



The politics of Chao Anouvong monument and deconstruction of king representation in present-day Laos

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Abstract

This paper explores two questions. First, what causes the association between the monarchy, the past Lao political regime, and its revival and reuse to create political legitimacy for the Lao government under the current social context? Second, what are the political implications behind the construction of the many Lao king monuments by the government? How is it related to legitimization and creation of political power? This study analyzes the process of deconstructing the monument of an important Lao king, Chao Anouvong, a historically important figure in Laos, known as a “heroic king” who had fought for the independence of Laos and who is widely acknowledged by the Lao people. This paper aims to point out the political implications linked to the belief behind the construction of the monument of Lao kings, a political symbol that was overthrown by the government but is now revived, and the use of Chao Anouvong’s image to build political power for the Lao government with the new sense of nationalism. This shows that the Lao government uses historical figures to raise awareness of the value of Lao nationalism through the Lao cultural heritage. It also helps create legitimacy for the Lao government’s operation.

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Introduction

The beginnings of Laos’ history show a long-standing relationship with the monarchy since before the founding of Lan Xang Kingdom in 1271 in the area called Chiang Dong Chiang Thong (Sririkrai, 2005; Stuart-Fox, 1998). The history of Laos has long been associated with monarchy and dynasties. The earliest evidence mentioned

in the Lao chronicles records that Laos was ruled by a dynasty and the ruler’s title was “Phya”, meaning “The Great One” in Pali. King Fa Ngum established the Lan Xang Kingdom and continued the dynasty. The monarchy has been passed down through the centuries in Laos history. Even though the monarchy has been overthrown since 1975 (Baird, 2017; Evans, 2002; Gosling, 1996) when the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) was established, the Lao people still acknowledge the monarchy and have a word in the native language to call the kings “the Greatest of all lives”. Traces of the monarchy culture can be seen

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in today's Laos (Grabowsky & Tappe, 2011) such as the old palaces in Luang Prabang, the royal chariot, Pha That containing the relics of the kings and the towering monuments of the many kings in Luang Prabang Heritage City and the capital city Vientiane.

It seems unusual that the symbols associated with the monarchy continue to be used and deconstructed. Therefore, it is interesting to explore whether the reuse of these symbols in the present era has any hidden implications and if so, what kind? How does it reflect the belief, value and political idealism of the Lao government in modernity?

We think that the reason why the Lao government tries to restore the image of kingship in the present era, especially by constructing monuments of many kings, is to convey a political message as well as to legitimize the government. Chao Anouvong is not the representative of the monarchy they try to resurrect. Rather, he is used for political communication with implications related to the creation of legitimate rights for the government. It also helps support and build a political power base with a new sense of nationalism. Many Southeast Asian studies scholars have shown that monarchy has long been linked to the creation of political history. Besides, the revival of the image of the previous kings to connect with the nation (a fictitious boundary) is considered a cultural invention that creates both knowledge and realization of a nation's existence (Anderson, 1991; Winichakul, 1994). According to Evans (2002, p. 232), "The Lao PDR government is trying to legitimize itself. One approach is to adopt the strict rituals of the religion by building the statue of King Fa Ngum in Vientiane in 2003." The government claimed "The nation must have a symbol of unity." However, it was seen as an attempt to connect the old symbol which is powerful and meaningful to the Lao people to nationalism under the auspices of the Lao government. This shows that creating new awareness of nationalism by using king symbolism is in fact aimed to legitimize the power of the government and to create a more intense political awareness. Veeravong (2001), Lao historian, has emphasized that "the monarchy of Laos is a tradition that has been passed down since the founding of the ancient kingdom. Lao nationalities are aware of the important role of this system."

Literature Review

This paper focuses on the case study of the representation of Chao Anouvong, an important king chosen by the Lao government to create political legitimacy within the new sense of nationalism (Ford, 2011). In this analysis, we find that the governments in the Mekong region such as Thailand and Cambodia usually use monarchy to build political power (Bassenne, 1995). Therefore, the Lao government may also revive and reuse this symbol under new nationalism. This paper aims to present a new perspective on the connection between using the king as a symbol and building political power base in the new trend of nationalism and to show that the construction of the King's monument is linked to a sacred area and a legitimate political powerhouse for the Lao government to gain acceptance and to create unity among the people in the Lao modernity.

In the political system of the Mekong sub-region, it is found that Laos, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Vietnam were each ruled by a monarchy. Thus, it shows a specific concept about the image of a king as having power and prestige. The king is sometimes viewed as a holy person or a demi-god connected with supernatural powers. It was mentioned in the myth that Khun Borom (a Lao King) was sent from heaven to reincarnate on earth. Some say that Khun Borom was sent by Tan (Lord of Heaven or Heavenly Ghost) to rule humans. Later, Khun Borom sent his seven sons to rule various cities in Southeast Asia such as Luang Prabang, Chiang Rung, Chiang Mai, Ayutthaya and Chiang Kwang. Lao people believed that Khun Borom was the first king who was an ancestor of the Tai-Lao ethnic group (Masuhara, 2003; Stuart-Fox, 1997). In addition, it was found that in the traditional belief influenced by the concept of the universe since prehistoric times of the community in this area, states gave the highest priority to the monarch who was believed to come directly from heaven and to be god-like. The king had divine power and was able to use it in peace making (Evans, 2002; Osborne, 1995). In the past, people worshipped the king through some pictorial symbols. In the event of the king's visit, some villagers would lay down a handkerchief on the path where the king would step. After the king stepped on it, the villagers would bring home the handkerchief with his footprint to worship. Such divine power is believed to be inherited and inherent to the king as a mighty being. In Lao society,

monarchs have been believed to be associated with power, prestige and sanctity for centuries whether they were from Luang Prabang dynasties or Vientiane dynasties.

Today, the monarchy system in Laos has not been much discussed since its abolition in 1975 (Hongsuwan, 2018; Suebsimma, 2019). However, the symbolism associated with the king, e.g. old palaces, monuments and rewritten historical narratives can still be found today. For this reason, it is interesting to do research on the revival and deconstruction of the monument of the kings that took place after the year 2004 when Laos established and strengthened its economic, trade and social relations with the outside world, especially with the United States and China. We think that the deconstruction of monuments of some Lao kings carried out by the government was aimed to communicate politically with other countries that Laos is a country of civilization with a monarchy as a cultural heritage passed down from generation to generation. It is also used as a political strategy to create legitimacy for the government and to create a “historical landmark” that indicates and reinforces Lao people to develop a sense of nationalism in the context of Laos’ modernity.

Methodology

Our view is based on the fact that structures and sculptures play a powerful symbolic role in politics. They have many meaningful functions beyond being a mere physical space. Some structures act as representations of state power. Some of them are important to the history of nationalism and represent the spiritual anchor of the people in society. Some of them are a symbol or representation of capitalism. In this paper, we are searching for the hidden implications in order to better understand the phenomenon of deconstruction of Chao Anouvong representation in contemporary Lao society through the monumental statue.

Data Analysis

In this study, data are drawn from various sources such as historical writings, booklets from monuments, rituals, symbols, songs and literature related to the representation of King Chao Anouvong. Data are also drawn from interviews and old photographs and presented in the form of descriptive analysis.

Results and Discussion

Statue of Chao Anouvong: Significance of a Heroic and Patriotic King Image

A monument refers to a structure erected to commemorate a person, event or concept from the past. Monuments erected in modern times can be in the form of structures or statues. The idea of monuments in art is linked with grandeur, magnificence and permanence. Most importantly, its gigantic size conveys the glorification of memories to live on (Osborne, 2001; Prakitchonhakan, 2007). “The Statue of Chao Anouvong Monument” by the Mekong River in Vientiane is the largest and tallest monument in Laos. The monument is 14.99 meters tall from the ground to the head while the statue alone is 8.29 meters tall, made of 8-ton of copper donated by the companies in the MMG Group of Lan Xang Mineral of China, which has a concession to invest in gold and copper mining in Velaburi city, Savannakhet district (Nation Weekend, 2010, p. 12). The construction of the Chao Anouvong Monument was one of the 21 development projects to celebrate Vientiane’s 450th anniversary in 2010, led by the members of Politburo and Central Committee and sculpted by a Lao sculptor. They also looked for the descendants from the 6th generation of Chao Anouvong family from Sepon City in Savannakhet District. The statue of Chao Anouvong is in the standing posture adorned with the full decorations of the king, holding the scabbard of the family in his left hand above the waist pointing forward in an alert manner. The right hand extends to the front at the chest level suggesting the calling for unity for the whole nation and being the protector of the nation (Institute of historical research, 2010). The interpretation of his gesture is given by the Lao government who supports the construction of this monument.

Chao Anouvong is a national hero who is widely known and influential in the history of the nation, society, economy, and politics. He was named “Chao Anouvong, the founder of the nation” (Ngaosrivathana & Ngaosrivathana, 2010). This remarkable image of Chao Anouvong is different from other Lao kings, which is the main reason why he was chosen in the symbolic operation in the context of modernity.

The area where the statue of Chao Anouvong is enshrined is in the park along the Mekong River, later named “Chao Anouvong Park”. It is located opposite the President’s office (Ho Kham or Old Palace) at Don Chan

Beach, which is believed was Chao Anouvong's palace. It is also opposite the Old Phra Keo Hall, Sri Chiang Mai District, Nong Khai Province. In the inscriptions of Wat Si Saket, it was mentioned that Chao Anouvong had a bridge built across the Mekong River in 1810, in order to facilitate the commute to the festival celebrated at Ho Phra Keo (Bunyavong, 2010). It is also believed that Chao Anouvong had a headquarter built in this area and conquered the state of Siam and killed many of the generals and the Siamese soldiers (Ministry of Press and Culture, 1997, p. 19). When we consider the deconstruction concept, we find that the deconstructive spirit reflects the "incommensurability" of different methods, schemes, or paradigms. That means no single definition is used as a standard. Chao Anouvong in the Laotian worldview is the "victor" who can kill the enemy and defeat them with pride due to the deconstruction of Chao Anouvong's image from being a "loser" to a "winner" through the wars in Laos. Meanwhile, in Thailand's history, Chao Anouvong is portrayed as a rebel. But for the Lao people, that war established and created a "national hero". This phenomenon shows that the real meaning cannot be traced back once something is deconstructed. When no one group has a complete monopoly on meaning, this leads to several versions of conversations and discourses (Jirasatthumb, 2010, p. 96).

The researchers traveled to Sri Chiang Mai District and found that the Old Phra Keo Hall in Sri Chiang Mai District still had traces of the remains of brick and cement in the military service area. This is the navy unit along the Mekong River, or "Mekong Riverine Unit". Thus, on the Thailand shore of the Mekong River looking southwards, we will see a big statue of Chao Anouvong standing, holding a sword and extending his hand in front of him located on the right bank of the Mekong River. He is facing south, opposite to the place where Pha That Dam of Sri Chiang Mai District is enshrined. However, we discovered that the original sketch of the statue is different from the actual statue. This is mentioned in the draft document for the construction of the 3 Lao Ancestor Monuments by the Ministry of Press and Culture (1997, p. 18). "The statue was designed with Chao Anouvong standing on the back of an elephant commanding a battle. The original version portrays him in the war with Siam, in which he was riding an elephant according to the documents. So, the statue of Chao Anouvong was supposed to include an elephant. Chao Anouvong was the heroic king of the Lan Xang Kingdom of Vientiane. Therefore, the statue of Chao Anouvong should be associated with the name of the kingdom "Lan Xang"

(million elephants), which also envisions the history and geography of our kingdom."

The text above shows that there was a modification of the statue of Chao Anouvong from the original one. As mentioned before, the Lao government had many symbolic purposes in constructing the monument of Chao Anouvong. One of the main purposes was to take responsibility in responding to and connecting the socio-cultural concepts in modernity. The connotation of the Chao Anouvong monument is a symbol of the Lao government as well as representing the Laos identity. The image of Chao Anouvong holding a sword and extending his hand to the south is symbolic of bringing the Lao people to the new imaginary era. His face towards the west also means many nations and the area to the west of Laos. This constitutes the meaning of the modern era in the context of cross-border relations between Laos and Thailand, Laos and the western world and other countries. This deviates from the old concept of building unity and reconciliation internally and internationally. The statue then was modified from the king "riding an elephant" to "standing with the royal amulet, extending his hand to the front and turning his face to the west" as a welcoming gesture to foreign guests to create "peace, independence, democracy, unity and permanence" under the context of Lao modernity. As such, it can be seen that the Chao Anouvong Monument does not merely serve as a connection to the past that only refers to the historical identity of Chao Anouvong, but it is also connected to the future of Lao people in modern days. This is an attempt to change the meaning and to dismantle historical knowledge of the relationship between Thailand and Laos with a new narrative form, which seems to be an invention of concepts or "sweet words" based on a period of peace among the countries of the Greater Mekong Sub-region. The aim is to pursue a better future for the nation of Laos in the post-modern era.

Deconstruction of Chao Anouvong's image is, according to Derrida (1981, p. 280), merely a discourse, a system of constructing meaning in which all things have no meaning except this system of constructing meaning. A system of meaning construction is a system of creating different meanings. The lack of a constant or permanent meaning that transcend time and space allows an infinite possibility to play with endless creation of meaning. The meaning then depends on the system of making meanings or discourses. If the system that creates the meaning changes, the meaning of all things changes accordingly as seen in the case of the Lao government creating a new representation for Chao Anouvong.

Another puzzle is why the statue is facing west. We searched for an answer and found that there was a rumor about an incident that caused the statue of Chao Anouvong to face the Mekong River or the west, which is the Thai side. The initial plan was to have the statue facing the tower or the president's office, which is the east. In the Lao traditions, sacred objects such as Buddha statues or other monuments tend to only face east or north. However, due to the size and weight of the statue, it needed to be carried by a large crane. It was therefore hard to control the direction of the statue weighing more than 8 tons, as desired, so the Chao Anouvong's statue ended up facing the west bank of the Mekong River, which is the Thailand side. This change of direction happened 3 times during the enshrining of the statue. Rumor has it that a shaman was called to perform rituals to inquire and communicate with Chao Anouvong's spirit, and he found out that "His Majesty wishes to turn his face to the west bank of the Mekong or the Thai side" (Vongpachan, 2011). This event shows that the Lao government pays special attention to relations with neighboring countries. It is another form of communication to create the ideology of a nation and create a relationship with a neighboring country, such as Thailand, like never before (Winichakul, 1994). Alluding to the greatness of Chao Anouvong is therefore an ideology to create legitimacy for the government. This indicates the determination of the placement of monuments to build cross-border relations.

Certainly, changing the direction or placement of such monument has a symbolic meaning. The Mekong River has served as the perimeter or borderline of Laos over the past several decades. Placing the statue of Chao Anouvong here signifies that he is the "Guardian" of the territory of the nation as well. Some people explain the meaning of the gesture of the statue saying that he is welcoming visitors of Lao PDR, showing an open attitude in freely giving new meanings. In addition, it can also indicate the desire of the Lao nation to grow and bring the nation to modernity.

In addition, the direction and placement of the statue facing west imply the direction of veneration, which is in the opposite direction. If the monument faced east where the city of Vientiane is situated, then people who come to pay homage to the statue would have to bow their heads to the west, which means facing to Sri Chiang Mai District on the Thai side. But if the statue faces the west, visitors who come to pay homage will bow down to the statue towards the direction of Ho Kham, the office of the president of the country. Therefore, the expression of

homage to the statue of Chao Anouvong also suggests paying respect to the country and the Lao government as well (Vongpachan, 2011).



Figure 1 (A) Statue of Chao Anouvong holding a sword and extending his hand to the front; (B) Two large cranes were used to lift the statue of Chao Anouvong to be enshrined on the pedestal

From the above, it shows that Chao Anouvong's image communicated through the monument is the desire for national diplomacy towards a global community. The monument is symbolic as being a role model, creating relationships with the modern world by imagining the region, a new transnational space through the narrative of Chao Anouvong Monument. This creates regional concepts that include not only Laos, but also other countries. The direction of the statue has a connotation that is a symbolic act covered up to create a new meaning by deviating from the historical reality.

However, the Chao Anouvong Monument construction committee researched historical evidence and held many meetings in an attempt to explain the posture of Chao Anouvong statue. "Mr. Bua Ngern" explained the meaning of the gesture of Chao Anouvong via a news program on the National Television of Laos (Nation Weekend, 2010, p. 12) "Historians reached the conclusion that Chao Anouvong's hand gesture means he forgives the invaders (Siam) who brutally killed him and the people of Laos. He forgives them, and in this gesture, he is ready to show goodwill to all nations. This meaning is consistent with the Lao people's attitude nowadays because this era is the time to build relationships, peace and friendship for development of the country. The Lao people are ready to get over any discord in the past. We will not let the sorrow return again."

From the above statement, we can see the attempt to deconstruct and eradicate the old mentality that limits the thoughts and imagination of the Lao people. Looking through the historical lenses, the incident of Chao Anouvong is perceived as a "bitter pill" between Thailand and Laos. It has been declared by the representatives of

the Lao Revolutionary Party that Laos will avoid mentioning the past political conflict between Thailand and Laos based on the ideology of the Lao government in modernity. Generosity, compassion and forgiveness about the Chao Anouvong battle are also seen as a measure of the level of development in Laos. The construction of the statue of Chao Anouvong monument thus creates a modern image of the growth and development process of Laos. A new definition has been created and reinforced by the new country name: Lao People's Democratic Republic, suggesting that Laos is no longer endorsing communism. The implication of the country's name suggests that the political party does not seek the best interests of the party and state. Rather, it is a democracy that belongs to the "people." However, in reality, it is not practiced that way. The name "Lao People's Democracy" is therefore still just a political discourse in the socialist system of one-party-one-state regime.

The Lao government has integrated socialism with democracy. This can be an attempt to avoid the mistakes of communism and capitalism since democratic socialism is believed to combine the creativity of the private sectors with the central guidance of the public sector. A society that thrives on progress must have two essential characteristics: a centralized view of the power of the state and the freedom of initiative of the private or the masses. If a country lacks central authority, it is likely to become anarchist, but if it lacks freedom, its advancement will be delayed (Taylor, 2007, p. 491).

Due to the emergence of globalization that brings the world closer as well as the rapid and intense movement of goods, people and capital in a global capitalist system, the relationship between Thailand and Laos is that of "One Community/Social Unity" under the context of modern economic development (Ford, 2011). In addition, the present Lao society is quite influenced by Thai media. Upon such realization, the Lao government has made an effort to create a symbolic meaning through Chao Anouvong's image as someone who is "patriotic" and who shows goodwill even to the former adversary during war time. Therefore, under current circumstances, the identity of Chao Anouvong is ambiguous, dynamic, uncertain and modifiable (Derrida, 1981). The monument of Chao Anouvong also impacts the ideology of "Modernity" which is based on relationship of power in current situations.

Even though the monument was constructed with hidden political significance in modern Laos, most

Laotians understand that this is not about reviving or wanting to bring back these old regimes. Rather, the Lao government wants to unite the Lao people to have a spirit of patriotism, as shown in interviews with students, villagers and government officials. When compared with the statue of the leader of the new regime "The Statue of Kaysone Phomvihane", built for a long time, it was found that the statue of Chao Anouvong has greater effect in both the mind and memory of the Lao people. According to some Laotian people, the statue of Kaysone can be found in every city, and it belongs to the government. The people do not feel involved with it. Therefore, when traveling to rural areas, we found that the pavilion where the statue of Kaysone is located looked desolate and is not given the proper care and attention. The revival of this symbol of the heroic king shows that Laos has changed its policies to be more open to the outside world. It also helps to create an image of the Lao government in the modern era as the "resurrector of Chao Anouvong" by portraying him as having a role in rebuilding nationalism.

Derrida (1997) defines this phenomenon as "deconstruction", the process by which something initially rejected becomes necessary once again to the very person who rejected it. The Lao Revolutionary Party, who previously rejected and overthrew the former monarchy, now "borrows" the symbols of the old regime to reuse in the present era. Chao Anouvong Monument therefore symbolizes the politics of monument and creation of meaning that represents "modernity" by rejecting the idea that Chao Anouvong had lost the battle with Siam and by creating a new meaning of Chao Anouvong as a figure who represents nationalism, hospitality and goodwill in order to lead the country to permanent development in today's world. Therefore, "friendship" has been created through the identity of King Chao Anouvong Monument, which is the key to unlock the door to the future of Laos.

In addition, there was a rumor that at night on the day of the enshrining, some people saw a green beam of light on the statue of Chao Anouvong. Lao people in Vientiane believed that the light was the soul of Chao Anouvong. The monument was inaugurated on November 7, 2010. Many Laotians came to attend the ceremony with sacrifices. This celebration was called "Pang Boon" (traditional merit-making period), reflecting the attitude about Chao Anouvong as a "special person or sacred person" like "Tonbun" (person who has merit), representing Laos political ideology of nationalism that has returned to life in the modern era.

Finding King Chao Anouvong's Lineage: Reviving Memory and Building Nationalism

Creating a statue of Chao Anouvong, who lived more than 100 years ago, seems to be difficult to reliably describe his appearance. Therefore, an attempt was made to find his lineage to use as references. This is also unusual because since the Lao revolution and abolition of monarchy on December 2, 1975, a large number of aristocrats fled the country. Those who stayed in Laos were stripped off their titles and became commoners. In the past three decades after the establishment of the Lao People's Democratic Republic, the image of aristocracy quickly faded and disappeared from Lao society. The trace of some aristocratic families can be found in their last names.

Before the statue was created, the Lao government claimed that they were trying to find the 6th lineage of Chao Anouvong. They also discovered new evidence about this last king of the Vientiane kingdom. The search for people who witnessed his life is an important piece of evidence, which makes it possible to determine the appearance of King Chao Anouvong. Somsavath Lengsavath, vice president and chairman of the Organizing Committee for the 450th Anniversary Celebration of Vientiane City said at the inauguration that (Ministry of Press and Culture, 1997, p. 19) "The statue of Chao Anouvong is dressed as a commander-in-chief. His left hand held his sword firmly. His right hand extended out in front of him showing forgiveness for the invaders of the Lao Kingdom in the past. This project was started in 2010. The Project Sub-Committee and related agencies took a survey and collected data at Sepon city, Savannakhet sub-district and discovered historical documents and the 6th lineage of Chao Anouvong. They are the family of "Chalichan", "Chantanagon" and "Sitalibud". Based on the research, the sub-committee sketched his appearance, his outfit and his gestures. There were several seminars so that a consensus was reached."

From the above political phenomenon, we can see the new direction of Laos' development policies in this modern era, namely, the government still plays an important role in the country's political and socio-economic development. The restoration of the tradition from the old regime indicates that the control is being eased, but the government still maintains strict control over political movements. It can be seen that even after finding Chao Anouvong's lineage, families were not praised or glorified in the media in any way.

Evans (2002) suggests that the collapse of the communist regime in the country where it originated, and the economic failures that occur in communist countries in general, make the original claim of implementing this system in Laos obsolete. Therefore, the Lao government sees the need to change in order for them to maintain their legitimacy. The most obvious change was that in 1991, the national emblem was changed from hammer and sickle to Pha That Luang of Vientiane. The emblem is used on the government buildings, official documents, banknotes and stamps. More importantly, during the year 2010, the government produced 100,000 kip banknotes with the image of the monument of King Xaysethathirat enshrined in front of Pha That Luang, Vientiane to celebrate the 450th anniversary of Vientiane Capital. Thus, it is an attempt to link symbolism such as holy places and kings to the creation of nationalism under the auspices of the Lao government.



Figure 2 100,000 kip banknote, Vientiane capital, 450th anniversary, with the image of the monument of King Xaysethathirat in front of Pha That Luang, Vientiane

One of the meanings of the attempt to deconstruct the King Chao Anouvong monument that the Lao government wants to communicate to the Lao people through the king's identity is to raise awareness of the duty of citizenship to the nation state. The government tries to encourage the people to participate in the national-building ideology.

We think that the King Chao Anouvong monument does not represent a desire to restore the monarchy. Rather, it was used as a strategy of the rulers to invent symbols based on nationalist ideas. Traditional customs in the old regime, namely, the monarchy of Laos, are borrowed to negotiate with the mass to gain acceptance by claiming that the government is the protector of the beautiful cultural heritage of Laos as well as to receive more support from the public sector, which somehow seems to contradict the historical reality. Aphonsuwan

(2009, p. 320) suggests that in borrowing or inventing something in society, the important issue may not lie in the historical fact whether the rule existed or not. They may not have heard this concept before. Because for modernity, if something does not exist, it can be invented. The importance is therefore not on historical facts. If this is the case, the statue of Chao Anouvong Monument reflects the borrowing of the old Lao culture in the traditional era to adapt to the new culture or the new world, which is the use of the past to benefit or serve in the present only.

November and Don Chan Beach: Time and Place Overlapped with Political Meanings

The month of Phachik in Lao means November, which is the 12th lunar month in the traditional culture. In the ancient Lao tradition, November is an important month. There is an important annual merit-making festival that has been celebrated for hundreds of years. Pha That Luang Festival in Vientiane is held every year on the 15th waxing moon of the 12th lunar month. November is also when the inauguration of Chao Anouvong Monument, which was on November 7th, 2010, is celebrated. It can be seen that the first festival is a Buddhist merit event that is associated with the Phra That, which is considered an important symbol of Laos today, and the second celebration is for the 450th anniversary of Vientiane and for honoring the heroic deeds of the Lao kings in the past.

However, we found that in Lao, people view November as not only limited to these two events. Another well-known official ceremony is the commemoration of the death of Kaysone Phomvihane on November 21, 1992 (Leifer, 2005, p. 156). He had represented the socialist regime for a really long time. He was named “President Kaysone”. The Lao government had tried to promote a “Kaysone Cult” the same way as “Ho Chi Minh Cult” in Vietnam, but was not successful. Part of this is due to the fact that Lao people do not have the same belief in ancestor worship as in East Asian countries such as China, which have a more successful policy of promoting Mao Zedong Worship or Ho Chi Minh Worship in Vietnam, for example, because Lao people worship people whom they believe to be sacred (sacred man) like Chao Petcharat, who was a royal descendent and a Buddhist. The creation of a cult of non-royal or non-Buddhist political leaders seems to have slipped away and ultimately failed (Evans, 2002; Stuart-Fox, 1996).

It can be seen that the month of November seems to be popular for many invented customs. Some are celebrated by laymen as in Pha That Luang Festival. Some are held by the government as in Kaysone Phomvihane Memorial Day. And lastly, the celebration of Chao Anouvong Monument, that integrates a Lao people ceremony with the government one, which signifies deconstruction of monarchical culture in today’s Laos. It is a symbolic negotiation of the Lao government because during the 450th anniversary of Vientiane celebrated in November 2010, there were references to the past in relation to the current political regime of Laos by creating a new meaning. Laos’ Independence Day was also integrated in Vientiane’s 450th anniversary celebrations even though the establishment of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic is celebrated on December 2nd of every year. This phenomenon shows the extension and creation of new meanings in Laos’ current political culture by implementing it as a new model for the political aims of the Lao government in the modern era.

Celebrating the 450th anniversary of Vientiane Capital together with the 35th anniversary of the establishment of the Republic is a practice of formalization and a ceremonial role model with references to the connection between the two ceremonies. This also shows a contradiction by creating a heroic image of Laos in the modern era. Chao Anouvong represents the old regime, but on the contrary, the political elite of the new socialist party has chosen to adopt and integrate the royal symbol as one of the heroes who built the Lao nation. This phenomenon is considered an attempt by the Lao government to invent a new tradition by using history as a tool to create legitimacy or action and cement of group for the society (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983, p. 12). For this reason, we can see a pattern of symbolic negotiation. Namely, the Lao Revolutionary Party was viewed as a political symbol that “overthrows” monarchy, and now they try to become a revolutionary party that promotes and “preserves” the cultural heritage of Laos within the context of modernity.

This phenomenon is a demonstration of monumental time. When the timing of a monument is chronological, it is not empty. In contrast, it has an element of present added to it. It is an idea that refutes the continuity of history, covered up as a public holiday. The reality is that it is a token that reminds people of something or someone forever. A calendar is not like the hands of time that keep turning and turning without coming back, but it creates

a memorial or memory of history (Benjamin, 1982, p. 263).

Martin Stuart-Fox (1997, p. 145) made an interesting observation about the change of political symbol by the Lao government to create nationalism: “only Buddhism and history can give opportunities for cohesive nationalism.” Though these two elements are limited to the Lao Lum people. This modern Lao kingdom has taken its name “Kingdom of Lan Xang Rom Khao”, which is a term used to refer to the ancient kingdom. The flag and national anthem serve to strengthen the historical continuity of the national identity. However, the symbol of nationalism in Laos is “Nation, Religion and King.” The flag and national anthem cannot create a feeling of mystery and nobility nor create a feeling of appreciation for the royal power like Thailand can. This is because the Lao kings were very distant and unknown to most rural people, not to mention the hill tribes, who are a minority in the country.

Monuments are a special area associated with remembrance and especially with time. Each monument has space and time dimensions. When one thinks of a monument, one must think of a place and a specific date. Monuments are built in reference to an event or a person in the past. There is no monument built for the future. For example, we do not build a monument for trees in the fear that they may become extinct in the future. There is no monument for a future prime minister or World War III. As for time, a monument is built for the past, but it must stay in the future (Khumsupha, 2005, p. 154). Regarding this, we discuss the place where the statue of Chao Anouvong is located. This place, called Don Chan Beach, is situated along the Mekong River. Today it is known as “Chao Anou Park”. This place seems to be associated with the myth about the curse of Chao Sri Khotabong, that goes like this: “once upon a time Vientiane was invaded by a large number of wild elephants, which were destroying the city. The ruler of Vientiane therefore announced that if anyone defeated the elephant herd, he would reward that person and let the person marry his daughter. In response to the announcement, people from around the country volunteered to defeat the elephants. No one could control the elephant herd except for Thao Sri Kot, who had a magic spell. He used his magic to successfully defeat the herd of elephants. Thao Sri Kot married the daughter of the ruler and became his son-in-law and received many rewards. As time passed, the ruler started to become paranoid that his son-in-law would take over his power, so he plotted to get rid of his magician

son-in-law. The ruler of Vientiane convinced his daughter to discover his weak point. After finding out the secret, he ordered someone to ambush his son-in-law while doing his business on the toilet by using the spear to stab into his anus. Before he died, Thao Sri Kot cursed the ruler and the whole city to always have bad luck and restlessness. According to the curse, if prosperity occurred, it would disappear as quickly as a flick of an elephant’s ear or as fast as a snake’s tongue. This curse would only end when there were “Floating stones in the Mekong River as well as a python and a milky way crossing the Mekong River. That is when the country will return to true sustainable prosperity” (Pinthong, 2010, pp. 120–121).

Today, many Laotians interpret and describe the present time, Laos today, as the end of the curse since they think that the so-called “Floating Stone” is the first bridge across the Mekong River between Thailand and Laos, that was inaugurated in 1994. The “Python” across the Mekong is believed to be the railway connecting Thailand to Laos in the area of Ban Tha Na Laeng (Laos) and Nong Khai Province inaugurated in 2008 while “The Milky Way” is sometimes interpreted to mean “merchants, foreign investors, westerners, Chinese people” who have brought a lot of capital to invest, making the country’s economy more prosperous.

We consider these narratives as a type of social action that has implications for politics and culture. In the Lao social context, these tales show many Laotians’ thinking methods in different dimensions. For example, they serve as a symbolic confirmation and reinforcement of the modern city of Laos that will transcend. They also create legitimacy for the three pillars of the country, which are the nation, religion and monarchy. These pillars create the power of nationalism. And finally, the narrative of the ending of the curse of Thao Sri Kot has a social function by reconstructing and adding the end of the story and finally a closure.

It has been noted that several descriptions about the myth often have references to Thailand. For example, “Python” refers to the railway between Thailand and Laos. “Floating stone” refers to the bridge across the Mekong River and “White Elephant Steps on the Land of Laos” refers to King Bhumibol, King Rama IX of Thailand, who went to the inauguration of Thai-Laos Bridge in April 1994. The Milky Way crossing the Mekong River is described as a natural phenomenon in which rocks and sand dune are created in the Mekong River in such a way that the land at Don Chan Beach can

connect to the Laos mainland. For this reason, the success of the story of the curse of Vientiane shows the historical meeting of beliefs between people in society and their past stories as well as the relationship and the need to transcend in order for Laotian society to enter modernity through the identity of Chao Anouvong, who remains at Don Chan Beach in Chao Anu Park. The Mekong River current brings deposits, creating a sandbank connecting between Don Chan Island and the Lao mainland, which can be seen when the Mekong River has low tide. This phenomenon is significantly explained with a new meaning. It shows that Laos is “Land linked No Land locked” through the existence of Chao Anouvong on the land of Laos.

The above tale can be explained within Derrida’s conceptual framework (Derrida, 1981). The tale “End of Chao Sri Kot’s curse” is a narrative that has flexible, movable, non-static meaning. Derrida believes that language has no specific context although the meaning depends on the context. But the context itself is boundless. It can change at any time depending on the interpretation. Language is therefore independent of context in this sense, which means deconstruction.

Deconstruction involves dissolving the unity of the message and then recreating the meaning by rearranging the hierarchy and importance of unity, center, occurrence, sound in order to open space to the suppressed side and replace it with something else to create the possibility of a different meaning while maintaining some traces of the original (Charoensin-Oran, 2008, pp. 153–154). For Derrida, the “end of the curse of Chao Sri Kot” tale contains not just one meaning but more than that. There are endless additions and replacements to the story. For this reason, this narrative is borrowed and linked to the construction of Chao Anouvong Monument in the area of Don Chan Beach along the Mekong River, which is redefined once again as an event that brings about “the ending of Chao Sri Kot’s curse” due to the power and prestige of the holy person who brings the country to modernity.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Under the current trend of global change driven by economic and trade competitive dynamics, every country needs to adjust their policies to cope with this globalization. They also need to take into account the cultural foundation of society (Wankaew, 2009).

The change within Laos results in dissolution of the political, economic, social and cultural boundaries in the era of globalization. This has led to the process of merging Laos to the economic area of the countries of the Mekong Sub-region with an aim to create transportation routes among the countries in this region and to open up opportunities for development. This can clearly bring the country to transcend in the modern era.

Restoring the image of the king in the case of Chao Anouvong Monument is not an act of nostalgia. Instead, it has important implications and political messages created by the government in order to legitimize their own political institutions. Chao Anouvong Monument serves as a symbol of the present-day Laos. It creates a new meaning and deconstruction of traditions which are related to the structure and Lao nationalism. Chao Anouvong’s image is therefore more for the new era and not about the old times. The resurrected identity of Chao Anouvong allows Laos at present to maintain and creates an awareness consistent with every situation to be sustainable. The monument of Chao Anouvong is redefined as a “hero with a sense of nationalism” or one who maintains the identity of Laos and raises nationalist awareness under modernity in response to new occurrences in Laos.

A form of anti-domination is done by deconstructing the culture. Considering the narrative of Chao Anouvong Monument, it can be seen that the image has been changed from the historic point of view as a fighter against the enemy to a “Cultural Ambassador” who welcomes guests from Thailand and other countries. He is also a forgiver free of any grudge against the past. This is a commendable image changing from inferiority to challenge (because in Thai history, Chao Anouvong is seen as a “rebel”) and by turning inequality into an equal relationship by redefining the meaning of historical stories. Chao Anouvong serves as a symbol of Laos in the modern era. This is a very specific definition of the modern situation in which Laos has to connect with other countries. It is a form of symbolic interaction of the Lao people. Chao Anouvong has become a symbol that gives meaning to the situations facing Laos, with the emergence of globalization and transnational societies that bring the world and the region closer together.

Therefore, the image of Chao Anouvong through the politics of monument is a challenge and distortion of Laos history. Chao Anouvong Monument was

constructed during the formation and development of the Mekong region based on cross-border political perspectives in the dimension of cultural complexity of Lao society in the present era, which indicates the dynamics and diversity of ideas on economic and political development in contemporary society as well as creating historical dialogue by deconstructing past events and bringing up the opposing idea of “enemy”, which is “friendship”, to suggest alliance in the context of the modern history of Laos. This seems to be confusing and has a significant difference from the history. Interestingly, it also shows how the opinion about nationalism has changed in the context of developing international relations in the modern era, driven by the Lao government together with the people of the country.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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