Interactions with a Violent Past

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“People had to hide in the forest,” said the old, half-blind farmer sitting in front of his family’s house in Ban Nakai, Viengxay town. He then pointed to the green hills covered with secondary forest and the occasional swidden rice field. “Many stayed in caves but others had to dig holes and covered them with leaves so that the American bombers could not see them. Our old village was completely destroyed. We could go to the rice fields only under moonshine. The leadership of the party even disapproved of raising colorful ducks and advised us to wear inconspicuous clothes.”

Welcome to Viengxay, the so-called “Birthplace of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic” (Nivat 2006: 45; see Provincial Tourism Office Houaphan 2007). As a celebrated site of revolutionary history, namely the place where the leaders of the Pathet Lao sought shelter in caves during the US Army’s bombing campaigns of the Second Indochina War, Viengxay plays a considerable role in Lao official commemoration politics. This site of memory is presented to visitors as a place of revolutionary solidarity and bravery, of patriotism and sacrifice. A guided tour leads through the caves of the leading figures of the Lao communist revolution such as the late Secretary-General, Kaysone Phomvihane, and “Red Prince” Souphanouvong who stayed there from 1964 until the 1973 ceasefire. Besides heroic stories of the great leaders, the “small fates” of the local population are acknowledged as well. The audio guide reflects voices of survivors of
the war, children of the political leaders and ordinary villagers who endured hardships and suffering, and for whom the limestone karst mountains of Viengxay constantly remind them of one of the most violent episodes both in Lao history and their own lives.

A walk through this memorial landscape reveals the ambivalent heritage that imbues the physical environment with meaning: small hidden caves where a household could find cover, rocks bombed out of the mountain faces and scattered around overgrown craters; ruins of former militia compounds and the vast halls of the hospital cave where women gave birth next to dying mutilated soldiers; bomb debris and sometimes even unexploded ordnance which until today threaten the population … in sum a landscape that represents both shelter and sorrow, both nourishment and death, haunted by traumatic memories of a violent past.

This chapter shall discuss first Viengxay as landscape of war memory by focusing on the interaction of people and their environment, and the influence of official commemoration politics on local collective memory connected to the landscape, on shared images of the past; second, it will focus on the growth of tourism in the former “liberated zone” that creates ambiguous connections between official narratives, multivocal local memories and international views on the broader context of the violent years of the Second Indochina War.

**Introduction: Landscapes as Sites of Memory**

I consider Viengxay as a key site of memory in the present-day Lao People’s Democratic Republic following Pierre Nora’s (1989) basic definition of *lieux de mémoire* as sites where memories converge and condense and where people engage (controversially) with their pasts. As deplied by the French historian, such sites are often appropriated by the state for official commemorative politics — linked to state holidays, visited by official delegations and included in a national imaginary (Nora 1998; see Ricoeur 2004: 401–11). Yet the interplay with local collective memory — that is between different intents to remember — continues and will be of particular importance for our analysis. Following Halbwachs’ (1950, 1952) insight in the social and cultural constitution and organization of memory, the past is less a given than continually reconstructed and represented (Erll 2008: 7). Collective memory implies the idea of a socially constructed and continually reproduced memory — an ongoing project of “reconstructive imagination” (Assmann 1997: 14) aimed at the production of meaning
which in essence is unstable and susceptible for ideological/political contention. Here the distinction between the local and the national level comes into play. While local collective remembrance of the past is often directly linked to the self-ascertainment of a community, on a national level political strategies of legitimization and public relations prevail. However, these dimensions should not be treated separately since war memory links individual “small fates” and local history to the overarching grand narrative of national history.

The discursive genesis of this site of memory provides profound insights in how official narratives of the revolutionary struggle continue to legitimize the political status quo in Laos. As a national lieu de mémoire, Viengxay is claimed by the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (LPRP), which at present shapes the meaning of the place as key site of the victorious revolutionary struggle from which the current regime derives its legitimacy. Simultaneously, the town is promoted as tourism destination focused on historical entertainment in a beautiful natural environment. In other words, Viengxay is now a spatial historical document and a potential economic resource where the interests of the Lao government and the international development community intersect. The topography of Viengxay as historical palimpsest comprises various layers to be analyzed both as media of memory and ideological projection screens, and of course as components of local life-worlds. The term life-world comprises the sum of physical surroundings and the everyday experiences of individuals and collectives living together in this environment (Husserl 1970; Merleau-Ponty 1962; Ingold 2000). Therefore, sites of memory must be considered as part of a larger physical world which constitutes the ground of human experience — prominent landmarks perceived and more or less engaged with by the local population.

As Vatthana Pholsena and I have pointed out in our Introduction, we analyze landscape as a cultural process characterized by the interaction and mutual constitution of people and their physical environment rather than a mere physical reality “out there.” Thus, landscape is a contingent interplay of actuality and potentiality, not just a fixed image or representation of an idea. Moreover, landscapes are contested sites of power struggles, in particular if they are shaped and interpreted as state-controlled lieux de mémoire — a hegemonic strategy that encounters resistance by multiple local collective voices or transnational perspectives. Yet, the physical surface of landscapes should not be neglected since the perception of landscapes is a manifold process that takes aspects of aesthetics, memory and materiality
into account — all on their own capable to constitute a meaningful environment with which the inhabitants correspond in their daily activities and where visitors are confronted with competing impressions. The negotiations of historical meaning and collective memories are entangled with prospects of development sustained by the prospects of agricultural and tourism development in Viengxay. This makes it a nexus of past, present and future where a bundle of different and at times contesting discourses entertain a complex relation with the physical environment and everyday life-worlds. This intricate interplay between discourses and materiality, affects and iconicity, official historiography and tourism strategies will be explored in the example of Viengxay as a polyvalent, meaningful landscape of memory.

**Houaphan Province as Landscape of Violent History and Memory**

Even before the irruption of the Indochina Wars, Houaphan regularly turned into a place of chaos and violence. As French travelogues illustrated, marauding bands of multi-ethnic militias ravaged and looted northern Laos in the 1870s. These bands were scattered remnants of the large-scale rebellions that unsettled the Qing dynasty for decades (Kuhn 1970). In Laos, these bands were considered Chinese (Ho) even though upland Tai, Hmong and other ethnic groups sometimes joined the marauders (Culas and Michaud 1997: 224). Yet more often than not, peoples fled from the invading bands either deeper into the forested mountains or — in the case of the Lao who settled in the uplands of Houaphan since the 16th century — to the lowlands. Captain Cupet, member of the Pavie mission, traveled through Houaphan and Xieng Khouang in 1888 and bemoaned the devastations that characterized the landscapes of the northeastern provinces. He mentioned destroyed temples in abandoned villages and suggested a traumatized population: “[The Chinese] raids were renewed almost every year and after a very short time, the majority of the villages had been burned. The inhabitants, hit by incessant requisitioning, obliged to run to the forest every so often to see their huts destroyed when they returned and their fields devastated, abandoned the country little by little” (Cupet 2000 [1900]: 39). The Second Indochina War (1961–75) clearly mirrored this historical situation when the local people fled into the forests and caves of the mountains to seek shelter from the American bombing campaigns.

The chaotic years before the consolidation of French colonial administration changed the demography of the sparsely populated region. Hmong
fleeing from the Chinese established villages on the mountain ridges while Tai Deng from Thanh Hoa took over villages and rice fields abandoned by Lao — who partially returned after awhile, creating tensions with the upland Tai groups (Foropon 1927). Further tensions were created by colonial interventions such as taxation policies or the changing administration between Luang Prabang and Thanh Hoa (Gay 1989: 208–10). Messianistic movements occurred among the local population, for example, the Hmong uprising under Chao Fa Pachai (Alleton 1981). The Việt Minh took advantage of local resentments and supported anti-colonial militias. Võ Nguyên Giáp considered war against France as an Indochinese affair, opened up an additional “Lao Front” by establishing joint Lao-Vietnamese forces in Houaphan since 1948 and by backing a young, energetic soldier, Kaysone Phomvihane — son of a Lao mother and a Vietnamese father — who later became the strongman of the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (Goscha 2003: 38–40). Houaphan with its strategic location in the mountainous Lao-Vietnamese border region next to the political and military power centers of Hanoi became a bridgehead of Indochinese revolution. After the First Geneva Agreements of 1954, the remote provinces of Houaphan and Phongsaly were controlled by the communists and considered “liberated zones” (Lao: khet potpòi).

When politics of national reconciliation failed and Laos was drawn into civil war between rightists, neutralist, and leftist groups, the leadership of the Neo Lao Hak Xat (the Lao Party communist’s official front political organization) fled to Houaphan in 1960 where Kaysone’s troops had established full control with support from Hanoi. After a short intermezzo of political negotiations, the civil war escalated in 1963; in particular, Xieng Khouang province became the major battlefield. With the American intervention, the communist leadership retreated from the Plain of Jars and again sheltered in the stronghold of Houaphan’s mountains, more precisely in the village of Siang Sûi, located only a few kilometers south of Viengxay. When on 17 May 1964 the American bombing of the region started (Ministry of Information and Culture 2000: 915), the limestone karst mountains around the small village Ban Nakai — which later became part of Viengxay — were chosen as a more suitable stronghold than the unprotected plain of Siang Sû. Souvanna Khamdy, today curator of the Kaysone Memorial in Vientiane, recalls how the later politburo member Sali Vongkhamsao sent him to survey the region for suitable bases for the communists to retreat which he finally found in the hundreds of caves in the mountains around the village Ban Nakai (Lao National Tourism Authority 2010: 8–9). Refugees from the heavily bombed provincial capital, Sam
Neua, and other bombed villages followed the revolutionary leaders and their soldiers. A true cave town emerged, named Viengxay, “City of Victory” (then the nom du guerre of Kaysone). Since this strategy did not remain secret for long, American bombers attacked the noticeable mountains with full force. The bombing raids were intended to wipe out the communist leadership and the revolutionary troops who were directly supported by North Vietnamese troops. Each night, Vietnamese soldiers filled the craters in the supply routes as they used to do it at the same time along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Southern Laos (Pholsena 2008; van Staaveren 1993). While Sam Neua was completely razed to the ground, more and more people took refuge in about 200 out of 480 natural caves around Viengxay. With more than 23,000 inhabitants, Viengxay became one of the largest cities in the Lao highlands. Over the years, a viable infrastructure had been constructed within the caves including army quarters, hospitals, schools, factories, and communication networks (Rogers 2005). Yet for most people life was full of dangers and risks, particularly for peasants working in the fields. One of the most frequently told stories from the war is about how the people tended their fields and gardens under moonlight. Both soldiers and civilians suffered from hunger and relied on Vietnamese food supplies. For nine years, the local people had to endure daily bombing campaigns while the communist leadership led its guerrilla war from within the caves. Inside the caves, rooms and corridors had been enlarged with sledgehammers and dynamite and made more comfortable with level floors and concrete walls, ventilation, roofs and drainage (ibid.; Lao National Tourism Authority 2010).

Following the ceasefire in 1973, the leaders left their caves and built houses directly in front of their shelters in case the war erupts again. As provisional capital of the “liberated zone,” Viengxay witnessed a profound change since administrative buildings and ministries were built next to newly built roads. The Vietnamese continued their military and technical support. It was not before the takeover of 1975 that the revolutionaries and their entourage returned to Vientiane to proclaim the Lao People’s Democratic Republic. However, for the local peasants, hardships and distress continued as the economy was down and agriculture was constrained by ruined fields and unexploded ammunition. Moreover, reeducation camps were established in the region. Senior bureaucrats, members of the Royal Army and even the royal family were taken to Houaphan to attend political “seminars” — a euphemism used for the camps that implied years-long forced labor, malnourishment, illness, and death. Often the camps were misused to settle old scores through denunciation (Stuart-Fox 1997: 172).
Viengxay with more than 400 detainees in 1976 (Khamphanh 2004: 182) became an isolated *khet phiset* (“special zone”) and a notorious symbol of remoteness and secrecy.

With the relaxed political climate of the 1990s and the official closure of most of the camps, the Lao government hesitantly opened Viengxay for visitors. With international aid, the site was turned into a promising tourism destination focusing on the violent history of the Second Indochina War and the heroic legacy of the “liberation struggle” of the Lao people. In this process, Viengxay was turned into a showcase and memorial site of the Lao revolution and an arena for self-legitimating strategies of the LPRP. As will be shown in the following sections, the three entangled aspects of Viengxay — site of state commemoration, tourism destination and nexus of different individual war memories — create tensions and ambiguities as well as synergies.

**Viengxay, Landscape of Memory — A Topographical Overview**

Visitors entering the town of Viengxay are usually surprised by its quiet and picturesque appearance that makes it hard to imagine it as a former arena of war and violence. The oversized roads — reminding of the short career of Viengxay as provisional capital of communist Laos (1973–75) — are lined with gardens and small houses, only now and then interrupted by decrepit and abandoned former administrative buildings displaying a melancholic aura of the faded idea of a socialist resistance capital in the highlands. In contrast, a monument consisting of a peasant, a soldier and a worker celebrates the vision of socialism by the main road. The worker is stepping on a bomb with the letters “USA” — recently repainted — inscribed on it (Plate 2.1). This posture is somewhat ambivalent since it can be interpreted as a sign of victory against the “imperialists” as well as a reference to the explosive legacy of the war lurking to the feet of the people. As Holly High (2007: 70) puts it: “UXO has become part of the very ground livelihoods are built on.”

Next to the monument in the town’s center, an unremarkable market with a couple of noodle soup stalls is frequented by the occasional tourist group and women from the surrounding villages buying and selling goods. A number of Chinese traders have opened their businesses next to it, including a motorbike store that appears over-dimensional in this rural area. Yet given the fact that motorbikes are nowadays the most important means of transport in even the remote mountains, and the large catchment of
the district capital, the line-up of colorful motorbikes from Chinese production does not surprise. Rather, they stand emblematically for the current provincial initiatives to make the region attractive for foreign investment and promote economic development. Next to the market, large ponds dominate the center of the town. They used to be crater landscapes unsuitable for cultivation and were thus dug out by hundreds of men — forced labor according to contemporaries — in order to create fish ponds. Halfway to the Viengxay Caves Visitor Centre, a white “stupa of the unknown soldier” with a communist star on the top refers to the relationship between Buddhist and socialist ideas in contemporary Laos (Plate 2.2; see Evans 1998; Tappe 2008). Every now and then, a large concrete plant tub is placed next to the road inscribed with revolutionary slogans such as “Müang Viengxay is the birthplace of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic,” “Müang Viengxay is a place of solidarity,” and “Müang Viengxay is the stronghold of the revolution.”

The whole scenery is overshadowed by limestone karst mountains crisscrossed by the natural cave complexes mentioned above.

The following caves are included in the official tour package: the office and residence caves of the revolutionary leaders Kaysone Phomvihane...
(1920–92), Souphanouvong (1909–95), Nouhak Phoumsavan (1914–2008), Phoumi Vongvichit (1909–94), and Khamtay Siphandone (*1924) whose cave is connected to the Tham Sanglot complex which housed up to 2,000 soldiers and staff (according to the information plate). Inside the caves, only a small amount of crude furniture and other items give a sense of life in this inhospitable and cold environment. Narrow rectangular emergency rooms with oxygen pumps refer to the fear of gas attacks. The cave entrances hide behind huge blast walls that protected the caves from bomb shrapnel and guided missiles. As a photo in Phoumi Vongvichit’s autobiography (1987) documents, only provisional shack stands outside the cave as temporary resting places. It was not before the ceasefire of 1973 that the party erected concrete houses for the revolutionary leaders — close to the cave entrances in case the bombing restarts (Rogers 2005). Nouhak Phoumsavan’s house appears to be in the best condition since Nouhak used to visit Viengxay on a regular basis and other cadres from Vientiane were accommodated there as well.5 A photo exhibition displaying impressions from the war years occupies one room in Kaysone’s house while another small building is reserved for a bust of the late party leader. Visitors leave
donations here and light incense in commemoration of the great leader, thereby imitating ritual practice in Buddhist temples.\(^6\)

The impressive Tham Sanglot, the “cave were elephants could pass,” was used for theater and dance performances to entertain both soldiers and civilians. Today this large cave with a concrete grandstand is used for large gatherings such as party meetings. In the same complex, the army quarters were established and the so-called artillery cave sheltered the anti-aircraft, now looking across the crater-pocked and overgrown plain of the former airport. Souphanouvong’s cave is surrounded by bougainvillea which the Red Prince had ordered from his hometown Luang Prabang. Besides, Souphanouvong dug out a large bomb crater and built a heart-shaped pool instead. The small stupa for his eldest son who died during the war will be explained in more detail below. Recently, the Vietnamese and Chinese embassy caves were included in the tour, and in the future, the vast hospital cave complex (the former “Lao-Cuban Friendship Hospital,” located seven kilometers east of Viengxay) will be opened as well, according to the Provincial Tourism Office (personal communication).

The landscape surrounding Viengxay reveals more or less visible traces of a precarious past. Besides smaller caves where lower-ranking revolutionaries, soldiers and civilians resided, or which were used for different purposes such as workshops, factories etc., overgrown relics of concrete foundations indicate the sites of former buildings such as the barracks of Vietnamese engineers that helped to improve the town after the cease-fire. These traces are visible only by locals and well-informed visitors. More conspicuous are the brick basins on the mountain slopes that were used as a water supply for the caves and once linked to them by bamboo tubes. The name of one Hmong village — Ban Kum Chet (“Village Group 7”) recalls the former location of a battalion of the People’s Army. Further war souvenirs are craters and unexploded cluster bombs that scatter the landscape albeit on a lesser scale than in Xieng Khouang province (see Russell, this volume). While the cases of the cluster bombs are used for various purposes such as planting pots, barbecue cases, and poles for huts, the bomblets are collected and sold as scrap metal — even if they are still potentially active. Therefore, the bombs represent ways of appropriation and valorization as well as lethal danger.

The materiality and iconicity of this landscape of violent memory opens it for processes of signification and for struggles of meaning. From the perspective of the state, Viengxay as a national lieu de mémoire requires a deliberate shaping of meaning — to make it the unambiguous heroic “birthplace of the Lao PDR” as official accounts would have it. As
the following discussion of official commemorative politics will show, certain levels and elements of this landscape are singled out and arranged in a meaningful historical discourse. The official cave tour with its numerous information plates and explanations by the guides fulfills this purpose.

Viengxay as Revolutionary *Lieu de Mémoire*

After the escalation of the Lao civil war and the beginning of the American bombing campaign in 1964, most leftist politicians and their families went to the “liberated zone,” more exactly to Houaphan where Kaysone Phomvihane already had established the base of the revolutionary party with North Vietnamese assistance. Many of them did not enter Vientiane again before 1975. In his autobiography, Phoumi Vongvichit (1987: 175) reports how it took him four days in 1964 to bring his family from war-torn Xieng Khouang to Viengxay because they could only travel in the security of the night. While people in Xieng Khouang increasingly had to dig holes in the hills to find shelter, in Viengxay things were prepared for the leading members of the Patriotic Front: “the central committee of the party had drilled caves for us” (ibid.) inside one karst mountain that provided shelter for Phoumi’s family. The cave included a garage, a kitchen, a dining room, and bedrooms for all family members who went through the daily bombing raids unscathed thanks to the sheltering rock. Outside the cave, a few simple, provisional shacks, ducked close to the cliffs towering the cave entrance allowed rare moments of fresh air and daylight as one of the photographs illustrates (ibid.: 176). Numerous pictures on information plates in the caves illustrate the life of the revolutionary leaders among soldiers and civilians in the caves.

The cave tour reproduces official historical narratives of the so-called “liberation struggle” (Lao: *kantôsu potpòi*) against foreign oppression. Contemporary historiography as exemplified by the standard history book *Pavatsat lao* tells the story of the valiant “Lao multi-ethnic people” in their centuries-long struggle for independence and unity (Lockhart 2006; Tappe 2008). Wars against Siamese and Burmese “feudalists” and against French and American “imperialists” are key elements within this heroic narrative. According to this teleological history that culminates in the revolution — the “liberation” — of 1975, the historical protagonists of the *kantôsu* are arranged in a genealogy of national ancestors (Lao: *banpha-bulut*). This official hero pantheon includes heroic kings such as Fa Ngum and Anuvong as well as the revolutionary leaders mentioned above who used to sit at the long table in the politburo cave (Plate 2.3).
fits nicely in the discursive national topography of Laos that represents a specific idea of the Lao nation according to LPRP vision (via narrative, icons and state performances): a multi-ethnic people with a rich cultural heritage that fought for centuries for independence and unity, now united in pursuit for socioeconomic development while preserving the culture, in particular the legacy of Buddhist civilization (Tappe 2008, 2011a).

In March 2010, a Buddhist temple was inaugurated in this largely non-Buddhist region. This event became an occasion for celebrating the legacy of the liberation struggle in connection with culture politics and visions of socioeconomic prosperity. On this occasion, a large tour group of 150 persons traveled from the capital Vientiane to the mountains of Houaphan in a commemorative pilgrimage, visited the caves and paid homage to Kaysone with incense and donations. Besides ceremonies at the temple such as almsgiving, political speeches mixed with dancing and singing performances. The dancing performances referred to local cultural “traditions” (Lao: *papheni*) — Lao women dancing with *kaen* flutes, Hmong kids in traditional dress jumping to Thai-style pop music. Between

Plate 2.3  The meeting room of the politburo in Kaysone Phomvihane’s cave complex.
these acts, an aged veteran of the “struggle” gave a mò lam singing performance in which he sang about his war years he spent together with Kaysone and the other leaders, living in caves and pushing risky military operations. In a corresponding speech, an official from Vientiane merged cultural and economic “development” of the district within a general discourse of national construction (Lao: sang sat) by emphasizing how Viengxay turned from a crater landscape into a prosperous müang. His speech illustrated the three pillars of contemporary government politics: cultivating Lao national culture, preserving the legacy of the revolutionary struggle, and promoting socioeconomic development.

In the foreword to a publication based on 46 interviews with people who lived in Viengxay during the war — these interviews from 2008 constitute the material for the audio tour as well — the chairman of the Lao National Tourism Authority, Somphong Mongkhonvilay, states that “[…] Viengxay was a place of great heroism, ingenuity and solidarity, but also of great suffering” (Lao National Tourism Authority 2010). Therefore, Viengxay is considered meaningful because it represents revolutionary values such as heroism and solidarity but also the hardships of the Lao people during the war. As a lieu de mémoire in Nora’s sense, the place unites official memory discourses of the revolutionary struggle with a wide range of individual memories of the war which finds its expression in the cave tour. One crucial keyword here is arguably “solidarity” (Lao: samakkhi): solidarity between soldiers and peasants, between the communist leadership and “the people,” between Laos and Vietnam (in terms of food supplies, military and technical support by Hanoi; see Lao National Tourism Authority 2010: 14), and general internationalist solidarity (delegation visits from Cuba, China, etc.; Lao-Cuban friendship hospital). This emphasis on solidarity ignores the fact that Vietnam and China had their own agendas in which the support for the Lao communists was a mere by-product. The comment in the English version of the audio tour states that during the war the leadership focused “on protecting the people” and that the armed struggle was a “social revolution” on behalf of the Lao people. When talking with locals, I frequently encountered this image of close solidarity between revolutionaries and “the people.” In February 2008, a farmer expressed his gratitude to Kaysone by stressing: “If Kaysone did not have the idea with the caves, the Lao people would have been wiped out.” Moreover, he repeated Mao’s famous phrase that army and people are like fish and water (Lao: pa kap nam) which I have heard from many interlocutors in Houaphan.
The focus on the historical role of Kaysone might be a product of the deliberate historiographic and iconographic attempts of the LPRP to present him as the undisputed and decisive leading figure of the “liberation struggle” — thereby ignoring that his dependence of Vietnamese support. His cave is not only the obligatory starting point of every cave tour, but in addition, a huge monument with a five-meter-high statue of the late secretary general was inaugurated in 2010 (Plate 2.4). The Vientiane Times (15 December 2009) commented on the occasion of the groundbreaking ceremony: “The event was seen as deeply meaningful in relation to the history and politics of the Party, state and Lao people, especially for the people of the heroic province of Houaphan.” With this monument, the party celebrated Kaysone’s 90th birthday (13 December 2010), which was the occasion of an almsgiving ceremony with more than 1,000 guests. Again a commemorative caravan from Vientiane was organized to “[…] remember the good deeds and efforts of President Kaysone to seize power from foreign aggressors and lead the nation to liberation in 1975.” It is evident that the LPRP keeps the memory of the revolutionary struggle alive and promotes Viengxay as the alpha of the omega Vientiane, linking the “stronghold” in the mountains to the prosperous national center in the
Mekong Basin. This process of signification entails a kind of historical debt relation between the young generation and the forefathers who fought for national “liberation” and allegedly terminated foreign oppression and violence. Kaysone appears to personify this struggle and is glorified officially as national strongman from amidst the Lao people (and not as arm of Hanoi). One young monk gave me the core argument when he pointed out that Viengxay is the most important historical site of Laos because “all revolutionary leaders” (Lao: banda phu nam pativat) who fought against “the enemy” (Lao: sattu) used to live here.

The caves epitomize the protection of the people by the party as it is propagated in official history books. This image is diffused further by newspapers and TV programs which simultaneously promote Viengxay as destination of educational adventure trips to the place where Lao history found its climax. The years of the war are idealized as time of bravery and solidarity of the “Lao multi-ethnic people” of Houaphan, and directly linked to the existence of a free and prosperous Lao People’s Democratic Republic. This heroic image appears as homogenous and without contradictions: the brave Lao people against the imperialists. Yet there are some stains on this idealized image, for example the death of Souphanouvong’s eldest son who was allegedly assassinated in 1967 by a Hmong agent working for the CIA (yet other versions of this incident suggest internal quarrels within the Pathet Lao). However, this episode is often mentioned as example of revolutionary self-sacrifice. As one former soldier told me in March 2010, Souphanouvong’s son refused to stay in the caves or be sent to Hanoi like other children of the leaders. Instead he sought direct confrontation with the enemy. Finally, his recklessness made him an easy target for the opponents. In the audio tour, Souphanouvong’s daughter Nyotkaeomany speaks about this traumatic event for the family and fosters the image of the “red prince” as revolutionary leader who endured hardships and sacrifices for his people instead of living an easy life in the palace. A photo in the Souphanouvong Memorial in Vientiane shows him doing garden work in Viengxay, one of his favorite pastimes according to various accounts that refer to it as marker of his modest lifestyle and proximity to the everyday life of the commoners. The vivid description and original voices of the audio tour bring the past — and purposeful images of the past — to life. These voices are key elements of Viengxay as site of memory since they tell the visitor directly about the past and have a clear pedagogical function by making history more imminent and entertaining, not only for students’ excursions and party delegations but for private tourists as well. The post-conflict landscape of Viengxay reveals
various dimensions and links to official historical discourses as well as family memories.

For domestic tourism, the site appears as the place where everything began and everything happened, a site for self-ascertainment, patriotism and pride. Caravan tours reenact the arduous trip from the cities at the Mekong to the remote mountains of Houaphan. Most Lao visitors have heard stories of Viengxay from relatives who lived in the liberated zone and are anxious to see the famous place where the revolutionary leaders and the people fought side by side. Yet, some are surprised about the low living standards and almost refuse to believe that life within caves was possible. Furthermore, for some younger visitors Viengxay seems to be also a place for recreation and party. The *lieu de mémoire* Viengxay does not only imply the reconfiguration of revolutionary memory but also images of rural authenticity, simplicity, and hard life.

As mentioned, the narratives of the caves tour are informed by certain indebtedness toward the generation that sacrificed their lives for the “liberation.” The configuration of the cave tour implies a morality that demands a “correct” historical memory on behalf of the valiant people. In this sense, the increased activities of state commemoration create both a historical debt to the revolutionary leaders — a highly questionable ideological meaning — and an idea of local pride that is promoted by phrases such as *mûang vilason* (“heroic town,” as stated in a speech during the temple inauguration). The reconfiguration of war memories during the cave tour entails national recognition for the local people and their plight during the war and a view of history beyond socialist textbooks. Visitors from the capital usually know about the “birthplace of the Lao PDR” and show respect toward the elder generation that carried the yoke of “the struggle.” Shared memories — either direct memories or memories mediated by books or guides — link the heroic and traumatic aspects of the war, resulting in manifold images of the past that are particularly dramatized in tourism-related encounters as shown below.

It seems as if there had occurred an unusual collaboration between an authoritarian regime and the international development community — through the promotion of tourism projects in rural areas — in creating a truly national *lieu de mémoire* functioning as legitimizing device for the “victors of history” and their teleological narrative of the “liberation struggle.” Then again this runs counter to Nora’s original vision of *lieux de mémoire* as multivocal sites concerned with the idea of a dynamic, living memory-nation. The landscape of Viengxay is appropriated by state commemoration and thus endangered of being solidified and monumentalized,
even though small voices are included in accordance with Western ideas of oral history directed against hegemonic master narratives. Indeed, we witness dynamic interactions between national and local memory discourses, where the small voices with their will to remember on the one hand claim historical agency while simultaneously affirming the grand narrative of the Lao “liberation struggle.” If Viengxay exemplifies this idea of a site of memory, a materialized cultural configuration — including encroachments by state-orchestrated commemoration — the pure “historical” counterpart might be the linear, rigid, and simplifying narrative of the Pavatsat lao. However, these elements do not exist in pure form but intersect and constitute each other. Viengxay reproduces the official historical-graphical myth of the multi-ethnic liberation struggle while simultaneously allowing polyphony of various perspectives on the past to be nourished by interacting individual and collective memories. Yet in general, Viengxay as memorial site fulfills the preconditions as suggested by Pierre Nora: 1) the material aspect through the stone of the caves and the rocks, through monuments and documents; 2) the symbolic aspect through imaginations of a heroic revolutionary past; and 3) the functional aspect through state rituals and tourism business. As will be discussed in the next section, the field of tourism provides insights into how the materiality of landscape constitutes the ground for interactions with the past which can be characterized by either fascination and entertainment or bewilderment.

War Memory and Tourism

The former cave city of Viengxay is a relative latecomer on the touristic map of Laos. Its remoteness and purposeful isolation left the site shrouded in secrecy for many years before it was opened for visitors in the 1990s. After the revolution of 1975, many reeducation camps were established in the region — violent places were members of the royal family, the former government or other political prisoners were held captive for months and years, some of them until their death. Today, the “stunning and beautiful landscape” glosses over past sorrows and invites foreign and domestic tourists alike to attend organized tours through the various cave complexes of Viengxay, first of all the residence and office caves of the prominent leaders of the Lao revolution. As mentioned earlier, landscapes can be seen as an iconic environment that is constantly shaped and negotiated. While their material and affective powers undoubtedly have an impact on the local population, outside forces can influence and alter the perception of the landscapes: new ways of seeing the landscape, selective foci and points
of view, and changing discursive regimes transform the relationship between people and landscape. As indicated above, the exploitation of landscapes for ideological or economical purpose has a strong impact on how people perceive their surroundings. In the case of Viengxay, both aspects meet in the domain of tourism. In particular, the cave tours have been established to provide income for the region and simultaneously propagate the official narrative of the heroic Lao “liberation struggle.”

Within the broader framework of poverty alleviation and the quest for alternatives to opium cultivation, tourism was identified as an alternative for poor provinces such as Houaphan. Among tourism experts, the caves of Viengxay were identified as one of the most promising destinations in the remote Northeast of Laos (Rogers 2005). Although Houaphan enjoyed a tenfold increase of tourists between 2003 and 2010, the province ranks only 14 from 16 provinces in Laos with a meager 22,116 international visitors from a total of 2.5 million, almost 90% of which came from Asia and the Pacific (Lao National Tourism Authority 2011: 6). Domestic tourists constitute the bulk of visitors in Houaphan, though.

The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and the Netherlands Development Organisation (SNV) cooperated with Deakin University to elaborate a heritage interpretation and management plan in 2006. One aspect of promoting sustainable tourism in the region was to “create employment opportunities for local people, boost income levels and contribute to improving livelihoods in the area.” Thanks to this international cooperation, a professional tourism infrastructure has been established around the Viengxay Caves Visitor Centre. Local guides, most of them Hmong, received English-language training and the necessary know-how to deal with expectations and sensitivities of tourists. The interaction between locals and tourists led to new perspectives and perceptions of the war years in Laos. In comparison to the notorious tourist hotspots in Vietnam, such as the Củ Chi tunnels where the factor of entertainment is prioritized at the expense of historical correctness, the educational aspect in Viengxay is well-received by foreign visitors. Only rarely are popular images of the Vietnam War reproduced; music by The Doors was played in one instance within the audio tour. The vivid audio tour is mainly characterized by historical information, original statements of survivors, and impressive sound effects such as the din of B-52 planes and detonating bombs. In addition, information plates display historical photos that give an impression of everyday life inside the caves. In particular, pictures of underground schools and factories demonstrate how consequently the idea of a cave city had been put forward during the war.
The backside of this ambitious project was that the tours had to reproduce official narratives of the Second Indochina War.\textsuperscript{20} The foreign advisors had to accept the low priority the authorities gave to critical historical discourse for being able to carry through the envisaged projects dedicated to rural development and heritage protection.\textsuperscript{21} The history of the reeducation camps has to remain a taboo and is until today not included into the topography of Viengxay as official lieu de mémoire. The camps are referred to by the guides only in passing as political seminars where members of the ancien régime just had to endure some ideological education and communal work and returned to Vientiane as “proper socialists.” Details of brutality and suffering in the camps are left aside. Instead, the guides demonstrate local pride, a sense of place as inhabitants of a “heroic landscape” where the people took the main burden of the liberation struggle. Here, it has to be distinguished between domestic and international tourism since both types of visitors have different understandings and perceptions of the landscape and the corresponding historical narratives.

When I visited Viengxay the first time in 2008, for two weeks I met only a few busloads of Lao civil servants or students, mixed with the occasional Western backpacker. Things have changed considerably: there are not only more buses and organized caravans from major Lao cities, but also private cars doing the adventurous trip to the “stronghold” where history took place as now marketed in the Lao cities for the new educated and rich urban middle class. In contrast, the number of international tourists has not increased much and the falang (Lao: “Western foreigner”) are sometimes surprised when faced with the larger groups of Lao visitors which have to be guided with megaphones due to the group size. They mostly leave the audio guides to the Western tourists since the Lao “don’t need much historical explanation” as the head of the tourism office pointed out in 2010. They just want “to see” the caves. Domestic tourists seem to be less interested in firsthand accounts of the war — many of them grew up with war-related stories from the elders — than in the experience of “being there.”\textsuperscript{22} Personal memories are linked with the historical arena where “it actually happened,” thereby creating discursive entanglements that recall Nora’s idea of living memory.

The “authentic” voices of eyewitnesses interviewed for the audio guide evoke immediate interest and even compassion by foreign visitors — or “deep respect for this people” as one young American backpacker put it. He and other foreign tourists I interviewed in 2010 were fascinated by the extreme living conditions that prevailed in Viengxay during the war. Damp caves lit by smoky oil lanterns, the devastating destruction of
rice harvests, hurried cooking at 5 a.m. before the daily bombing started: such powerful images are conjured up by the massive materiality of the caves together with the original voices of the audio guide. On the one hand, the tourists feel a bond to the local people and their plight during a sideshow of a global conflict. On the other hand, the cave tour provides education about the Second Indochina War and the American involvement in Laos, the “secret war” that Western tourists are not always aware of. Interestingly, the cave tour fosters a latent anti-Americanism that is widespread among alternative travelers. Other falang are just ashamed about the asymmetric conflict between a highly technicized power and a small peasant society, thereby ignoring the wider geopolitical context of the Second Indochina War. Moreover, they praise the kindness and hospitality of the local people that “suffered so much” (Swiss tourist, 2010).

As Michael Herzfeld (1996) observes, tourism is a site of cultural intimacy due to its often ambivalent and embarrassing encounters between different cultural identities. Not only are Western tourists (or urban Lao visitors) culturally different from local peasants which causes problems of communication. Perhaps even more crucial is the different knowledge
about and perceptions of the regional past. Consequently, travelers with historical half-knowledge taken from guidebooks confront the local Hmong guides — who consider themselves as Lao patriots — with offensive statements such as “You are suppressed by the government, aren’t you?” (Dutch tourist, 2008). Other reasons for embarrassment are produced by ambiguous historical episodes such as the death of Souphanouvong’s son at the hands of a CIA Hmong agent which might be embarrassing for the “patriotic” Hmong. Yet another version of this story would be even more embarrassing for the LPRP because it suggests a quarrel among party cadres. Such stories spoil the nice image of the monolithic people against imperialists as it is presented for the international audience.

The cave tour allows visitors to enter a dialogue with events and persons from the past. Viengxay emerges from obscurity as a living and lived landscape embodying multiple meaningful memories. However, these memories are selected and controlled by the LPRP and its hegemonic history discourse. Moreover, tendencies of shaping a coherent heterotopia of the war for tourist consumption influence the various interactions with the landscape. Despite these present transformations, Viengxay is far from being fully appropriated by revolution or tourism and still exudes a multivocality of contrasting memories.

**Multivocal Memories of Viengxay**

The merit of the audio guide of the cave tour is the inclusion of different personal memories of the traumatic war period. One particularly dramatic narrative informs about a bomb hitting a cave, thereby causing a fire that killed people and destroyed Buddha images. Other memories are inherently ambivalent since they tell of both fear and happiness. Hansana Sisane, son of revolutionary veteran Sisana Sisane, recalls these occasional “joyful moments” in his account of his childhood in the caves and other times of danger and fear (Lao National Tourism Authority 2010: 36). Following Schwenkel’s (2006) discussion of Vietnamese war memories, Viengxay can be considered a new social space for memory work. As will be shown, state efforts to maintain historical hegemony and standardized narratives of the past contrast with a polyphony of different memories and perspectives. Yet the oral history project for the audio tour appears to support official narratives of the heroic “liberation struggle.” Indeed, in combination with the massive materiality of the caves, the personal memories give an imminent and emotive experience of the war and evoke sympathies for the people in the caves. Lao visitors are reminded of how their
ancestors suffered for national independence and unity in a more efficient way than in dull history books like the official *Pavatsat lao*. Original voices are exploited to stress revolutionary values such as bravery, solidarity, perseverance, patriotism, self-sacrifice. Ironically, the historical discourse is simultaneously enriched and mainstreamed here.

However, many other accounts of the war years lack the heroic glorification of official narratives and are occupied with the loss of friends and relatives and the hardships of everyday life. The half-blind man quoted above is only one example of the majority of peasants and foragers who were confronted with a radical transformation of the landscape that used to be the base of their livelihoods. Suddenly, access to the fields was restricted by daily bombing with cluster bombs and napalm. At the same time, the landscape provided shelter through caves and holes people dug out in dense forest. Ironically, it was the domain of the spirits, caves and jungle — where usually no Lao would dare to spend the night — which was now the key to survival while the rice fields turned to ambivalent places of nurture and lethal danger. These contradictions haunt the memory of the witnesses and refer to the disruptions of security and subsistence during the war years. The fact that these disruptions entailed displacement and migration contributes to the general feeling of a world turned upside down. The aggressive soundscape of war is still strikingly present as most elderly people accompany their accounts with sound of bombs, artillery and airplanes — acoustic memories laden with affects of fear and loss. Today, each UXO incident haunts the population with disturbing images of the past. The official “heroic landscape” contrasts with the small fates of a population overrun by the effects of global Cold War politics and is until today suffering its aftermath.

Seeing the Lao tourists strolling relaxingly through the caves and enjoying a barbecue afterward — for example, at Nouhak’s old house if it is an official delegation — one is tempted to think that Navaro-Yashin’s “hangover” cannot be about to fade away. This estimation might be valid at least for the cave landscape which is “tamed” by efforts of tourism development and turned into a tangible *lieu de mémoire* of revolutionary commemoration. However, the people who remember the war are still haunted by the affects of fear and helplessness instilled by the American planes. In my interviews, onomatopoetic references to the bombing campaigns often replaced words — imagine an elderly woman looking at you intensely under her traditional Tai headscarf and shouting a series of voluminous “boom” sounds. She shares her resounding memories by repeating the soundscape of the war which creates an uncanny layer on
the now idyllic scenery of Viengxay and its pleasant surroundings. Here, direct memories are mediated by sensual experiences, unlike the following generations who link their more rational accounts of hardships and poverty to their own difficult start in life as people of upland “poor districts.”

Memories of extreme poverty and family tragedies during and in the aftermath the war add another dimension to Viengxay as a site of memory. Even if corresponding with positive images of community and solidarity in times of crisis, the melancholy evoked by memories of trouble and loss pervade the stories I collected in Viengxay. The head of the Viengxay Caves Tourism Office — whose story is also included in the audio tour (Lao National Tourism Authority 2010: 27) — told me how the war violently entered his life. When he was about nine or ten years old, a 500-kg bomb hit his family’s house, killed his grandfather and injured many other relatives. His father had to bury the corpse in a hurry since everybody was afraid of more attacks. This story is exemplary of how the young generation in the Lao uplands was confronted with the war and then often became easy targets for communist recruitment attempts for the fight against the “aggressors” (see Pholsena 2006). They associate with the landscape a sense of loss, feeling a “spatial melancholia” (Navaro-Yashin 2009: 16) which emanates from the very ground they stand.

Another perception is the nostalgia implicit in organized caravan tours “back to the caves.” They not only focus on a time of violence and sorrow but also on group solidarity that was crucial for the “liberation.” These tours appear as rituals of community (see Connerton 1989) and stress the idea of the patriotic and heroic “Lao multi-ethnic people.” In many conversations, local people stressed that ethnic (and class) difference did not matter then, that the whole ethnically heterogeneous people of Houaphan — the “land of heroes” (Vongsingh 2006) — fought together for national liberation. This view is of course one-sided and leaves out, for example, the pressure on the Christian inhabitants of the region (Weldon 1999). Yet it fosters local pride and a sense of coming to terms with the violent past through the idea that the sacrifices were not in vain and had instead created the foundation for future prosperity. The narrative of “from crater to mūang” as told during the festivities for the temple inauguration reflects the hopes of the local population for a participation in national development.

During a walk with a 30-year-old local Hmong in the surroundings of Viengxay (January 2010), I could sense the various discursive and phenomenological aspects of this memorial landscape. Around 1990, many
households from his village in Xieng Kho District were resettled to Ban Phou Say which at present constitutes the largest Hmong quarter of Viengxay town. Gardens and upland rice fields constitute the base of local livelihoods while the forests still provide important resources for consumption and trade — yet my informant remembered when hazardous UXO contaminated this important source. UXO forms a link between local livelihoods and the history of the war. In passing, he referred to overgrown craters and aisles between the rocks which allowed hidden manoeuvring by Lao and Vietnamese soldiers. He explicitly referred to the latter as important allies in the war and respected them — like many of my local interlocutors did — for the alleged selfless contribution to the Lao liberation struggle. Hidden within a cassava plantation, inconspicuous remnants of old Vietnamese barracks almost evaded my gaze. These belonged to a compound for Vietnamese technicians who moved to Viengxay after the ceasefire to reconstruct the resistance capital of the Pathet Lao. The Hmong admitted that neither the successful struggle nor the modest reconstruction of Houaphan would have been possible without Vietnamese aid. Comments like this contribute to the impression that at least parts of the Lao population still feel historically indebted toward Vietnam — while many critical voices remain skeptical about the ongoing Vietnamese influence in Laos and often complain about the arrogant attitude the Vietnamese hold toward the Lao. Besides referring to the role of the Vietnamese in the war, my informant also stressed the contribution of the Hmong people to the revolution. He took me to the cave of Faydang Lobliayao who led the pro-communist faction of the Hmong during the civil war (Plate 2.5). This cave was not part of the official cave tours and only recently integrated with the tourist infrastructure through inclusion in trekking tours. Considering themselves as Lao patriots despite their relative marginality, the Hmong of Viengxay emphasize their contribution for the revolutionary struggle in particular toward a Western audience that often only knows about the “Vang Pao Hmong” as he called the historical adversaries of Faydang. Starting from a discussion of upland cultivation, we were suddenly contemplating the intricacies of the Lao civil war and the cultural complexity of the country. This walk allowed me to participate in local perceptions of the landscape and its history, in the discourses and affects it evokes. Glorification of the past interacts with memories of hard times and results in a profound sense of place.

The landscape appears as a benevolent source of nourishment and as a dangerous place where lingering legacies of the past manifest themselves
as active explosives. Everyday interaction with the landscape works mainly through agriculture and regular walks to fields and forests for hunting and gathering food. UXO poses a latent threat by which the landscape continuously recalls the war as aggressive materiality and index of past intentionality (Gell 1998: 17). The landscape is thus contaminated not only by violent memories but also by physical hazards. Even though not a direct witness of war, my informant’s sense of the place indicated at how knowledge of the landscape was essential for survival under harsh conditions during the American bombing campaigns. In contrast to this immediate interaction with the environment, the top-down perspective of the American pilots implies a completely different perception of Houaphan’s landscape: facing the endless green topography of forested mountains, the pilots appeared to do warfare against a landscape instead of people.

Questions about the camps were smiled away by my informant. In general, the prisons and reeducation camps that mushroomed in the region after the revolution remain a taboo in contemporary Laos. It is indeed difficult for foreigners to raise this issue in conversations and one usually gets only meager information. The dark side of the camps can be explored in some published life histories (see, for example: Bounsang 2006; Khampphanh 2004; Nakhonkham 2003). Former RLG official Bounsang Khamkeo (2006: 247–9) mentions public projects in Viengxay which depended on forced labor by camp inmates. These memories tell of the brute force of a paranoid regime; of humiliation, violence and death from maltreatment, illness and malnourishment. This is the “other” landscape and “dissonant heritage” (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996) of Houaphan: not the caves of heroism and solidarity, but the barb-wired fields of hatred and violence. Perhaps the most traumatic episode for many Lao exiles is the imprisonment of the Royal family in the former “Hotel No. 1” — today the Thavixay Hotel apparently oblivious of its ambiguous history — followed by the fatal deportation into a reedcation camp (Evans 2009).

Euphemistically called “production units,” the compounds were labor camps where most detainees died from malnutrition and mistreatment. The innocent statement, “By the late 1970s, the caves were emptied and the quiet life of the countryside returned,” and the suggestion of Viengxay as “World Peace Site” (Suntikul et al. 2009: 160), must feel like slaps in the face for former camp victims and their families. Since the LPRP was responsible for the establishment of the inhuman camp system, a clear distancing from this policy by the present leadership would be required to deal with this traumatic episode of recent Lao history. While it
is still ignored by the official cave tour, visitors sometimes hear rumours about which of the derelict building and caves were used as prisons after the revolution. Like the camps-turned-villages in Vatthana Pholsena’s case study (this volume), the materiality of former camp sites probably reveals nothing about the suffering that took place here. In the future, they might be turned into commemorative sites where people burn incense for the deceased or perhaps allow even cathartic experiences in cases of actual localizations or reburials of the victims (Verdery 1999).

The different perceptions of Viengxay as landscape of memory by various individuals and collectives epitomize the multivocality of memory discourses linked to certain places and spaces characterized by an iconic openness that even hegemonic historiography can only partially reduce. Perhaps even the opposite is true, namely that this multivocality — plus official strategies to deliberately shape the meaning of the place — entails an excessive imposition of meaning (Augé 1995) that adds “text” to the palimpsest rather than erasing it.

**Conclusion**

The different landscapes of Houaphan — from “land of heroes” to land of lingering violence — are not exclusive. Since they are constituted by heterogeneous and contradictory perceptions, they form aspects or layers of the physical landscape. The Lao government tries to level this diversity and stresses the heroic and revolutionary aspects of Viengxay, thereby producing absences and ambiguities. The official cave tour creates a specific spatial configuration that only partially overlaps with the agricultural landscape as relevant for many local peasants. The appropriation of the landscape by the LPRP as a clearly shaped revolutionary topography did not fully erase other meaningful layers. Moreover, some “wounds” of the landscape are already “healing”: craters are filled with soil or used as fish ponds, UXO is being cleared and removed. The idea of Viengxay as a bomb-crater-turned-healthy-and-lively-town suggests the healing of both topographical and social wounds. The perception of this post-conflict landscape is deeply entangled with the contemporary development discourse and with hopes for a better future. Reading Viengxay as a historical palimpsest (Huyssen 2003) reveals these complex and contradictory entanglements as converging layers of an ambiguous past comprising revolutionary heterotopia, precarious life-worlds and partially erased traces of violence.
The preparation of Viengxay as a national *lieu de mémoire* is the latest step of appropriation of history by the LPRP that had been only partially achieved through publications such as the *Pavatsat lao* which is read — if at all — only by Lao citizens. Now the Lao government is able to present its idea of the righteous “liberation struggle” to a larger audience including Asian and Western foreigners. The mainstream American image of the just war of the “free world” against Communism appears pale and overtly simplified in comparison — even though the Lao version is not the most complex one as well. However, the struggle of the “Lao multi-ethnic people” for independence and unity seems to be more legitimate concerning the hardships the local population, who did not know much about the Cold War conflict, had to endure. Contrary to American popular-cultural images of “evil Communists,” the revolutionary leadership appears sympathetic to foreign visitors with respect to the propagated image of selfless patriots sharing the plight of the common people. Therefore, the cave tour is a clear attempt of claiming legitimacy for the revolutionary cause and a quest for historical credibility that is fostered by the support of international development organizations.

Furthermore, the cave tours create historical meaning and make sense of the heavy toll the local population had to pay during and after the war. Individual suffering is collectivized and rationalized through a coherent narrative of a historical mission aimed at national liberation from foreign oppression. Necessary sacrifices are recognized, and instead of being relegated to some dry statistics, they take centerstage within a landscape of memory prepared both for state commemoration and tourist consumption. What for many witnesses of the “secret war” must have been an incomprehensible violent chaos is now shaped as a soteriological grand narrative of a finally victorious struggle between good and evil. Accordingly, the revolution of 1975 is legitimized in retrospect as well. With the narrative of the struggle promoted in this way, it will entail more links to individual memories insofar that the latter are sometimes shaped according to the former model. Thus even traumatic memories of loss and sorrow can be linked to the heroic history of the “people” and turned into a positive meaningful light. As discussed above, many accounts of the war stress the violent impact of the Cold War on local livelihoods as well as the idea of having participated in an important historical era.

Reading the landscape of Viengxay as a memorial palimpsest, one cannot fail to notice the weak traces of erased meanings. In particular, the time between 1975 and 1986 remains obscure and is seldom referred
to. The rare cases where people mentioned this time focused largely on a rough idea of general poverty — yet without clarifying all reasons that might be taken into consideration. While it makes some sense to blame the war for the ruined landscape and the precariously livelihoods of the rural population, the failure of orthodox socialism is usually not acknowledged. The memories of the local population are clear enough not to romanticize the “quiet” postwar years. Instead, hardships such as hunger and the hazard of UXO, are emphasized — while the suffering of the prisoners in the reeducation camps usually remains untold.

As a lieu de mémoire, the caves of Viengxay provide a functional and impressive materiality. They represent the nexus of a network linking past and present, destruction and development, Lao peasants and the Pentagon, local livelihoods and international tourism. In combination with craters and cluster bombs, the caves are icons of the “secret war,” perhaps the most violent episode in Lao history. The landscape produces ambivalent affects that oscillate between sorrow and pride, between melancholy and hope. Moreover, it is the target of memory politics controlled by the ruling Lao People’s Revolutionary Party whose self-image depends largely on the glorification of the liberation struggle. Viengxay provides the material base for the hegemonic discourse of the state as well as for individual self-ascertainment and hopes. It remains to be seen which implications the transformation of the landscape for touristic consumption will have for the local population — if there will be more contested views of the past, memory struggles, a stronger affirmation of belonging, or haunting images of the violent past entangled with economic interest and entertainment. Commemorative practices such as official delegations paying homage at Kaysone’s cave and listening to heroic stories of the “struggle” foster the “national” meaning of the place and create a certain revolutionary nostalgia.

When one asks — following Michael Herzfeld (1991) — who decides on the history of a place, the answer in the case of Viengxay must be: the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party in cooperation with Western heritage and tourism experts, even if this project of historiography remains largely state-centered. While this cooperation goes beyond one-sided revolutionary historiography and grants more room to multivocal local perspectives, the voices of the victims of the camp system still remain excluded. To talk about social amnesia would be too strong a statement since the decade of orthodox socialism is rather silenced than forgotten. Ambivalent places such as the former “Hotel No. 1” might be sites of negotiating the historical meaning of Viengxay/Houaphan in the future. The increasing popularity of the region as a destination for both domestic and international
tourism will heighten the awareness of the ambiguities of this memorial landscape with its inherent violent legacies — and will lead to further dissection of this monumental palimpsest. The stains on the glorious image of the “birthplace of the Lao PDR” are evident but until now lack the potential to undermine the official discourse on Viengxay as one of the key national *lieux de mémoire* in contemporary Laos.

**Notes**

1. Interview in Viengxay, 8 Mar. 2010. This chapter is based on three fieldtrips to Viengxay between 2008 and 2011. Parts of it have been presented at the 6th EUROSEAS Conference in Gothenburg/Sweden (2010) and at the 3rd International Conference on Lao Studies in Khon Kaen/Thailand (2010). I would like to thank all participants for their interest and critical feedback. Special thanks go to the staff of the Houaphan Provincial Tourism Office and the Viengxay Caves Visitor Centre for their kind support and hospitality.

2. According to the Geneva Accords of 1954, the Communist-controlled provinces of Houaphan and Phongsaly were to be integrated into the Lao kingdom along with their armed forces. When rightist groups pushed the Neo Lao Hak Xat out of the first coalition government in 1959, Communist troops refused integration and started armed resistance (Evans 2002: 110–5; Tappe 2010).

3. Lao: müang viengxay pen ban koet không sathalanalat pasathipatai pasason lao, müang viengxay pen bòn taohom khuam samakkhi, müang viengxay pen müang thi man không kanpativat.

4. These five names form the well-known line-up of the revolutionary struggle and are considered the most important Lao national heroes of the 20th century in official discourse (Tappe 2008).

5. The local people emphasized that even in his old age, Nouhak was eager to visit the old stronghold. This contradicts the witty assessment of Colin Cotterill (2006: 97), writer of the humorous Dr. Siri novels: “Once the old cave dwellers’ houses were complete and all the documents and personal belongings moved into them, there had been no reason, none at all, for the senior cadres to go back into the caves. Such a visit would have been no more likely than the Count of Monte Christo popping back to the Château d’If to reminiscence over the happy times he’d spent there.” Rather, the intensive years of battle, fear, and feelings of closeness and solidarity must have created affects that turned into nostalgia during the years of bureaucratic everyday life in Vientiane.

6. Kaysone appears as venerated ancestor and thus ironically linked to a spirit world which used to be rejected by socialist orthodoxy.

8. While Fa Ngum and Anouvong are considered as heroic, patriotic kings of a glorious past, the first politburo (Kaysone Phomvihane, Nouhak Phoumsavan, Souphanouvong, Phoumi Vongvichit, Poun Siphasout, Khamtay Siphandone, Sisomphone Lovanxay) consists of 20th-century national heroes (Grabowsky and Tappe 2011).


10. However, the oversized concrete monument for Kaysone provoked some critical comments. A young salesman told me in June 2011 that the construction of the monument had swallowed too much financial resources that could be put to better use in this poor region, and that some people had to renounce their land for only a small compensation.

11. He connected to the discourse of the old generation of “preachers of the revolution” (Ladwig 2009) such as Luang Vichit who died in 2010 at the age of 85 and who spent 15 years with the revolutionaries in the liberated zone.

12. An eyewitness account of Souphanouvong’s life in Viengxay states: “While Prince Souphanouvong was in Viengsay, the war was raging and bombs were launched ceaselessly, but he still had the courage to get out of his cave to take care of his garden, to grow and water vegetables. He was wearing the clothes of a simple peasant […]” (Khambay 1989: 137). Souphanouvong’s willingness to reject a royal lifestyle and to share the plight of the locals is exemplified by numerous photos in museums and books which show him working in his cave office or among the peasants in the rice fields (Tappe 2011a).


14. Pioneering projects of community-based tourism in Luang Namtha Province focused on eco-trekking and homestays in ethnic minority villages (Lyttleton and Allcock 2002; Neudorfer 2007). The tourism initiatives in Viengxay — and related projects in Xieng Khouang — combine these approaches with historical education on the Second Indochina War (see below).

15. Information plate, Viengxay Caves Visitor Centre.

16. Laos belongs to the so-called Least Developed Countries (LDC). More than 50 international NGOs working in projects related to poverty reduction in rural Laos and important donor organizations such as the Asian Development Bank give financial aid, for instance, in pro-poor and sustainable tourism projects (Suntikul et al. 2009: 158; Tappe 2011b). As one of the 47 districts that are considered “poor” by the Lao government, Viengxay district is among the target regions for rural development. Since 2006, the United Nations World Tourism Organization has been supporting projects in the region, with the Dutch development organization SNV being the main implementing agency.

18. I am indebted to Rik Ponne (Lao National Tourism Authority, Vientiane) for sharing his knowledge about the history and organization of the Viengxay Caves tourism project.

19. For Vietnamese war tourism, see Schwenkel 2009 and Alneng 2002.

20. The tone of the information plates is far more moderate than the labels in museums such as the Lao National Museum and the Lao People’s Army History Museum which are characterized by verbal attacks against the “American imperialists and their lackeys” (see Tappe 2011a). For example, one plate at the tourism office states: “In these caves the Pathet Lao established a ‘hidden city’ of government ministries, housing, offices, shops, schools, hospitals and military barracks. From here the future leaders of the Lao PDR directed their political, military and ideological campaign. The caves and surrounding area supported a population of around 20,000 people during nine years of ferocious air bombardement that destroyed the landscape.”


22. According to the head of the Viengxay Caves Visitor Centre in Mar. 2010. He explained to me the logistics of guiding 150 visitors from Vientiane through the caves who came to Viengxay on the occasion of the temple inauguration.

23. Lao National Tourism Authority, 2010; see as well the official Viengxay website of the LNTA, at http://www.visit-viengxay.com [accessed 1 Nov. 2012].

24. In discussions, travelers often make a connection between Laos and Iraq and Afghanistan — a (self-) critical anti-war discourse that is shared by the Lao to a much lesser extent.


26. Navaro-Yashin (2009: 5) refers to “ruination” as “[…] subjectivities and residual affects that linger, like a hangover, in the aftermath of war or violence.”

27. In 1997–98, the incidence of poverty in Houaphan was estimated at 75% (Rigg 2005: 75). At present, all districts except Sam Neua are officially declared “poor district” (Messerli et al. 2008: 17).

28. For example, elderly people remember how the Vietnamese refilled the bomb craters on the strategically important Road 6 (linking Sam Neua with the Vietnamese border) every night. American intelligence from 1969 acknowledged the good condition of this road despite daily bombing, at http://www.foia.ucia.gov/docs/DOC_0000835644/DOC_0000835644.pdf [accessed 1 Nov. 2012].

29. The role of the Vietnamese is reduced to mere advisors and “volunteers” in Lao historiography in order to cultivate image of truly “national” Lao revolution.

30. Khamphanh Thammakhanty (2004: 173) presents a day’s schedule from a prison camp in Et District that included about 11 hours of hard physical labor.

31. Khamphanh Thammakhanty (2004: 265) reports that the royal family had been wrapped in blankets and buried without any religious rites in a mass grave.


34. Sparse reports about prisoners — including the royal family and American POW — held captive in Viengxay can be found in declassified CIA sources, at http://www.virtual.vietnam.ttu.edu/cgi-bin/starfetch.exe?jzXm7@63yDFYD2X0mWCCF0eNVaePFbd9UvFs@p.O80HGAdG54ZG0iz8pCsVYmqU0Qq6wHc.JR753CGFBEB@GkSuVf4gFKTIJ1YThGQCbee/3671408012.pdf [accessed 1 Nov. 2012].

35. For parallels between hegemonic narratives of the war and individual narratives, see Pholsena 2006.