Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements

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Published by NUS Press Pte Ltd

Ting, Susan Blackburn & Helen.
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CHAPTER 8

“Minority” Women and the Revolution in the Highlands of Laos: Two Narratives

Vatthana Pholsena

This chapter focuses on two female war veterans of ethnic minority origin who conducted most of their revolutionary activities during the Second Indochina War (1961–75) in southeastern Laos along the “Ho Chi Minh Trail”. As women combatants from ethnic minorities, they are arguably the least-known participants of the Pathet Lao, the Communist movement that led the anti-colonial struggle in Laos in the second half of the 20th century.

In recent years, gender has emerged as a fruitful research area in war studies focusing on Asia. In particular, the participation of women in armed independence struggles and/or Communist insurgencies in Southeast Asia has been the focus of remarkable research. Works on “women warriors” have broadened our understanding of the experience of war by exploring the private sphere of combatants’ lives, bringing to light the (often unattainable) balance female combatants sought between the traditional demands of their society, the sacrifices of a revolutionary life, and their own desire for freedom and independence. Books by Vina Lanzona and Agnes Khoo studying Huk female insurgents in the Philippines and women Communist fighters in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle, respectively, tackle such issues. Pioneering works by Karen Gottschang Turner and Phan Thanh Hao, Sandra C. Taylor and François Guillemot on North Vietnamese female Communist fighters involved with Viet Minh forces also come to mind. In fact, so important was Vietnamese women’s role during
the wars (especially in the struggle against the Americans) that Turner and Phan Thanh Hao claim that “an accurate history of the war the Vietnamese call the ‘American War’ must recognize Vietnamese women’s contributions to Hanoi’s victory in 1975”. Yet, Taylor notes in 1999 that “few books in English have mentioned the Women’s Liberation Association, the Vietnam Women’s Union, the role of women in the National Liberation Front, or their participation in the war”. Besides being essential for the writing of a more balanced and complete history of the Indochina Wars, the inclusion of women’s voices is also important as these voices often reflect different perceptions of war to those of their male contemporaries.

This chapter aims to go beyond conventional diplomatic and military histories of the Vietnam wars to examine war from below. It is concerned with how people were shaped by their wartime experiences. To understand such processes, it is first necessary to explain the strategic significance of the highlands and the role of ethnic minorities on the anti-colonial side during the First (1946–54) and Second Indochina Wars, in conjunction with the Communist ethnic policy. In guerrilla warfare, the support of the local population is essential. The local population discussed in this chapter consists of the highland peoples of southeastern Laos. During the Indochina Wars, these highlanders were targeted as much by the Lao and Vietnamese
revolutionaries as by the French and, later on, the Americans. All the belligerents saw the mountain areas of southeastern Laos as of crucial strategic importance: the areas became a Viet Minh (the Vietnamese Communist-dominated nationalist front\textsuperscript{12}) stronghold during the First Indochina War and, beginning in the early 1960s, the conduit for the
Following the Japanese surrender at the end of World War II, the Lao Issara (Free Lao), the first Lao nationalist movement — founded in 1945 and led by Prince Phetsarath — unilaterally declared the independence of Laos from France and formed a government. However, unable to curb the French military effort to regain control over Laos, the Lao Issara leadership fled to Thailand within six months. Deep divisions in the ranks of the Lao Issara emerged rapidly in the late 1940s, between opponents and supporters of collaboration with France. Some Lao nationalist leaders adopted a policy of strict neutrality — among them was Prince Phetsarath, who until his death in 1959 opposed any foreign intervention in Laos’ internal affairs and subsequently left the country and lived in exile for ten years in Thailand. Another member of the Lao royal family and a well-known nationalist leader, Souvanna Phouma (Phetsarath’s brother), conversely, returned to Vientiane after the disbanding of the Lao Issara on 25 October 1949 to serve under Laos’ constitutional monarchy within the French Union. His half-brother, Souphanouvong, rejected the new political leadership in Vientiane and, in February 1949, formed another political front from the guerrilla forces under his command, which in the early 1950s took the name of Pathet Lao (Lao Nation). Following the dissolution of the Lao Issara in late 1949, he travelled to meet Ho Chi Minh at his headquarters in Tuyen Quang (North Vietnam) to ask for his support. The first congress of Lao Communist leaders was organised there on 13 August 1950, and it resulted in the election of a new resistance government. A subsequent meeting held in North Vietnam in November 1950 provided the Pathet Lao with a pro-Communist nationalist political movement, the Neo Lao Issara (Free Lao Front), which began building battalion-sized fighting forces. This was a broad-based movement designed to draw popular support to the radical faction of the Lao Issara that had abandoned exile in Thailand for the struggle against the French on home soil. It issued a new political programme directed towards every Lao: equality of all races in Laos, unified struggle against the French, and abolition of inequitable taxes. Adoption of this policy for the first time also gave
the highland populations of non-ethnic Lao origin a role within a political movement where their interests were considered and promoted.

When the Viet Minh learned of Lao aspirations for independence, it sought to play an important role in guiding and supporting early Lao anti-colonialist and nationalist figures, such as Prince Souphanouvong, Kaysone Phomvihane and Nouhak Phoumsavanh. In fact, in the aftermath of World War II the Viet Minh had been active in recruiting Lao individuals along the western border of Vietnam.16

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### Lao Communist-Nationalist Movement

<table>
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<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>Formation of coalition of Lao nationalists, the Lao Issara, which creates a provisional government</td>
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<td>1949</td>
<td>Prince Souphanouvong forms his own political movement in the north of Laos</td>
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<td>1950</td>
<td>Creation of Neo Lao Issara and government of resistance of the Pathet Lao in North Vietnam</td>
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<td>1953</td>
<td>Offensive in Laos of troops of Neo Lao Issara, together with Vietnamese “volunteers”. Provinces of Huaphan and Phongsaly in the northeast pass under the control of the Pathet Lao. Total independence of Laos from France</td>
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<td>1954</td>
<td>Signing of the Geneva Agreements and withdrawal of France from Indochina. Vietnam is divided at the 17th parallel. The independence and territorial integrity of Laos and Cambodia are reaffirmed. Pathet Lao forces are allowed to regroup in the provinces of Huaphan and Phongsaly while waiting for integration into the country’s political system</td>
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<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td>Creation of Lao Communist party, Phak Pasason Lao (Lao People's Party)</td>
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<td>1959</td>
<td>North Vietnamese Communists begin armed struggle to take over South Vietnam by force via southeastern Laos</td>
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<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>Escalation of war: intensification of US Army bombings over northern and southeastern Laos</td>
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<td>1973</td>
<td>Paris agreements between US and Democratic Republic of Vietnam; ceasefire in Laos; end of US bombardments</td>
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<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>Abolition of monarchy in Laos and proclamation of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic. Kaysone Phomvihane, Lao Communist Party secretary general, becomes first prime minister of the new regime</td>
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In the sparsely populated border regions of Laos and Vietnam, the political situation was extremely confused. Between the start of World War II and 1949, when the Lao Issara movement broke up, several small anti-French resistance groups operated in this area. Some of them were in close contact with the Lao Issara government-in-exile in Bangkok, while others, especially those led by highland chiefs, operated independently. What they all soon had in common was their dependence on Viet Minh support. In some cases, this assistance took the form of rice, money, arms and ammunitions. In others, Vietnamese advisers attached themselves to lowland Lao or highland groups.

By late 1947, it had become evident that the war between the French army and the Viet Minh was going to be a prolonged conflict. The Viet Minh had several reasons for intensifying their efforts to build up military forces and revolutionary bases in Laos (as well as in Cambodia). First, in developing close military and political collaboration with the local Communist movement, the Viet Minh were creating a buffer zone to protect their western flank from attacks by the French troops (especially in southeastern Laos) and to enable their troops to intervene freely in Laos. Second, as in Cambodia, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam considered it essential that the Communist movement expand its membership in Laos and train local cadres so they could lead the struggle side by side with the Vietnamese, thus carrying out a genuine Indochinese revolution. While strategic factors played a crucial part in this decision, the Vietnamese Communists were driven also by an ideological and cultural impetus. They felt a sense of belonging to a wider internationalist movement and believed they ought to play a role in spreading the revolution.

Thus, anti-French resistance forces from late 1947 shifted gradually from western to eastern Laos, that is, away from Thailand and closer to Vietnam. Between the end of 1948 and early 1949, they set up military zones in the highlands of eastern Laos. Here they began to launch armed propaganda activities with the aim of establishing “peoples’ power bases”. Once highlander support was secured, it was active, and often crucial, in the mountain areas.

In some upland communities a legacy of resistance (some armed, others non-violent) to external control led them to be characterised and promoted as prime supporters of the patriotic revolution by the Communists. There were a series of revolts in the highlands of eastern Laos beginning in 1896, reaching a peak between 1910 and
1916, and finally dying out in the 1930s, all of which expressed resistance to aspects of the French administration. Members of a Mon-Khmer group, the Loven, engaged in armed resistance against the French as early as 1901 led by their chief, Pha Ong Keo, in southeastern Laos. The latter was eventually killed in 1910, but the resistance sentiment was carried on by the Alak highland leader Ong Kommandan until 1937. The skilled chief was eventually shot by the French. However, his son, Sithone Kommandan, who would reach the rank of general in the Pathet Lao army, survived to rally armed opposition to French colonial rule after his release from the Japanese in 1945. Although most of these early rebellions failed because they were scattered and isolated, they showed a desire for freedom and autonomy among some highlanders, as well as their responsiveness to their leaders. The anti-colonial nature of these revolts was thereafter exploited skillfully by Communist agents to demonstrate the timeliness of their own anti-colonialist cause.

The Indochina Wars were as much a political as a military struggle. The Lao and Vietnamese revolutionaries understood that in order to carry through a war of independence, it was vitally necessary to mobilise the rural population by implementing immediate actions at the local level (for instance, providing medical care and schooling, and supplying staple foods) and making it clear through political training that the national revolution was the prelude to a wider social revolution from which the peasantry would largely benefit. Hence the Communists’ strategy of involving the upland population in the war effort also included responding to local aspirations for concrete improvement in their general and material welfare. Moreover, the Communists’ ethnic policy was not merely a by-product of their war strategy. The policy of national equality and unity was to a great extent influenced by Lenin’s own prescriptions. For example, in 1934 the External Direction Bureau of the Indochinese Communist Party warned the Laos section to remember Lenin’s strategy of encouraging full liberation for ethnic minorities and of fighting against two dangers, one of which was “regional, patriotic, or chauvinist ideology, since communism recognizes only the class struggle, not the struggle of races”. Based on the socialist ideology, the highlanders were expected to follow the path to “progress” by going through all the evolutionary stages — from primitive Communism to feudalism, then to capitalism and finally to socialism.
War and Revolution: Personal Narratives and Historical Experience

Although memoirs and biographies of former revolutionaries (mostly in Lao) began appearing in bookshops and markets in Vientiane in the early 1990s, they overwhelmingly portrayed the lives of male Lao leaders. Only one biographical memoir of a (lowland) Lao woman revolutionary, Khampeng Boupha, has been published (in Lao and English) in the last 15 years. Khampeng Boupha, the first woman to be elected as a member of parliament and to the Central Committee of the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party, was a Communist cadre who held mostly intellectual and political positions. In her memoir, she mentions several other Lao women revolutionaries who were awarded the highly prestigious Medal of National Heroes and Heroines for their military actions and courage. Unfortunately, their stories are unknown. To our knowledge, these women never published their memoirs, and none of them had their revolutionary lives narrated. Some of them no doubt died during the war: it is not uncommon for the title of National Hero to be granted posthumously as it is often associated with the sacrifice of one’s life for the country.

Manivanh and Khamla are the two “minority” women fighters in the Lao revolutionary movement whose oral testimonies will be examined in this chapter. These two militants belonged to the second generation of indigenous revolutionaries — the first one was formed by resistant fighters who participated in the struggle against the French (see above) — who were recruited between the mid-1950s and the late 1960s in Pathet Lao-controlled areas in southeastern Laos. Although their testimonies have historical value (they contain information on historical facts such as guerrilla-controlled areas, battle dates and guerrilla activities), this chapter is more interested in these revolutionary fighters for what their stories reveal about their own understanding of historical events. Their subjectivity plays an integral role in the constitution of their past: that is, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did. In other words, their narrated past matters also because of its relation to the present. These two female war veterans’ remembrances of their past are, of course, selective and subjective, evoking only certain memories. Yet, by analysing what such inconsistencies reveal in terms of deeper psychological and emotional significance, their narratives in the end unveil characteristics of the “good Montagnards (“highlanders” in
French)" that are not related in wartime propaganda literature and the carefully vetted memoirs of official leaders. The personal experiences of historical events and social changes that every personal narrative reveals in its own specific way are significant. As the anthropologist Roxana Waterson has stressed, “it is the combination of the deeply personal, and the social and political, embedded as it is in the manner of telling, which can make the life history such a special kind of document”.35 It is this unique positioning of the subject-narrator — linking the private and the public worlds of experience — that gives the narrative its authenticity, not some assessment of the individual's story as being “representative” or “typical”.36

Motivations

Manivanh was a very well-known revolutionary figure in Savannakhet province. She was indeed the only female revolutionary cadre who was awarded the regime’s highest military title of National Hero in the whole province (out of the total of three that were awarded to revolutionary fighters in Savannakhet; the two other National Heroes — both men — were Akum, a mobilising cadre of Bru Tri origin, and Sikhai, a Phuthai army officer).37 Manivanh was born in a Katang village a few kilometres from the district centre of Muang Phine around the mid-1940s.38 After some formal introductions, she began to unfold the story of her revolutionary life:

I would like to tell you my story. Since I was 14, my parents … as I told you, I was an orphan … At the age of 14, I stayed with my uncles and aunts…. I was working for the revolution. Before that, to start with, soldiers, agents had been carrying out their underground propaganda activities in the forests … At the very beginning they were our agents, Issara agents. Before getting involved, my motivations were as follows: first, I was an orphan — both my parents had died. I was living with my uncles and aunts. I wasn’t angry; I didn’t hold any sentiments of hatred. No, I didn’t. But on that day … at the age of 14, in 1957, on my way back from the hay [upland rice field] I met my uncle. He was already working for the revolution. He was in hiding. He asked me: “Do you want to get involved? Do you want to study?” I then replied: “Yes, I want to study!” He took me to another agent and told him: “Write her down and take her to study politics, solidarity and all that!” My uncle warned me: “If you meet strangers, people that you don’t know, don’t tell them that visitors came around.” And that was how it really began!39
The kind of motivation that pushed Manivanh onto the revolutionary path is not the stuff of stories of heroism. What seemed to persuade her to join the struggle was the disarmingly straightforward prospect (yet exceptional in those circumstances) of going to school, studying, and escaping an ordinary life. “Anti-imperialist” feelings of anger and hatred would come later:

Later I understood, I reflected, I clearly saw that I wanted to join the Revolution, that I wanted above all to study. Secondly, I understood that … in the villages … the enemy was beating us, was threatening us…. I was full of hatred, of anger … and this is why I joined the Revolution…. My uncle, my brother were arrested in 1958, 1959. I wanted to go with the soldiers. In my heart, I hated the enemy! At that time, I wasn’t sure if they were French or Americans. But I was full of hatred. The date of my entry into the Revolution was around July 20, 1957.40

Khamla was born in Muang Phine, in Savannakhet province, in the middle to late 1950s. She also came from an “ordinary” peasant family (khorp khoua pasason), did not go to school in her childhood because “there wasn’t any in the village”, and could not (as a member of the Bru Katang ethnic group) speak Lao. Her first acquaintance with the Communist-nationalist movement, at the young age of eight, occurred when the area around her village was “liberated” around 1963–64. She was “restless as a child” and enjoyed helping with the collection of fruits and vegetables in the forest to feed guerrilla soldiers who entered the village to hold meetings and conduct their activities. As time went by, she gradually learned how to write and read in the company of revolutionary soldiers and cadres in makeshift evening classes. In fact, she explained her proper “entry into the Revolution” (khaw hoam kan pativat) in 196841 as partly the result of a desire to get a better education (“I was an ignorant girl, could even not speak Lao”), since she hoped that leaving her village and joining the revolutionary movement “out there” would help her in achieving this goal. Nonetheless, Khamla also linked her personal reason with a more collective motive: “resentment and hatred against foreign invaders”, as she put it, employing commonly used anti-colonialist idioms.

Khamla and Manivanh’s narratives reveal the complex nature of their motivations. The reasons for their involvement in the revolution were first personal (they came from underprivileged backgrounds, and they wanted to study) and subsequently collective (Manivanh fought
to take revenge against an enemy who arrested and probably tortured her fellow fighters two years after she joined the guerrilla forces). Their motives were not initially ideological. They did not become revolutionaries because of a faith in Communism or socialist ideals, nor even for the liberation of women. These politically inspired reasons would mature progressively.

Revolutionary Activities

In its early days the Pathet Lao was a male-dominated organisation. Most of the women serving in the movement’s administrative organs were spouses or daughters of cadres. However, this does not mean that the party did not have a policy stance on the role of women in society, as it formed a Research Committee on Lao Women's Activities in July 1955. In fact, many women were members of the party’s underground cells and conducted numerous missions on its behalf. Women in the “liberated zones” also served as couriers and spies. They were entrusted with the transmission of secret directives and took an equal share of the burden when carrying supplies on foot to military bases set up in the forest. Manivanh vividly remembers her first mission:

I brought food and water to the agents. I was recruited into the women's secret organisation…. [She later recalled the name of the organisation] … seup khoa, song khoa [literally, “information investigator”]. I was also recruited as an informant to check on the enemy’s movements in Muang Phine, Muang Phalane — how many were they? I went three times to the enemy's military base of Muang Phine. Once I got the information, I gave it to Brother Khamla, who was a soldier. He's now retired. He was a soldier for the enemy, for the French. But he was also working for us, and he was also working for the French! I was getting the information from him. As well as from Uncle Khemly … he's now deceased. Information on their weapons, big, small, and on the number of the enemy troops. The enemy never suspected anything; I was only 14 years old in 1957. I was collecting information on the enemy's position, after which I'd go back and submit my report. My third task was to inform the Issara soldiers when the enemy was about to go into the villages. I then would run to the forests to inform the Issara soldiers. Those were my revolutionary activities at the village level, in 1957, 1958 and 1959.
With the inclusion in 1957 of the Pathet Lao's official political vehicle, the Neo Lao Hak Sat, into the government, supplementary elections were called to provide for representation of the new party in the Assembly and so complete the process of national integration that began at the first Geneva Conference in 1954. Twenty additional parliamentary seats were created to this end, and elections were scheduled for May 1958. But as the elections approached, hostilities between the conservative Royal Lao Government (RLG) and the Pathet Lao deepened, with the political struggle on the ground getting increasingly violent. The Neo Lao Hak Sat, with its electoral ally, the left-wing Santhiphab (Peace) Party, won 13 of the 21 seats that were contested in the 1958 election.

These results proved enough to alarm right-wing politicians and their American allies in Vientiane and to subsequently force Souvanna Phouma, who pushed for the political integration of Neo Lao Hak Sat, to resign as prime minister in July following the suspension of US aid. In actuality, the electoral gains obtained by the leftist camp merely reflected a reality already entrenched in some eastern parts of the country: the conviction among Lao Communist partisans (and the people sympathetic to their cause) of the existence of two opposed governments, the Vientiane-RLG side backed by the United States, and the Pathet Lao supported by the Viet Minh. Likewise, the eastern districts of Savannakhet province, where our two female protagonists originated, were then a disputed territory pitting Pathet Lao agents against RLG forces. By the late 1950s, the struggle between Communists and royalists had spread to the social and political sphere and had turned into a hide-and-seek pursuit where the Communist followers remained an elusive target by blending into the population, exacerbating the RLG forces' reprisals against civilians. In other words, Laos was turning into a politically and socially fractured country.

It was during the early years of her revolutionary life that Manivanh (not her birth name) adopted the name “Manivanh”, which, significantly, is a lowland ethnic Lao name. As the war intensified and the Communists made territorial gains and won military battles, Manivanh moved up the ladder of responsibility and left the physically demanding work of a porter to assume the more enviable task of a propaganda agent at the provincial level, again driven by both personal desire and collective purpose. It was at that moment of her life that she became aware of the wider political issues and struggles. Her narrative clearly shows the intersection between her personal experience and historical events:
In 1958, I sometimes stayed in the village, or when there was danger, lived in the forest. But 1959 was the most violent year.\textsuperscript{44} My brother, my uncle were arrested. The enemy shot at my comrades, at our vehicles…. Then we lost our cover … They arrested and tortured people … I left and went into hiding in the forest. Then in 1961, it was the battles of Muong Phine and Muong Sepone. These were finally liberated. I was in the village at that time. I was carrying out the same task, I was still a porter [lam lieng]. I was carrying rice, cigarettes, oil and so on, up to Muang Phine. Then, in 1962, I left. My uncle and brother came to take me. At that point, I knew I wanted to leave! Because first, I was full of hatred, I hated the enemy! And secondly, I wanted to study, I especially wanted to study! At that time, I even didn't know to read [Lao]. I could only speak it. I sacrificed [sala] myself. I left the family, the village, around June 20, 1962. I joined the mobilising group [korng kon kwai] in the province of Muang Phine. I followed my uncle, my brother.\textsuperscript{45}

Like other minority cadres’ narratives I had the opportunity of hearing, Manivanh’s is closely tied up with agency, reflected in her strong desire to acquire a formal education. This was clearly a determining factor in her decision to join the revolution, though the weight of fate never completely disappears in her story. During the period of renewed political turmoil in Laos, which began in 1959 and ended — temporarily — with the second Geneva Accords of 1962, the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese forces made significant territorial gains, extending their control into new areas of the country. In January 1959, during the Fifteenth Plenum of the Vietnamese Workers Party’s Central Committee, the North Vietnamese leadership authorised the use of armed struggle in the south, to be headed by the National Liberation Front for South Vietnam.\textsuperscript{46} In early 1961, after negotiations with the Pathet Lao, Hanoi decided to extend the Ho Chi Minh Trail into Laos.\textsuperscript{47} Muong Sepone, which became one of the most important centres for the North Vietnamese transportation network, fell in 1961.

Manivanh’s life, meanwhile, was not getting any easier. In the years that followed, she indefatigably contributed to the war effort, travelling to wherever her help was needed and living with the villagers, mainly women and children, who had fled the bombings and lived scattered in the forests.

I was sent with this group to the Tasseng Namchalo-Angkham [in the eastern region of present-day Savannakhet province]. I
followed the older sisters, they were more experienced. The people cultivated the upland rice fields, so did we! We were by their side. The people were pounding rice, so were we. The people went and fetched the water, so did we. They were looking for food, and we helped them. We never stopped, never had a break, we were by their side, with the children, with the grown-ups. We kept going! We also went with the soldiers. We were looking for food, bamboo shoots, and so on. People were living in the forest … they were our informants, kids, women without their husbands, kept us informed on the enemy's movements…. The orphans, the widows, single women, they were trustworthy because we liberated them … it was like that! In 1962, 1963, 1964, 1965, I was on the road with the comrades…. Then, in 1967–68, I sometimes went on my own to go and collect “rice for helping the nation”, as we called it then, “rice to help the country.”

In a sense, the tasks Manivanh undertook during wartime provided her with an independent life and a sense of adventure she would not have experienced had she stayed in her village: moving about as a propagandist and proselytising for the party. Having been recruited into the struggle, she in turn mobilised children to join the revolution and, in the same manner as her own recruitment, promised them a bright, though elusive, future:

I was mobilising the population. I was recruiting children. I persuaded them to go and study, to become teachers, soldiers, nurses, doctors. I wasn't alone in my work, there were several of us. We worked together. We worked in the rice field during the day and returned home in the evening. After dinner, there were dances…. The youth in villages in Namchalo, we all went, girls, boys, to become agents, soldiers, doctors, students … that was my work in the emulation group…. Everyone was satisfied with my work. I was always the first to be chosen to carry out the work. Because I was young and hard working, because I never stopped working. I lived with the people, I fetched the water, I looked for food, for wood. I lived in places where life was tough, with widows, single women, orphans, it was with them I shared my life. Those were my tasks in the propaganda group from 1962 to 1968.

In her exemplary narration, Manivanh never mentioned her personal suffering. The harshness of her life during the war is perceptible, though — particularly in the middle to late 1960s, when villagers and revolutionaries alike lacked food and more or less everything else and
had to rely on the forest to subsist. Nevertheless, Manivanh never expressed anything other than collective ordeals. As an interesting comparison, when writing about war veterans and resistance fighters during World War II in Italy, Alessandro Portelli notes that “often, these individuals are wholly absorbed by the totality of the historical event of which they were [a] part, and their account assumes the cadences and wording of epic”. By these narratives of self, people are expressing the desire to impose an order, to form a “whole” out of “constituent parts” (that is, events), and thus to retain a sense of their life — past and present — that is reflective, coherent and meaningful.

At the end of her interview, Manivanh modestly expressed her contentment and gratitude towards the state for her house and her monthly war veteran’s pension. She kept her revolutionary virtues pristine until the end.

Upon her “entry in the revolution” in the late 1960s, Khamla was immediately sent to carry out activities on the ground; she became, and remained for the duration of the war, a “foundation-laying cadre” (phanakngan pheunthan). As related in Manivanh’s testimony, Communist cadres were assigned to accompany villagers — alone or in pairs depending on the size of the group — for periods of time from a few days to several weeks. One of the cadres’ tasks was to provide practical advice and concrete support: in other words, to “educate” the population. Under their instructions, the villagers learned, for example, how to dig trenches covered with a steeply pitched roof of logs to deflect bombs. Revolutionary agents were also instructed to work in the upland rice fields and help in daily subsistence activities, such as the cultivation of potatoes, a crucial vegetable that could replace rice in times of shortage.

Their most important mission, however, was to keep mobilising the people in support of the revolution and war efforts. For instance, every household under the Communists’ supervision had to pay a “rice tax” — although it was strictly forbidden to use this “counter-revolutionary” term during the war — which in official language, or “political phraseology”, was known as “rice to help the nation” or, more concisely, “patriotic rice”. The quantity to be donated depended on each household’s production capacity. Every year, a cadre was tasked with assessing and monitoring the quantity of rice “paid” by each household. Khamla performed this work countless times, as she explained in detail:
For instance, one household produced 100 meun [one meun is equivalent to 12 kilos] per year. Then one counted how many members this household had and deducted accordingly the volume of rice needed for the family's own subsistence. The latter’s share might be higher if the family included one or more revolutionary cadres. The remaining quantity of rice, if any and however small, was considered to be “patriotic rice”. It was very fair. But the seemingly well-calibrated policy did not always go as smoothly as this and at times faced some (passive) resistance: “It happened that households, the richer ones, would lie to us and would declare a lower quantity. But neighbours would come and tell us the truth. We of course also carried out our own checks among households.” Khamla spoke spontaneously of these “un-revolutionary” behaviours; unlike Manivanh, who was a National Hero, she may have felt less compelled to maintain a flawless narrative.

Khamla remained a ground-level cadre, her desire to be “better educated” remaining unfulfilled: “I never went anywhere. The ‘central level' never sent me anywhere, neither in the North [of Laos] nor to Vietnam; only some training of one month or two here and there. I learnt everything by myself and with the help of friends and comrades.” Khamla’s hint of bitterness must be understood in the wider context of the Communist revolution in eastern Laos during the war. At that time the Pathet Lao leadership began the building of a proto-socialist state. Thousands of children living in Pathet Lao-controlled areas were thus sent to study in Sam Neua or in North Vietnam between the late 1950s and the mid-1970s. These young boys and girls — many of whom were of ethnic minority origin — experienced various trajectories following the end of their studies and their return to Laos (for those who were sent to North Vietnam) in the 1970s: some went back to their home villages, while others became civil servants under the new regime after 1975. Others held, or still hold, influential positions within the state apparatus, while a few are members of the political ruling class and even sit on the Central Committee of the party (the Politburo, the highest political body in a Communist regime). In spite of divergent paths, one can argue that the Pathet Lao’s recruitment campaigns in the highlands of Laos have produced a new generation of public servants: teachers, civil servants in ministries and local governments, medical personnel, senior officials, politicians (including members of parliament, provincial governors and
district heads), all of whom benefited during their youth from the Communist education system during the First and (especially) Second Indochina Wars. Meanwhile, on the ground, *phanakngan pheunthan*, such as Manivanh and Khamla, were the revolution’s foot soldiers, fulfilling an often thankless and demanding, yet crucial, role in rallying and keeping villagers in line with the revolutionary cause and the party’s doctrine.

**After the Revolution**

Manivanh never married and did not have any children. Towards the end of her life, unable to travel as much as she was used to because of declining health (she suffered from diabetes), she lived in downtown Savannakhet with her adopted daughter in a one-storey concrete house — a gift from the state for her accomplishments during the “30-year struggle” (1945–75). During the interview, the revolutionary cadre hardly mentioned anything about her private life. According to other war veterans (including Khamla), Manivanh was granted the “National Hero” title because she never refused or showed the slightest sign of dithering when tasked with carrying out a mission, including the riskiest ones, such as spying in the enemy’s territories during the war or conducting political assignments in areas threatened by counter-revolutionary forces that continued to operate well after the 1975 Pathet Lao victory in some districts of the province. “She was so often away, carrying out an assignment, attending a meeting or following a political training. She didn’t even have time to look after her adopted daughter. It was another female cadre who brought her up; the child ended up calling the two women ‘mother,’” Khamla recalled. Through the lens of her personal narrative and life, Manivanh personifies the model patriot whose life demanded a high degree of self-sacrifice, if not total abandonment to the revolution. Manivanh did not hold any prominent political position at the national or provincial level: in the aftermath of the war she was elected as the head of a district-level office of the Lao Women’s Union. The rationale underlying Manivanh’s biography could concur with comments made by Sophie Quinn-Judge on the lives of early Vietnamese women revolutionaries: “For the generation of women who began the revolution in Vietnam, the traditional virtues of stoicism and self-sacrifice were the ones that dominated their lives.”
Manivanh passed away in 2007. A picture of her is displayed in the Savannakhet history museum, next to Akum’s portrait (the third National Hero, Sikhai, who is still alive, may get this honour only after his death). The setting is bare: only their names are mentioned in the captions below the portraits. The lack of any mention of the ethnic group of each revolutionary (Bru Katang and Bru Tri, respectively) seems to be a missed opportunity for a regime that has constantly insisted on the inter-ethnic solidarity of “Lao people of all ethnic groups”, a phrase often used in Lao official discourse to emphasise the multi-ethnic unity of the nation. Neither did ethnicity feature prominently in Manivanh’s interview, though it does not mean that her ethnic origins did not matter. In fact, they greatly influenced the course of her revolutionary activities, because it was common for mobilising cadres of ethnic minority origins to operate in areas where they could use their cultural and language skills and knowledge; in other words, they were frequently assigned to mobilise their own “people”. Khamla recollected recruiting “lots of soldiers”, especially in “ethnic minority villages”, because “parents [in those villages] were not keen on sending their children to school, whereas young men wanted to fight against the imperialists and to wear a nice military uniform!”

The former revolutionary cadre candidly explained that she was taught which ethnic group she “belonged” to only after joining the revolutionary movement: “I couldn’t tell then the difference between a Makong or a Katang, I knew only that I was Bru. But my hierarchy told me that the name of my ethnic group was Katang, so the name stuck!” Despite accepting the official terminology, Khamla insisted that villagers, especially the elderly, in her native district would currently not be able to name any ethnic group and would still prefer to call themselves Bru (as she herself did at times, despite being told otherwise). More specifically, these villagers would identify themselves to a large extent by their village’s name and territory. (According to the anthropologist Gábor Vargyas, “[the] word ‘Bru’ has two meanings: a narrow one, as autonym, and another broader one, meaning all the surrounding mountain people: ‘Bru Van Kieu, Pakoh Bru, Bru Tau-Oi’. … [T]he same ethnonym [therefore] could have two meanings: all these people being ‘forest people’, they can use it to refer to themselves and to designate other neighbouring ethnic groups of the ‘forest.’”) Khamla’s sense of ethnic belonging (or, more broadly, sense of ethnic distinctiveness from the lowland Lao majority) may be also partly explained by the regime’s ethnic policies.
The Communist leadership in Laos changed the discourse and policies on ethnicity. As against the policy of the Royal Lao Government, they substituted a majoritarian logic built around the lowland Lao culture with a policy of equality dominated by the class issue and the diktat of progress. During the war in the “liberated” zones and the first decade of Communist rule, the Communists attempted to create a loyalty greater than loyalties to particular ethnic identities. The ultimate goal for the Lao Communists, as it was for their Soviet, Chinese, and Vietnamese counterparts, guided by a historicist and evolutionist vision, was to eradicate “old” identities and replace them with a “Socialist” one. In other words, these regimes’ ultimate objective was not to build a society based on ethnic/national consciousness: the concept of class was thought to be the new society’s main axis of identification. Antagonisms and mistrust between ethnic groups were to be dissipated by a period of national equality. This policy came to be known as “the flourishing of the nations”. It was predicated upon the Marxist belief that “nationalities” (ethnic minorities) would naturally move closer together. The new Communist regime in Laos, accordingly, explicitly recognised the “the hill-tribe question” from the early years of its leadership. Kaysone Phomvihane, the late president of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, called for greater attention to be paid to promoting education among ethnic groups, improving their living conditions, and increasing production in remote minority areas. Furthermore, he insisted on respect being paid to the “psychology, aspirations, customs, and beliefs of each ethnic group”. The principle was to give every constituent group of the multi-ethnic state official recognition on an equal footing. In speeches, policies and textbooks, the Communists promoted a new image of the nation: from an apparent mono-ethnic portrait adopted under the “old regime” to a multi-ethnic representation of the national community in which equality, diversity and unity were now the new key parameters.

However, a disturbing trend, from the perspective of state-minority relations, is currently the government’s embrace of Buddhism as a marker of national identity. For example, the religious Buddhist monument That Luang in Vientiane, which was the centrepiece of a tribute ceremony to royalty under the former regime, has replaced the hammer and sickle as the national symbol. The annual That Luang festival has become the locus of the state’s representational project.
of the nation, a crossroads between socialist ideals, Buddhist rituals, exhibition of the multi-ethnic national culture, and the politics of opening to the world. The conflation of Buddhism and socialism is openly celebrated and benefits from extensive media coverage.\textsuperscript{59} Symbols of nationhood are required to engender social cohesion by arousing a deeply felt sense of a shared community. They encompass what are claimed to be the unique and distinctive values of society. Functioning as collective representations, they aim at producing homogeneity from heterogeneity and integrating what is fragmented. With respect to majority-minority relationships, however, the revival of a Buddhist-orientated polity may widen the gap between the dominant Lao population (who are, in their vast majority, Buddhist followers) and the ethnic minorities (most of whom are non-Buddhist). The distinction is not solely religious: it also encompasses social organisation and world view. Thus, from the perspective of non-Lao citizens, the resurgence of state-sponsored Buddhist rituals as markers of national identity is troubling.\textsuperscript{60} Neither Khamla nor her husband is Buddhist, as they told me; nonetheless, they (and their children) participate in Buddhist religious ceremonies and gatherings, although (as far as Khamla and her husband are concerned) they do so only, as she stressed in her interview, “to conform to the majority’s urban social life”. In other words, former revolutionaries such as Khamla and her spouse, who once were told — and believed — that they were at the forefront of the new secular and egalitarian socialist society, having defeated the “feudal” regime, now have to fit the culturally lowland Lao-dominated everyday urban life, as promoted by their Communist leaders.

Khamla retired in her early forties during the 1990s. At the time of writing, she was a member of the Lao Front for National Construction (Neo Lao Sang Saat), the regime's main mass organisation, which functions as an intermediary body between the party and the population. Not dissimilar to her activities during wartime, Khamla is sometimes called upon to explain the government’s policies related to ethnic matters to villagers with whom she shares the same ethnic background. As during her revolutionary years, her relatively low level of education prevents her from undertaking higher-level assignments, which would require good (or better) literacy skills. Such was the explanation she gave me for her continuing grass-roots tasks, though a lack of good connections probably also accounted for the absence of
opportunities. She never expressed any feelings of regret or sentiments of dissatisfaction during the interviews, however, although she was somewhat aware that perhaps she could have expected a better outcome from her years of devotion to the revolutionary cause. “My friends and colleagues keep saying that I’m stupid,” she told me, sounding rather upset. “They think I could have asked for more with my revolutionary background. But I’m not stupid, I’m intelligent: I helped to liberate the country! I live in a state house, and I’m not asking for anything else.” Despite years of involvement in the revolution and in post-war reconstruction, Manivanh and Khamla barely saw any political career benefits from their self-abnegation.

In truth, politically active women in general have not fared well under the Communist regime. The statistics for 2010 show that women are still poorly represented at the executive level. There is no woman holding the post of provincial governor (one woman is deputy governor); two district chiefs (out of a total of 143) are women, as are 146 of the total of 8,726 village chiefs. The representation of women in the National Assembly is slightly better, at 25 per cent (29 out of 115). The proportion of women in the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party’s Central Committee (the regime’s most powerful political organ, below the Politburo) is stagnating and has not increased from its peak of four members (out of 55 to 60) in 1982.

**Conclusion**

Manivanh and Khamla were both recruited as young girls, went through the wartime educational apparatus and ideological circuit, and became cadres within the revolutionary movement. They both came from a materially poor and illiterate background. As guerrilla agents, these women broke from their own cultural and social norms to embrace socialist and nationalist ideals. They lived exceptionally independent lives under extraordinary circumstances for women of their background and origins. Manivanh literally gave her life to the revolutionary cause and was awarded for her sacrifice with the title of National Hero. Khamla might have followed a similar path had she been born a dozen years earlier. The war was over when she was still in her twenties, and the end of the conflict allowed her to regain a personal life — she got married and built a family (“During the war it was out of the question! You wouldn’t have time to raise children
moving around all the time like we did”). Neither woman went back to live in her village of origin. Both of them settled in Savannakhet town after the “liberation” in 1975 and carried on their duties as the regime’s loyal militants. Both women kept being assigned to the same task again and again — liaising between the party and populations of their own ethnic background in their native province. In a sense, they never grew out of their ascribed “ethnic” role, perhaps because they were never given the opportunity to do so.

Notes

1. This chapter is a modified version of my article “Highlanders on the Ho Chi Minh Trail: Representations and Narratives”, Critical Asian Studies 40, 3 (2008): 445–74. I thank the journal’s editors for granting me permission to republish sections of this article, which is based on information gathered during research trips in the southern provinces of Sekong, Saravane and Savannakhet in 2003, 2004, 2008 and 2010.


7. Turner and Phan Thanh Hao (2002, pp. 94–5) estimate that among the (officially accounted for) 170,000 young people who joined the North Vietnamese volunteer youth (also called the “youth shock brigades”) between 1965 and 1973, at least 70 per cent were women. Around a million more participated in local self-defence and militia units, and some 70,000 professional women — doctors, engineers, reporters — were recruited or volunteered to support the North Vietnamese Army.

8. Ibid., p. 93.


10. The Belorussian writer and journalist Svetlana Alexievitch, who has collected hundreds of testimonies of the former Soviet Union’s female World War II veterans, eloquently explains: “Women’s accounts contain nothing, or so little, about what we hear constantly, or perhaps rather,
what we have stopped hearing because we no longer pay any attention to it, that is, how some people heroically killed others and prevailed. Or lost. Women’s stories are different in character and deal with another topic. The ‘feminine’ war possesses its own colors, odours, lighting and world of feelings. And, lastly, its own words” (Svetlana Alexievitch, *La guerre n’a pas un visage de femme* [War Doesn’t Have a Feminine Face] [Paris: Éditions J’ai Lu, 2005], p. 9, my translation).

11. In Laos, the ethnic Lao, who are the politically and economically dominant group (though they do not constitute an overwhelming majority), live mainly in the lowlands. Other lowland areas are inhabited by ethnic groups who speak a variety of Tai-Kadai languages. Tibeto-Burman speakers arrived recently from southwest China, while the Hmong-Mien (Miao-Yao) peoples, also recent arrivals, came from southern and southeastern China. These latter two families are confined primarily to highland areas in the northern provinces. Members of the Austro-Asiatic language family, generally acknowledged to be the first inhabitants of the country, are found throughout the country in both upland and lowland rural environments. Southeastern Laos — comprising the eastern districts of Khammouane, Savannakhet and Saravane provinces; the whole of Sekong and Attapeu provinces; as well as the Bolovens Plateau, located in the east of Champassak province — are by and large populated by Mon-Khmer (a sub-branch of the Austro-Asiatic family) language speakers. With the exception of the Katang and the Makong (called Bru-Van Kieu in Vietnam), none of these ethnic groups numbers more than 10,000 people, though ethnic minority peoples constitute the majority of the population in Sekong (Katu, Triang and Arak) and Attapeu (Oy and Brau/Brao) provinces.

12. The League for the Independence of Vietnam (Viet Nam Doc lap Dong minh, or Viet Minh) was founded by Ho Chi Minh in May 1941 as a broad-based movement designed to draw popular support.

13. The name indicates its geographic location in the Trường Sơn Mountains, which form the natural border between Vietnam and Laos.

14. The term “Pathet Lao” gained international currency when it was used at the Geneva Conference of 1954, although representatives of the PL forces were not seated at the conference and it was a Viet Minh general who signed the ceasefire with the French on the PL’s behalf. The name remained in common use as a generic term for the Lao Communists despite the fact that a “legal” political party, the Neo Lao Hak Sak (Lao Patriotic Front), was formed in early 1956. Therefore, although Pathet Lao is properly the name only of the armed forces of the Lao Communists, it is colloquially used to include all non-Vietnamese components of the Lao Communist movement to this day (Paul F. Langer and Joseph


19. By supporting anti-colonial movements in Laos, the Viet Minh gained access to and control of safe territorial bases, communication networks, and logistical corridors for external assistance to flow through. Indeed, Laos bordered 1,300 miles of highly permeable Vietnamese frontier, and later on it provided the best route for reaching southern Vietnam and avoiding the political and military problems involved in infiltrating directly through the demilitarised zone that divided the country in two in 1954. (The Vietnamese Demilitarised Zone was established as a dividing line between North and South Vietnam as a result of the First Indochina War [1946–54]. The Geneva Conference on 21 July 1954 recognised the 17th parallel as a “provisional military demarcation line” temporarily dividing the country into a Communist zone in the north and a non-Communist zone in the south.)

20. On 2 September 1945, Ho Chi Minh proclaimed the independence of Vietnam.


23. My point is not to argue that the participation of highlanders in the war effort was the key factor in the Communists’ final victory, either during
the Franco-Viet Minh war or the North Vietnamese-US conflict. Their role, nonetheless, should not be underestimated.


25. The most violent of all revolts occurred between 1914 and 1916 in the Tai-inhabited region around Sam Neua. When French troops from Vietnam recaptured the provincial capital from Tai rebels, the survivors retreated through Vietnam into Phongsaly province, where it required more than 5,000 colonial troops from Hanoi to drive them eventually into China. The Hmong people also launched a violent insurrection against French taxes and impositions in 1919. Starting in Vietnam and spreading to Xieng Khouang province, their revolt was led by Pha Patchay, who called for an independent Hmong kingdom. Both the Hmong and the Mien ethnic groups shared a long history of resistance activity, which had led them to develop highly organised units of resistance. The French colonial government granted the Hmong a special administration status as a result of this rebellion (MacAlister Brown and Joseph J. Zasloff, *Apprentice Revolutionaries: The Communist Movement in Laos, 1930–1985* [Stanford: Hoover Institution Press/Stanford University, 1986], p. 10).

26. The release of Sithone Kommadan and his brother Kamphanh from prison in Phongsaly province in August 1945 was critical for the development of the Lao Issara and subsequently the Pathet Lao. Sithone was identified as the undisputed leader of the southern highland peoples, and thus his presence helped to unite them rapidly with the Lao Issara resistance forces. Sithone began to establish “resistance bases” in Phongsaly and Xieng Khouang. Then he entered southern Vietnam, where he met the militant Communist Tran Van Giau. He soon made contact with the Viet Minh leadership in northern Vietnam and the Lao Issara government in Vientiane. In 1948 Sithone began leading raids on the Bolovens Plateau, and in 1950 he regrouped with his son Sang Kham in their home province of Saravane. Sithone’s experience in utilising and organising the support of highland and rural groups extended the nationalist activities of the Lao Issara on a countrywide scale (Rathie, *Historical Development*, pp. 34–5).

27. Although for Lenin nationalism was a secondary problem, it was essential to keep it under control. His strategy for neutralising the national question was guided by his perception of nationalism as the result of past discrimination and oppression. Consequently, national antagonisms
and mistrust were to be dissipated by a period of national equality; this policy came to be known as “the flourishing of the nations”. It was predicated upon the belief that nations would naturally move close together, a process described in the official Marxist vocabulary as the “rapprochement” or “coming together” of nations (W. Connor, The National Question in Marxist-Leninist Theory and Strategy [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984], p. 202).


31. Khampheng Boupha worked first as a teacher, then as a translator, before representing her country in various international conferences and congresses throughout the 1960s and 1970s as well as after the war.

32. They were Ms Nyaeng, Ms Buasy, Mother Mi, Mother Buakhum, Mother Yongkay, Ms Su, Ms Buakhum, Mother Phanh and Nang Trai Phet.

33. I am using a pseudonym for the second revolutionary cadre, who is still alive and lives in Savannakhet province, for the sake of her privacy.


37. The eastern districts of Savannakhet province are inhabited predominantly by Mon-Khmer peoples (accounting for approximately 70 per cent of the total population), who are classified into three subgroups (the Makong/Mangkong, Katang and Tri). However, there is also a significant minority of Tai-speaking Phuthai (about 30 per cent).

38. The Katang (also known as Bru Katang) are a Mon-Khmer speaking group. They mostly inhabit the highland areas straddling the border between the provinces of Savannakhet and Saravane, in southeastern Laos.

39. Interview on 26 February 2004 in Kaysone Phomvihane, the capital of Savannakhet province.

40. Ibid.

41. That is, approximately one generation of revolutionary cadres after Manivanh’s generation.

42. Mayoury, Remembrances of a Lao Woman, p. 1993; Lao Women’s Union, Pavat mounsieu sahaphanmaenyinglao [History of the Origins of the Lao
Women's Union] (Vientiane: Lao Women's Union's headquarters, July 2010).

43. Interview on 26 February 2004 in Kaysone Phomvihane, the capital of Savannakhet province.

44. The summer of 1959 marked a low point in the PL's military strength. Its two battalions had recently fled Luang Prabang and Huaphan provinces to reach North Vietnam and had hardly had any time to regroup by the time 16 of their leaders were arrested and detained in Vientiane.

45. Interview on 26 February 2004 in Kaysone Phomvihane, the capital of Savannakhet province.


48. Interview on 26 February 2004 in Kaysone Phomvihane, the capital of Savannakhet province.

49. Ibid.


52. Interview on 1 March 2010 in Kaysone Phomvihane, Savannakhet province.

53. The Pathet Lao’s headquarters were located in Huaphan province (formerly called Sam Neua), in northeastern Laos. Many Lao revolutionary cadres were sent during and after the war to North Vietnam for political and ideological training.


59. The examples usually cited are pictures taken of the party’s senior members making merit during major Buddhist festivals.


61. The government sold houses located in downtown Savannakhet (some of which had been abandoned by their owners, who fled to Thailand in the aftermath of the Pathet Lao’s victory) to highly deserving war veterans at a (relatively) low price.

62. Lao Women’s Union, *Pavat mounsieu sahapanmaenyinglao [History of the Origins of the Lao Women’s Union]*, pp. 158–9. I thank Martin Rathie for sharing this book with me. Despite the dispiriting statistics, some women, who participated in the 30-year struggle (1945–75) and/or were educated in the Communist education system during the war, have nevertheless attained fairly prominent political positions under the Communist regime at both the central and local levels, the most well-known example being Pany Yathorthou, president of the National Assembly and member of the Politburo at the time of writing. Lao women revolutionaries’ trajectories during and after the war constitute an important area for further investigation.