

IRIS Graduate Student Summer Fieldwork Award

Post Research Report

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Listening to the Rice Grow

“The Vietnamese plant rice, the Cambodians watch the Vietnamese planting rice, the Lao listen to the rice grow.”

The comment believed to be made by the French colonists of the past century placed Laos and Lao ethnic subjects at the bottommost in the hierarchy of productivity. This colonial representation further assumed that Laos and Lao people deserved to be colonized, conquered, developed, educated, and civilized. My research made possible by the support from IRIS Graduate Student Summer Fieldwork Award 2023 invalidated this colonial discourse.

My dissertation research, *Cross-border Lives of Magical Monks in 1941 – 1957 Mainland Southeast Asia*, attends to the contested coloniality the borderlanders had experienced. Therefore, the project scope covers extensive borderlands of the region but this past summer I was able to conduct my research in two key Lao-speaking sites: Ubon Ratchathani of Thailand and Vientiane of Lao PDR whose histories are intertwined. Both areas had been caught in the tug of war between the two empires: Siam (now Thailand) and France, from the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century.

My archival and field research from both regions yield rich histories and intellectual legacies that upturn the colonial impression of backwardness and low productivity assigned to these Lao ethnic areas. In Ubon Ratchathani, a Thai-Lao borderland, I was able to access the under-explored files of Nakhon Phanom. This collection by the Ministry of Interior of Thailand revealed a vivid picture and clear understanding of border regulations during 1941 – 1957. Noteworthy was that these files did not only capture the public events, but also included the lives

of the commoners along the borderlands. Thanks to the kind assistance of the archivists at the National Archives of Thailand (Ubon Ratchathani Branch), I was able to make a photocopy request of more than 3,000 pages from this collection. The information gained from this archive will certainly add a significant impact on my dissertation.

Not only insights from the archival documents, but I also had a chance to visit memorial sites of Buddhist magical monks. Ubon Ratchathani has been known as a large learning center of Buddhism and a homeland of one of the greatest monks of early modern Thailand, Ajahn Sao Kantasīlo (1859 – 1941). Ajahn Sao’s life exemplified a cross-border subject during high colonialism. His marvelous life ended in Laos when he slowly bowed his ailing body to pay respect to a Buddha image at a Lao monastery. Everywhere in Ubon Ratchathani, I was also able to see the prevailing presence of images of a pious student of Ajahn Sao, Ajahn Mun Bhuridatta (1870 – 1949) whose influence remains strong as a leader of an important lineage and prominent school of Thai meditation. With this impression, Ubon Ratchathani, as a Lao-dominant site, has never been a *tabula rasa* that fits colonial imaginaire of conquest over a void territory in order to implement their civilizing mission over the inert colonial subjects. Ubon Ratchathani, instead, represents a vibrancy of intellectual and spiritual productivity both prior to and after colonialism.

In Vientiane, the capital city of Lao PDR, I was able to access important resources and meet several of amazing interlocutors who kindly offered support for my dissertation research. At École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) – Vientiane Branch, the center director Michel Lorrillard, directed my attention toward a Lao manuscript that documented the experiences of people living under contested coloniality at the turn of twentieth century. This will serve as a great reference for my study of people living with multiple colonialities during 1941 – 1957 when the borderlanders of Mainland Southeast Asia had witnessed the competition between the French, the Thai, and the Japanese dominations.

At the National Library of Laos, the librarians kindly opened the Indochine Room for me to explore the rare colonial collections. I was able to see the civic records during 1941 – 1957, with the fine-grained details of individuals working for the French bureaucracy in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Most importantly, I was able to meet a celebrated Lao poet, Douangdeuane Bounyavong, at her home learning center, “Land of Bamboo,” located at the outskirts of the capital. There she allowed me to see the collection of her father, Maha Sila

Viravong (1905 – 1987) who has been regarded as the most significant intellectual of modern Laos. This private library provided me the exciting information from the books published during 1941 – 1957. I was also able to conduct oral history interview with Douangdeuane who shared with me invaluable accounts of cross-border life experience of her father, the dedicated role of her mother in saving this rare collection heritage from wars and natural disasters as well as the comprehensive context of Lao Buddhism under colonialism.

Last but not least, I was fortunate to participate in the commemoration ceremony of the tenth-year anniversary passing of Venerable Sālī Kantasīlo (1933 – 2013). Venerable Sālī also represents a cross-border life during multiple colonialities. He has immeasurable contribution to the revival of Lao Buddhism after the revolution in 1975. I also had a chance to talk to some leading monks in the Lao Sangha order who shared with me moving insights on Lao Buddhism both during and after colonial periods. This research trip was truly an eye-opening journey for me to see a complete opposite from the French colonial claim that painted an incorrect image of the indigenous people they colonized.

My deliberation on this colonial discourse eventually culminated in a Vat (Buddhist temple) adjacent to where I stayed in Vientiane. I was struck by a scene of Buddhist decorative art over the front panel of a vihara (hall). It narrated the story of after six years of experiments and trials to find the ultimate peace and wisdom, the soon-to-be-Buddha in his fasting practice laid down his body in the resting position, presumably from unbearable exhaustion. At the very moment Indra (a heavenly deity) entered a scene, playing a mandolin on three different string types: one loosely tuned, one tight, and one balanced. Listening to three differing melodies, the Buddha-to-be came to realize the perfect pitch was only possible from the balanced, hence the “Middle Way” he needed to undertake. He found the right balance from changing his mindset and method. My new take from “listening to the rice grow” was thereby informed by this inspirational scene. One needs to be in an advanced stage of mind and has adequate sensibility to grasp the acoustic growth of rice. The Lao speaking areas where I conducted my research this past summer affirmed this revisit of the colonial stereotypical image of the colonies. With the generous support from IRIS Graduate Student Summer Fieldwork Award, I was able to learn how to listen sensitively to the rice grow, by tuning in my sensorial perceptions to the right balance in order to perceive the intellectual vibration of Laos and Lao people. My interlocutors

in Ubon Ratchathani and Vientiane played a vital role in teaching me how to be a deep listener. This research trip has thus marked a crucial milestone in my dissertation research and offered an important life-learning experience. I am profoundly grateful.



Reclining Buddha-to-be listening to the melodies of Indra at Vat Ban Fai, Vientiane
(picture by the author)