledge and experience abroad and bringing it 'home'. This analysis of educational pilgrimage has revealed that its transformative capacity lies instead in being *from* a

[64] Marshall Berman (1982), *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, Penguin Books, London, p 15.

[65] James Ferguson (1999), *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, p 212.

'place' and the value obtained about being from that place while abroad. One student justified her impending travel abroad, quoting the proverb: *khon bor ok chak ban bor hen danden kai*, or 'a person who does not leave the village does not see distant regions'. On return to Laos, students would express opinions that reworked this proverb, such that 'a person who does not see things from afar, cannot see the village'. The village becomes a very different 'place' when seen from afar.