

Scott Kloeck-Jenson International Pre-Dissertation Travel Fellowship (2011)
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This past summer my research into ancient and early modern Lao history was greatly advanced by an intensive period of study. I learned the tools necessary for my future historical research projects. I deepened my contacts among the intellectual, scholarly community in the capital, who have afforded me such vital exchanges and furthered my own understandings about the country. All of this has been critical for my dissertation proposal – what I learned this summer has made me rethink my research design and challenged me to improve the weaker points. I am truly grateful to have been presented with this wonderful opportunity, and I can only hope the results will show it was worth it.

My travel plans were fairly straightforward and I had no complications in this area. I did seize the opportunity to take a train from the central station in Bangkok to the Lao border. Scenic views of rural northeastern Thailand were an appropriate backdrop for a travel from Thai to Lao spaces, which are often blurred outside of Bangkok. A friend I had met in the previous summer picked me up at the border and I enjoyed switching from Thai language to Lao. It was a thrilling experience to be back in Laos!

I spent the next two months in the city of Vientiane, which is the national capital. Even though I was only away for a year, many things had changed there since then. There were many new buildings and the street traffic was more chaotic than ever, which shows how much the country has grown since most traffic was bicycles and motorbikes in the early 1990s. Since I had been away the city celebrated its 450th anniversary, and also erected a statue to the last king of the city, Chao Anou, who died fighting against the Thai in 1828. His statue now stands pointing at modern Thailand, which is as ambiguous a statement as any coming from a communist government and pointing to its biggest trade partner. One thing certain is that the government's new fondness for historical milestones is here to stay. I found accommodations a short walk from the National Library (my research site) and the Mekong River. The previous year I had lived in the outskirts, but now I was living in the heart of downtown. I did have some trouble finding the small markets that are best to get local food at, but I prevailed in the end.

Once I had arrived, I set to work on my research agenda for the trip. My goal was to sufficiently learn the Tham script to enable my future dissertation work, and secondarily to find as many interesting and relevant items in the archives to advance the project in its current form. However I found at the National Library that the Director, Mr. Bounleurth Thammachack had been taken ill since early May. It was a stark reminder to me of what his generation represented, as there are very few who would be able to fill in if he had to retire. Mr. Thongsuey Outhumphon, who had been my teacher last year, was quick to take me as his student again. He was ethnically Tai-Lue, and not only was he expert at reading the ancient manuscripts, but he also was a wicked musician on the traditional Khaen instrument (a type of bamboo reed instrument that sounds somewhat similar to a bag pipe). It was mainly through Mr. Thongsuey's dedicated work with me each day that I achieved as much as I had. I became very close to him over the ensuing months and shared long talks over family, life and sports.

I was able to find a number of interesting things in the Vientiane archives. The most surprising, unexpected thing I found was that the manuscripts I read had a lot of elements which I had thought were characteristic of “Thai” language. Certain phrases and even numerals appeared in Lao texts from the 19th century. This could be a result of the times in which the documents were written, which was after the destruction of Vientiane and the projection of Thai military power into the area. Many educated monks even went to study in Bangkok, which may explain Thai language creeping into what are basically religious documents perpetuated by the Lao Buddhist Order of Monks. Alternatively it could just mean that my idea of “Lao” language does not match with the evidence.

Being in the city of Vientiane it should come as no surprise that I read a lot of local chronicles about the area. I had previously focused my work more fully on the north, centered at Luang Phrabang. I would have chosen different texts as a result, but my goal was to read as many different and challenging scripts as I could find to make future research easy by comparison. So it was that I happened to read one of the oldest and hardest chronicles in the archive. It was a very old copy of the Khun Borom legend from Luang Phrabang. It was supposed to be several centuries old, however there is not yet a scientific dating system.

Probably the most interesting text was the last one I had a chance to work for the trip. I unfortunately did not have time to finish reading it. I was only able to read a small part of it. The subject of the untitled text was the infamous Chao Anou war, which continues to be controversial. My teacher told me himself it was a sensitive document. It was not actually kept at the library, but my teacher kept it at his home for the time being (it also had no tag which all the others did, so maybe not yet catalogued either). From what I had read, it talked of French battles with the Thai along the Mekong, the execution of a Lao king, who betrayed Anou, by Vietnam, and Chinese bandits in the area. This was one of the central texts which convinced me to look again at the 19th century and rethink my project’s orientation in an earlier period.

My normal work schedule was 9am to 4pm at the Library. After hours I studied with a great polymath intellectual named Bounthanh Phongphichid who is an author, translator, publisher, movie director and scholar. He was actually supposed to teach Lao at UW-M this summer, but the arrangement fell through. With him I worked specifically with modern Lao fiction. I have never read so much Lao literature as I did working with him. This method really improved my reading. Plus, I watched some Lao videos, which are pretty rare.

I did face some challenges during this trip. I fell ill when I first arrived which was a frustrating delay to the start of my work. I also had an issue arrive with a staff member at the library two weeks before I was to leave. Due to the sensitive nature of the issue I won’t go into details, but I feel that I did the best under the circumstances. I had assistance from some UW professors, as well as an Englishman who worked at a nearby German-Lao program.

All in all, it was a great trip that really set up my dissertation research very nicely. Thank you!