



Ancient Lao History to 1945

The Tai people migrated out of southern China about the 8th century. The Tai-Lao, or Lao for short, moved slowly down the rivers of northern Laos, like the Nam Ou and the Nam Khan, running roughly from northeast to southwest, until they arrived at the Mekong, the Great River.

The early Lao text known as the Nithan (story of) Khun Borom recounts the myth of creation of the Lao peoples, their interaction, and the establishment of the first Lao kingdom in the vicinity of Luang Prabang. The creation myth tells how two great gourds grew at Meuang Thaeng (Dien Bien Phu, now in Vietnam) from inside which sounds could be heard. Divine rulers, known as khun, pierced one of the gourds with a hot poker, and out of the charred hole poured the dark-skinned Lao Thoeng. The khun used a knife to cut a hole in the other gourd, through which escaped the lighter-skinned Tai-Lao (or Lao Loum, Lowland Lao). The gods then sent Khun Borom to rule over both Lao Loum and Lao Thoeng. He had seven sons, whom he sent out to found seven new kingdoms in the regions. The youngest son founded the kingdom of Xieng Khuang on the Plain of Jars, the oldest son, Khun Lo, descended the Nam Ou, seized the principality of Meuang Sua from its Lao Thoeng ruler, and named it Xiang Dong Xiang Thong (later renamed Luang Prabang).

The first extended Lao kingdom dates from the mid-14th century. It was established in the context of a century of unprecedented political and social change in mainland Southeast Asia. At the beginning of the 13th century, the great Khmer king Jayavarman VII, who had re-established Cambodian power and built the city of Angkor Thom, sent his armies north to extend the Khmer empire to include all of the middle Mekong region and north-central Thailand. But the empire was overstretched, and by the mid-13th century the Khmer were in retreat. At the same time, the Mongol Yuan dynasty in China lost interest in further conquest in Southeast Asia.

This left a political vacuum in central Thailand, into which stepped Ramkhamhaeng, founder of the Tai-Syam kingdom of Sukhothai. To his north, his ally Mangray founded the Tai-Yuan kingdom of Lanna (meaning 'a million rice fields'), with his capital at Chiang Mai. Other smaller Tai kingdoms were established at Phayao and Xiang Dong Xiang Thong. In southern Laos and southern Thailand, however, the Khmer still held on to power.

We know that at this time Viang Chan was tributary to Sukhothai, and it may well be that Xiang Dong Xiang Thong was too. As the power of Sukhothai grew, it exerted more pressure on the Khmer. The Cambodian court looked around for an ally, and found one in the form of a young Lao prince, Fa Ngum, who was being educated at Angkor. Fa Ngum was in direct line for the throne.

The Khmer gave Fa Ngum a Khmer princess and an army, and sent him north to wrestle the middle Mekong from the control of Sukhothai, and so divert and weaken the Tai-Syam kingdom. In this he was successful. Sikhottabong acknowledged Fa Ngum's suzerainty. So did Xieng Khuang and a number of other Lao meuang. Only Viang Chan held out. Fa Ngum was acclaimed king in Xiang Dong Xiang Thong, then brought Viang Chan into his empire. He named his new kingdom Lan Xang Hom Khao, meaning 'a million elephants and the white parasol'.

Fa Ngum built a fine capital at Xiang Dong Xiang Thong and set about organising his court and kingdom. He appointed his Khmer generals to positions of power, even though this antagonised the local aristocracy. Tributary rulers had to journey to the capital every three years to renew their vows of fealty and present tribute.

Fa Ngum performed sacrifices to the traditional spirits of the kingdom, and to the ngeuk of the Mekong. But he also acquiesced to his wife's request to introduce Khmer Theravada Buddhism to Lan Xang. Here, according to the Lao chronicles, he began to run into problems. The Cambodian king despatched a large contingent of monks and craftsmen up the Mekong, but they only got as far as Viang Chan. There the image they were escorting, the famous Pha Bang, magically refused to move, and had to be left behind. Its reason for refusing to go on to the Lao capital was that it knew that Fa Ngum was not morally worthy. Fa Ngum was sent into exile in Nan (now in Thailand), where he died within five years. His legacy, however, stood the test of time. The Kingdom of Lan Xang remained a power in mainland Southeast Asia until early in the 18th century.

Fa Ngum was succeeded by his son Un Heuan, who took the throne name Samsenthai, meaning 300,000 Tai, the number of men, his census reported, who could be recruited to serve in the army. He married princesses from the principal Tai kingdoms (Lanna and Ayutthaya, which had replaced Sukhothai), consolidated the kingdom and developed trade. With his wealth he built temples and beautified his capital.

Following Samsenthai's long and stable reign of 42 years, Lan Xang was shaken by succession disputes. A scheming queen, known only as Mahathevi (Great Queen), is said to have set on the throne, and then killed off, a succession of youthful kings before ruling herself. But she was overthrown by the nobility and sacrificed to the ngeuk (by being chained to a rock in the Mekong and drowned). The throne then passed to Samsenthai's youngest son, who took the throne name Xainya Chakkaphat (Universal Ruler). It was an arrogant claim, but he ruled wisely and well.

Tragedy struck at the end of his reign, when Lan Xang suffered its first major invasion. This was by Vietnam, whose emperor wanted revenge for a perceived insult. The Vietnamese emperor sent a large invasion force against the Lao. After a bitter battle the Vietnamese captured and sacked Xiang Dong Xiang Thong. Xainya Chakkaphat fled and the Lao mounted a guerrilla campaign. Eventually the Vietnamese were forced to withdraw, their forces decimated by malaria and vowing never to invade Lan Xang again.

The Lao kingdom recovered under one of its greatest rulers, King Visoun, who came to the throne in 1501. There he had been an ardent worshipper of the Pha Bang Buddha image, which he brought with him to Xiang Dong Xiang Thong to become the palladium of the kingdom. For it he built the magnificent temple known as Wat Wisunarat (Wat Visoun), which though damaged and repaired over the years, still stands in Luang Prabang.

Visoun developed close relations with Chiang Mai, and enticed Lanna monks and craftsmen to his capital. He ordered a new version of the Lao chronicles composed, which he personally edited, and his reign marked a cultural renaissance for Lan Xang. Friendly relations with Lanna continued under Visoun's successor, his son Phothisarath. His grandson, Setthathirat, married a Lanna princess and briefly ruled over both kingdoms. But Lanna wanted its own king, and Setthathirat had trouble enough shoring up support in Lan Xang.

By then a new power had arisen in mainland Southeast Asia, the kingdom of Burma. It was the threat of Burma that in 1560 convinced Setthathirat to move his capital to Viang Chan. Before he did so, he built the most beautiful Buddhist temple surviving in Laos, Wat Xieng Thong. He also left behind the Pha Bang, and renamed Xiang Dong Xiang Thong Luang Prabang in its honour. With him he took what he believed to be an even more powerful Buddha image, the Pha Kaew, or Emerald Buddha, now in Bangkok. Other reasons for the move included population movements (both the Khorat Plateau and southern Laos were by then Lao) and to seek improved trade links.

Setthathirat was the greatest builder in Lao history. Not only did he construct or refurbish several monasteries in Luang Prabang, besides Wat Xieng Thong, but he also did the same in Viang Chan. His most important building projects, apart from a new palace on the banks of the Mekong, were the great That Luang stupa, a temple for the Emerald Buddha (Wat Pha Kaeo), and endowment of a number of royal temples in the vicinity of the palace.

The Burmese threat persisted, however. When a Burmese army approached Viang Chan, Setthathirat abandoned the city to mount guerrilla attacks on Burmese supply lines. When the Burmese were forced to withdraw, he returned to celebrate his victory by building yet another temple (Wat Mixai). Burmese hostility disrupted Lao trade routes, so Setthathirat led an expedition down the Mekong to open a new route through Cambodia. But the Cambodians objected. In a great battle the Lao were defeated, and in their chaotic retreat Setthathirat disappeared.

It was over 60 years before another great Lao king came to the throne, a period of division, succession disputes and intermittent Burmese domination. In 1638 Suriya Vongsa was crowned king. He would rule for 57 years, the longest reign in Lao history and the 'golden age' of the kingdom of Lan Xang. During this time, Lan Xang was a powerful kingdom, and Viang Chan was a great centre of Buddhist learning, attracting monks from all over mainland Southeast Asia.

Suriya Vongsa had only been on the throne three years when there arrived in Viang Chan the first European to have left an account of the Lao kingdom. He was a merchant by the name of Gerrit van Wuysthoff, an employee of the Dutch East India Company, who, like Setthathirat,

wanted to open a trade route down the Mekong. A year later the Jesuit missionary, Giovanni-Maria Leria, came to Laos and stayed in Viang Chan for five years. During that time he had singularly little success in converting anyone to Christianity, and eventually gave up in disgust. But he liked the Lao people, and has left a wonderful description of the royal palace and the houses of the nobility. He was also much impressed by the power of the king.

After Suriya Vongsa died in 1695 another succession dispute wracked the kingdom. This time the result was division of Lan Xang. First the ruler of Luang Prabang declared independence from Viang Chan, followed a few years later by Champasak in the south.

The once great kingdom of Lan Xang was thus fatally weakened. In its place were three (four with Xieng Khuang) weak regional kingdoms, none of which was able to withstand the growing power of the Tai-Syam kingdom of Ayutthaya. The Siamese were distracted, however, over the next half century by renewed threats from Burma. In the end Ayutthaya was taken and sacked by a Burmese army. Chiang Mai was already tributary to Burma, and Luang Prabang also paid tribute.

It did not take the Siamese long to recover, however. The inspiring leadership of a young military commander called Taksin, son of a Chinese father and a Siamese mother, rallied the Siamese and drove the Burmese out not just of central Siam, but from the north too. Chiang Mai became tributary to Siam. After organising his kingdom and building a new capital, Taksin sought new fields of conquest. The Lao kingdoms were obvious targets. By 1779 all three had surrendered to Siamese armies and accepted the suzerainty of Siam. The Emerald Buddha was carried off by the Siamese.

His success went to his head, however, and three years later Taksin, suffering delusions of spiritual grandeur, was deposed by his leading general. The new king, founder of the current Thai Chakri dynasty, titled himself Rama I. He too built a new palace and capital at Bangkok, and quickly consolidated his power over tributary rulers. All Lao kings had to be endorsed by their Siamese overlord before they could assume their thrones, and all had to present regular tribute to Bangkok.

The Lao chafed under these conditions. When Chao Anou succeeded his two older brothers on the throne of Viang Chan, he determined to assert Lao independence. First he made merit by endowing Buddhist monasteries and building his own temple (Wat Si Saket). Then in 1826 he

made his move, sending three armies down the Mekong and across the Khorat plateau. The Siamese were taken by surprise, but quickly rallied. Siamese armies drove the Lao back and seized Viang Chan. Chao Anou fled, but was captured when he tried to retake the city a year later. This time the Siamese were ruthless. Viang Chan was thoroughly sacked and its population resettled east of the Mekong. Only Wat Si Saket was spared. Chao Anou died a caged prisoner in Bangkok.

For the next 60 years the Lao meuang, from Champasak to Luang Prabang, were tributary to Siam. At first these two remaining small kingdoms retained a degree of independence, but increasingly they were brought under closer Siamese supervision. One reason for this was that Siam itself was threatened by a new power in the region and felt it had to consolidate its empire. The new power was France, which had declared a protectorate over most of Cambodia in 1863.

Four years later a French expedition sent to explore and map the Mekong River arrived in Luang Prabang, then the largest settlement upstream from Phnom Penh. In the 1880s the town became caught up in a struggle that pitted Siamese, French and roving bands of Chinese brigands (known as Haw) against each other. In 1887 Luang Prabang was looted and burned by a mixed force of Upland Tai and Haw. Only Wat Xieng Thong was spared. The king escaped downstream. With him was a French explorer named Auguste Pavie, who offered him the protection of France.

In the end French rule was imposed through gunboat diplomacy. In 1893 a French warship forced its way up the Menam River to Bangkok and trained its guns on the palace. Under duress, the Siamese agreed to transfer all territory east of the Mekong to France. So Laos became a French colony, with the kingdom of Luang Prabang as a protectorate and the rest of the country directly administered. The French rule until 1945.

History Lesson:

Tell the students that today, they will learn a little bit about ancient Lao history. Give each student a pencil and ask them to keep their books close. Ask them what do they know about Lao history before 1945 and record whatever they say on a poster board. Don't make a comment about anything they say, just write it down.

Once they are done, have them open their book to the Lao History section. Divide the kids into 4 groups and tell them that this is their team for the rest of the class. Give each group a sheet of paper, glue, and the bag of paper. Tell them that their job is to use the article to put the names of in chronological order. Once they think that they are done, they need to let you know so you can check. Once three groups are done, tell the kids that time is up. Go over the answers by asking each group to share what they have one at a time and correct them as needed. Make sure that the kids put all of their names on the paper for each group and collect it. **+++ Green group (youngest group) read through the whole article together and have them underline all of the names of the rulers as you pass them. Have kids take turn reading. This will help them when they put the names in order.**

Tell them that it is time to check what they learned about Lao history by scanning the text for the names. Give each group a dry eraser board and one dry eraser and a paper towel. Tell them that they will compete and see who will get the most points. Read each questions aloud. Tell them to raise their hands as soon as their group finds the answer. Keep score of which team got a point. If the team gets a wrong answer give another team a chance to answer the question. The team with the most questions answered wins. Go over what the students added to the poster board and address it. **+++ Green group- have this part as a group discussion for each question and call on the kids that know the answer. When they are done and if you have time, have them draw a picture of the gourd and what it would look like with all of those Tai coming out of there.**

Closing: Ask each student to tell you one thing that they learned that they did not already know from the lesson. It can't be the same answer that someone just gave you.

Questions:

1. Where did the Tai or original Lao people originated from? (Southern China)

2. What country ruled over Laos from 1893 to 1945? (France)
3. Who was the first person to unit most of Laos and called it Lan Xang? Chao Fa Ngum
4. What is the name of the Lao creation myth? (The story of Khun Borom)
5. Where was Laos first captial? (Luang Prabang or Xieng Dong Xieng thong)
6. Why was the capital moved to Vientiane?
7. Which king reign the longest in Laos? (Suriya Vongsa)
8. Where did Buddhism come from? (Cambodia, Fa Ngum introduced it because of his wife)
9. In what year did the Siames (Thailand) took over all three Lao kingdoms? (1779)
10. Who was known as the greatest builder in Lao history? (Setthathirat)

Answer key for chronological order

Fa Ngum

Samsenthai

Xainya Chakkaphat

King Visoun

Phothisarath

Setthathirat

Suriya Vongsa

Siam

Chao Anou

France