

# Rebellion in Laos

**Peasant and Politics  
in a Colonial Backwater**

**Geoffrey C. Gunn**



**White Lotus**



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Geoffrey C. Gunn



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**Front cover picture:** Lao prisoners after an attack  
on a (French) poste (*l'Illustration* Aug. 1902)

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## Glossary of Foreign Words

- ban (L), village  
bao (L), entourage  
boun (L), fête  
chaufa (H), messiah  
chau (V), political division  
chaomuong (L), lord  
chaosivit (L), lord of lives  
Hosenam (Senam) Luong (L), King's Council  
Isan (L), northeast (of Thailand)  
khene (L), flute  
khoueng (L), province  
kong (L), district  
kounan (L), intendant for the preparation of festivals  
kha (L), slave  
khabot (L&K), traitor/rebels  
lam (Kouan& haou, van) (L), tribal intermediary  
Lao Loum (L), lowland Lao  
moi (V), slave  
muong (L), circumscription (province)  
malalecs (L), partisans  
naa (L), rice-fields  
nong hoi (V), peasantry  
phi (L), spirit  
phoa thay (M), king  
phou (L), mountain  
phu mi boun (L), men with merit  
pia, measure (of opium)

phnong (K), slave  
pongsawadan (L), Lao Royal chronicles  
phuwiset (L), man claiming supernatural powers  
ray (L), swidden  
sou khoun (baci) (L), calling of spirits  
suan (L), kitchen gardens  
sala (L), rest house  
sadet (L), king  
sin (L), Lao skirt  
sakdina (T), feudal  
tasseng (L), canton  
that (L), reliquary  
taliois (L), partisans  
wat (L), temple

(L) = Lao      (T) = Thai      (H) = Hmong  
(V) = Vietnamese      (K) = Khmer

## Preface

A study in historical anthropology, this work focuses on the world historical incorporation of Laos into a colonial capitalist system of surplus accumulation. In so doing, new light is brought to bear upon the non-rebellious and, especially, rebellious responses of the majority (Lao) and minority (montagnard) population of that country, at least as determined by a scrutiny of largely archival-based sources. The approach taken is to combine a general world-systems analysis with a concern for the non-economic, moral, and ideological forms of colonial and "feudal" domination.

In Part One, we address the question of the political and economic incorporation of Laos into a global world-system. We then turn to an explanation of the system of colonial monopolies, the labor process, and the colonial tax structure. In Part Two we turn to the phenomenon of the non-revolt of the Lao, but to challenge the conventional view that the Lao willingly acquiesced in the colonial system of rule and domination. To this end, we outline the complex relationship between tributary and local power in Laos, as well as seeking to establish objective indicators of the Lao peasant condition. Proceeding from this foundation we can identify interventionist strategies brought to play by the colonial state in order to stave off the economic and "political" crisis of the early 1930s. In Part Three we turn to the minority revolts which sundered the *paix française* for the duration of the colonial epoch in Laos and the montagnards of southern Laos carry strong overtones of millenarianism, the major leitmotif that connected the different groups through the decades, it is argued, was the anti-colonial, anti-tax and anti-corvée dimensions of their protest.

The importance of our findings, then, reveal the degree to which the minority population of Laos was “prepared” during the colonial epoch by its experience of capitalism, however incipient, for the revolutionary sequels of the late 1940s down to “liberation” in 1975.

Geoffrey C. Gunn

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# Introduction

No longer is it possible to take seriously the view that the peasant is an "object of history" a form of social life over which historical changes pass but which contributes nothing to the impetus of these changes.

(Barrington Moore Jr. 1966:453).

The history of these [African] peasant societies is that of an uninterrupted series of revolts against the domination of capital: resistance to conquest, to administrative machinery, to its forced requirements (corvées) and its taxes, massive uprisings whenever the peasants feel the ability of urban capital to operate in the countryside is weakening...

(Samir Amin 1977:152).

This book is a study of two interconnected themes. These are, first, the incorporation of Laos into a colonial-capitalist system of surplus accumulation and, second, the rebellious and non-rebellious responses of the majority and, particularly, the minority peasantry of that country to fundamental changes in their moral, social, political and economic order. Both areas of exploration, we will show, are explainable with reference to the general phenomenon of world-historical expansion.

Thematically, the subject of this work is that of a tax engendered revolt by the minority montagnard population of French Laos who

were thrust with dramatic speed into the colonial capitalist orbit. The various responses of these people to the confrontation with outsiders, was not necessarily a concomitant of total backwardness nor messianism—although this was also involved—but arose in opposition to exploitative capitalist social relations, displacement, and disarticulation. We will further argue that while class relations did not develop in Laos or especially in the montagnard environment in a way analogous to that of the commercial and industrial enclaves of Indochina, namely Tonkin and Cochinchina, the overall dissolution effect engendered by the colonial tax, *corvée*, and *prestation* (labor due) system was much more dislocative of traditional social relations in this backwater than has hitherto been appreciated. The otherwise unexplained phenomenon of the majority participation of these hill people in a modern movement for social and especially national liberation under the banner of the Pathet Lao movement and under the nominal (?) urban working class leadership is brought into perspective.

One of the central issues in the study of the colonial and post-colonial peripheries has been to establish the way peasants react to wide-sweeping changes in their familiar political, economic, moral and social settings. By the early 1950s, modernization theorists began to question the value of the hitherto static notions of anthropologists who focused their attention, albeit descriptively, on such part-societies as tribe, clan, and lineage. For modernization theorists who were concerned with the so-called transition from tradition to modernity or development on a national scale, the process of development in the colonial and post-colonial periphery was seen as following a similar trajectory of growth as that taken by the developed world. However, the theoretical foundations of the belief that the processes of social change are endogenous in the periphery came to be challenged in the early 1970s by varieties of dependency theory approaches. The new approach which emphasized uneven

development on a world stage challenged the modernization approach as a-historical and theoretically underdeveloped. Frank and Amin were representative of such theorists. Similarly Immanuel Wallerstein revealed in the mid-1970s, little work had been done on the processes that made it possible for the capitalist world-system to incorporate the non-capitalist social system. A similar concern that local level economic processes or part systems should be viewed as aspects of the world-system has been displayed by the Fernand Braudel Center in the 1980s via the pages of its publication, *Review*.

More recently, however, a separate body of literature has emerged which harks back to classical Marxist statements on capitalist accumulation on a world scale and thus posits a corrective to the dependencia theory. Thus while the dependencia theory posits a relationship of domination and dependency between a core and a periphery, between a metropole and a satellite (ie., world-system versus a nation-state as the unit of analysis), the new ascendant "industrialization" theory concentrates directly on the relations of production under imperialism and focuses on class structure and social classes engaged in class struggle. In contrast to the dependencia theory argument which states that imperialism blocks capitalist development in the periphery, the "industrialization" theory suggests rather that during the period of the industrialization of the peripheral areas of the world, imperialist expansion actually helps towards the industrialization of the peripheral regions of the world capitalist system (cf. Berberuglu 1984).

Clearly, while the political implications of these variant readings of Marx and Lenin on the historical underdevelopment of peripheral societies are fundamental to the debate, one of our concerns in this monograph is to critically enter the literature on the incorporationist process. In so doing, we limit our area of focus to a case study of the initial imperialist intervention in an erstwhile colonial backwater, that of French Laos. The period is from 1896 to 1945 or from the

outset of direct colonial rule to the eclipse of French power at the hands of their inter-imperialist rivals, the Japanese. But aside from the central concern in development studies of whether or not development took place in the colonial or neo-colonial era is the salient question of what were the modes and mechanisms of imperialist domination in the economic spheres? What was the linkage between the subordination of the population to metropolitan capital and the development of a peasant and working class consciousness of its oppression at either a communitarian level or at a class level?

Developing as an aspect of the dependency debate, a new theoretical framework for an understanding of Third World peasants has emerged. Central to the "new" anthropology, and in contrast to the old "descriptive" anthropology it replaces, according to the Malaysian anthropologist, Zawawi, is a concern to delineate the structural relationship of Third World peasants to capitalism during different phases of imperialist contact (Zawawi 1983:198). He further points out that this New Economic Anthropology, with its emphasis on underlying structural changes and transformations, gives little consideration to the formulation of an integrated framework to explain changes, continuity and variations at the level of consciousness or ideology, ie. how peasant actors become ideologically reconstituted as subjects and placed in structure by capitalism (Zawawi 1983:206). Notable exceptions to the neglect of the question of superstructure include Godelier (1977); Kahn (1980); and Scott (1985). Arguably, the latter, more than any other scholar, has laid the groundwork for a treatment of the question of peasant ideology and consciousness. But, Zawawi underscores, the task of synthesizing Scott's emphasis with the "new" theoretical framework has yet to be undertaken (Zawawi 1983:201). The matter has also been expressed succinctly by Werner in the preface to her study on the Cao Dai in Vietnam. The Vietnam area, she notes, has become a rich testing ground for both imperialism theories and peasant studies,

inquiries only marginal to the old modernization paradigms (Werner 1981:2).<sup>1</sup>

Theoretically, what is at issue here, as the anthropologist Joel Kahn found in his study of Minangkabau social formations, is to determine "those features of the local economy which are externally and those which are internally generated..." This arises out of the recent debate within a debate between world-system theorists (Wallerstein) and those who advocate a concept of articulation of modes of production (Rey; Kahn). The set of theses or theoretical prerequisites set out by J. G. Taylor for an analysis of Third World Formations is apposite here. As opposed to functionalist notions of development or underdevelopment, he argues, the problem must be analyzed from within historical materialism. A Third World Formation, he contends, can be seen as "being structured (or determined in the last instance) by an articulation which is produced largely as an effect of imperialist penetration." This articulation involves at least two modes of production; a capitalist and a non-capitalist mode, in which "the former is, or is becoming, increasingly dominant over the other" (Taylor 1983:102-3). Further, he theorizes, the division of labor and the restricted and uneven development produced by imperialist penetration establishes the material basis for a class structure specific to these formations. Moreover, "Imperialist penetration attempts to guarantee the reproduction of its restricted and uneven development through the promotion of political alliances representing its economic class supports. Yet, this in itself, is insufficient, since it also requires an ideological guarantee" (Taylor 1993:102-3). Thus, in this work, we are concerned not only with the Marxist ideas of modes of production, social formation, relations of production and value as they relate to a concrete historio-specific situation, but with the general problem of underdevelopment, domination and peasant responses to imperialist intervention. Not only does this bring us to the

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