

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter comprises of general historical background of Laos and the previous studies of related topics.

2.1 History of Laos

Laos had long been under foreign subjugation. Around 700-1253, the Ai-Lao or the ancestor of Lao people was a tribe living in the area known as Nongse which is located on the right bank of the Mekong. Around 1254, the invasion by a Mongul troop ruled by the Yuan dynasty of China forced the Laotians to move southwards from Southern China to the present area of Laos. At that time, the area of Laos was controlled by a Khmer empire. However, the territory was granted to the Lao people after a Lao prince married to the Khmer princess. In 1779, three kingdoms of Laos, Laung Prabang, Vientiane and Jampasak, fell under a Siamese seizure. To prevent the recovery of power, Siam burns Vientiane, the capital of Laos in 1828. Ubol Limsuwan asserts in *“Lao” in the Vision of Rulers in the Ratakosin Period, 1782-1910* (1994) that during the Siam colonial period, Lao people were treated in a friendly way, though as inferior and dependent subjects. However, when Laos became a French colony, the Siamese’s feeling towards Lao people was shifted to that of hatred.

Unlike the Siamese who required only tribute and goods from the land they conquered, the French colonizer re-structured its colonies to be a part of the French union. For Lao people, the French colonization is not productive experience as once the French found that they can not navigate along the Mekong River to China, they just stop building the country. According to Rakow, During the French colonial period, France ruled Laos almost indirectly (Rakow, 88). However, they had imposed direct administration on Laos by organizing six ministries which were Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Construction, Ministry of Forestry and Water Supply, Ministry of Justice, and Ministry of Taxes. The highest position that the

indigenous Laos could hold were that of primary teachers or interpreters. France established the first French school in Luang Prabang in 1896. During that time, those who wanted to further their studies had to go to Hanoi or Paris. The highest education institute during the French colonial period was College de Pavie which provided preparation courses for the university in Hanoi. However, the education provided was available in the cities only (Cha-umpol, 14).

During the World War II, the French took measures to resist the Pan-Thai homeland by the Thai government calling the return of areas formerly ruled by Siam by promoting Lao culture and Nationalism. According to Rakow, this was the renaissance of the Lao cultural movement as Lao music, dances, drama and literature was planted in young Laotian minds. A few years later in March 1945, the Japanese troop overthrew the French colonial government. However, after the defect of the Japanese in August 1945, Prince Phetsarath, the former viceroy and the former prime minister of Laos tried to convince the King to unify the country and declare that the treaty of the French Protectorate invalid because the French failed to protect the Lao from either the Thai or the Japanese. However, the King said he prefer to resume the former status as a French colony. In 1946, the French returned to Laos in force with the attempt of constituting “autonomy” for Laotian within the French Union. (Rakow, 96-99).

Since the independence in 1954 from the first Geneva accord, the identity of Lao is still unstable as the political regime was polarized into two sides: democratic or the royal Lao government and communist or the Pathet Lao force. The main conflict between these two sides is that the communist side does not accept the result of the vote. In “Laos and Laotians”, Meg Regina Rakow asserts that the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was accused of distributing bags of money to buy votes (Rakow, 118). The second Geneva conference, held in 1961-62, provided for the independence and neutrality of Laos. Soon after the accord is reached, the signatories accused each other of violating the terms of the agreement, and with superpower support on both sides, a civil war soon resumed. Although Laos was supposed to be neutral, the growing American and North Vietnamese military presence in the country increasingly drew Laos into the second Indochina war (1954-75).

For nearly a decade, Laos was subjected to extremely heavy bombing as the

U.S. sought to destroy the portion of the Ho Chi Minh Trail that past through eastern Laos (<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2770.htm>). In the intervening process of the Laos's affair by the American army, Laotian society was intoxicated by such "vices" as casino, brothels, and smuggling. When the communist party gained victory in 1970 and the foreign forces had left, negative effects caused by foreign influences such as the concept of materialism, declining in morality, and corruption remained ubiquitously (Cha-umpol, 14).

In *Glasnost-Perestroika: Gorbachev's revolution*, Associate Professor Pathumporn Watcharasatian asserts that Communism in Indo-China regions is Indigenous Communism which developed independently out of the control of the Soviet Union (11). While adopting Socialism, Laos did not embrace Marxism-Leninism which was spreading in Eastern Europe and Soviet Union. According to Marx, the emancipation of the laborers in the factories as working class must be done by the laborers themselves, not from the communist elites or communist leaders. Marx did not as they believe that peasants cannot create socialist society. Therefore, the socialist struggle focused on labor in the industrial sector. Moreover, Marx and Lenin regard that socialist society should be created in the universal scale. On the contrary, Laos embraces Stalinism-Maoism and followed in the leader's dogma. Stalin and Mao believe that peasants are the major force in creating socialist society, and that socialist society can be created in domestic scale.

The Lao Peoples Democratic Republic was officially announced on December 2, 1975 after King Sawangwatthana had been abdicated one day earlier. Following the establishment of a communist state, tens of thousands of people were detained for re-education without charge or trial, some of them for more than a decade, in extremely harsh conditions. An unknown number of people died while in such detention, with unconfirmed reports of the killing of some, including members of the former royal family. Tens of thousands of others fled the country as refugees (<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa260042002>). In November 1986 Kaysone Pomphan, the president of Laos, implemented the New Economic Mechanism, or a market reform resulting in less government interfere in the people's lives.

In the late 1980s, Lao refugees returned from Thailand after the government

ties between the two countries improved. Diplomatic relations were re-established with the US in 1992. Assistant Professor Dr. Chatri Rutarom, a political scientist at Chulalongkorn University, contends in *Nayobai Tangpaited Kong Soviet (Soviet foreign policy) 1945-1990* that President Gorbachev of Soviet Union officially declared the “New Thinking” known as Glasnost- Perestroika (The opening and the restructuring) in 1986 because of economic stagnancy (Rutarom, 322-233). Many socialist countries, in consequence, had adopted this policy after the collapse of Soviet Union in 1990. Laos Peoples Democratic Republic is one of the socialist countries that adopted this policy. In 1986, The Lao Peoples Democratic Republic officially declares the “New-Thinking Policy”. Its 15th August 1991’s constitution, for instance, ensures foreign investment. By adopting “New Thinking” policy, tremendous changes have been introduced to Lao society.

In 1990, all supports from Russia were completely terminated. In 1997 Laos eventually became a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. At present, Laos or The Lao Peoples Democratic Republic makes up of 16 provinces and one prefecture. According the American government’s website (<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2770.htm>), Laos has only one legal party which is Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) Although its government is socialist under the Lao revolution Party and the economic of Laos, many laws have been changed to facilitate the private sector. Agriculture still accounts for half of its GDP and provides 80% of total employment (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laos>).

2.2 Previous Studies

It can be summarized briefly that previous studies seem to fall into two categories. One is literary works as social reflection, and the latter is literary works as a discourse. The first group of study comprises of Sangkapantanont’s article entitled “The Face of Contemporary Laotian Short Stories” (1987), Promchitta’s Master of Arts degree thesis on *The Development of Lao Short Story: Its Relations to Society* (1998) and Department of Thai, Khon Kaen University’s research on *The relationship between Lao Literary Works and Lao Society* (2004).

The second group considers literary works as a discourse comprises of Panita Sarawasee's MA thesis, *Social Viewpoints and Concepts in Lao S.E.A Write Award Literature from 1998-2002* (2003) and Methinee Cha-Umpol's MA thesis, *Social Viewpoints and Concepts in Lao S.E.A Write Award Literature from 1998-2002* (2004). both of which were submitted to Regional Studies Department, Chiang Mai University. The last study in this group is *The Identities and Worldviews of Thai and Laos from Primary School Textbooks* (2005) by Supaporn Kongsirirat.

In "The Face of Contemporary Laotian Short Stories", Assistant Professor Tanya Sangkapantanont argues that the genesis of Laotian short stories began in Anti-Western Imperialism period from the Lao Issara's side. At that time, literature was used as a tool to establish Nationalist and Resistance discourse. Sangkapantanont contends that there are three periods of Laotian short stories; Pre-Liberation period, Post-Liberation period and New-Thinking Period. Sangkapantanont claims that short stories in Pre-Liberation period are mainly about Patriotism. In Post-Liberation period, writers had to comply with the Party's policy. The only one aspect approved by the government which was the positive image of proletariat society. In the New-Thinking Period, Sangkapantanont asserts that Laotian writers had more opportunity to be exposed to more social dimensions through the literature.

As most writers would avoid direct social criticism, Sangkapantanont only makes an observation on three writers namely, Saisuwan Phengphong, Bountanong Chomchaipon and Outhine Bounyavong. According to Sangkapantanont, Saisuwan uses satire artistically, which softens his criticism. In "Kwai Duay San", Sangkapantanont argues that it is merely biographical description of the author. Sangkapantanont comments that Saisuwan does not agree with the bureaucratic custom which does not consider the appropriation of the order. For Bountanong's short stories, Sangkapantanont contends that most of the themes criticize emerging consumerism in Laos. However, this study is totally different from Sangkapantanont's work as this study would not limit an interpretation on fallacy of the author's intention. On the contrary, this study would look as the short stories as the "texts".

In *The Development of Lao Short Story: Its Relation to Society* submitted to the Comparative Literature Department, Chulalongkorn University, Viyada Promchitta portrays how Laotian short stories have been developed. She has chooses

146 short stories to be the object of her study. In her study, Promchitta chronologically demarcates the period of Laos short story into four periods which are 1. The beginning of Lao short story (1893-1964) 2. The period between 1965 to 1975 3. The period between 1976-1987 4. The period from 1988-1997. Promchitta finds the beginning period of Laotian short stories based on realistic tradition reflecting the Laotian society from the time under the French colonization until the advent of the United States in the Indo-China war. Laotian short story writers in the beginning period are primarily women who explain the role of female characters in Laos' society. For the second period, the themes of the short stories were polarized because of the different political territories. The short stories written in the Kingdom territory's themes were based on the criticism of corruptions, capital-bound immigration and problems resulting from change in values. The ones written in the liberated territory present similar problems while the Kingdom territory writers merely represent them; the authors of the liberated territory imply the desired political policies and proper ways of solving those problems. From 1976 to 1987, the trend of the liberated zone becomes the mainstream of the Lao society. Its themes are an important tool for introducing political concepts, painting the picture of new desirable societies and campaigning for the government support. Moreover, some short stories present the conflict between the individual and society. In the last period during 1988-1997, the Laotian short story shifted from the socialist realistic genre in its phase to more globalized themes. Laotian short story writers became more individualized and critical of socialist policies than their counterparts of the previous stages.

The research entitled *The relationship between Lao Literary Works and Lao Society*, the research covers Lao folksongs, folktales, poetry as well as short stories published in 1997-2002. In Lao folksongs, the main contents can be divided into six categories:

1. Love songs
2. Songs of important events and places
3. Songs of livelihood and career
4. Songs of social values and etiquettes
5. Songs of beliefs and religions
6. Songs of social changes

The research argues that Lao folksongs were vehemently influenced by Thai songs in terms of styles. This influence causes changes in accent and the use of vocabularies among teenagers. For Lao folktales, the research covers the analysis of 31 folksongs and divides the tales into five categories:

1. Humoristic tales
2. Fantasy tales
3. Mythology tales
4. Animal tales
5. Local tales

The research finds that Lao folktales were orally rendered from generations to generations. However, the tales were published after Laos gained independence. The research argues that the Lao folktales reflect four aspects of Lao society. First of all, Lao society is agrarian society. Secondly, Lao society highly values monogamy. Thirdly, Lao society highly values the concept of the proper lady. Lastly, Lao society believes in the Buddhist doctrine.

For Lao poetry, the research argues that most themes are didactic style. The themes of livelihood, diligence, refrain from drugs and alcoholic drinks as well as prevention of AIDS are presented. In the theme of career, the roles of government officers, teachers and farmers are discussed. Lao poetry extends to the themes of religion, love, politics, geography, and social values.

For Lao short stories, the research claims that not only did the number of the short stories publication increase tremendously during 1970-1975 in the liberated territory, the quality of the works also improved. The research argues that the tone of voice and the attitude of Bountanong Chomchaipon are different from those of other contemporary writers in term of changes in the society. The research claims that Lao Identity was greatly affected by development and international relationship. The research suggests that after the year 2000, the impact of globalization has changed Lao society structurally. Furthermore, ideology and narratives styles also changed. In other words, the theme of the stories totally shifts from the revolutionary frame.

In *Social Viewpoints and Concepts in Lao S.E.A Write Award Literature from 1998-2002*, Sarawasee compiles and analyzes 50 pieces of primary sources in Lao language. She asserts that People Republic Party aims to promote Nation's unity and

equality among different ethnic groups. In creating the National Consciousness, the government employs media, monuments, museums and rituals as instruments to recall the sense of Laoness. By the time the Soviet Union enforced “the New-Thinking” concept, the Lao curriculum had to comply with the New Economic Mechanism policy resulting in textbooks’ revision. National culture which was kept dormant while the country was newly changed to socialist was retrieved, especially Buddhism.

Meanwhile, Sarawasee claims that Laos’ authority tried to differentiate their Laotian Identity from Thai Identity. The most outstanding attempt is the language restoration. To make a distinction of Laotian Identity, Laos abolished the use of “ຳ”. All words which used to be spelled with “ຳ” (r) have to be respelled with “າ” (l). Moreover, Laos also regulated the dress code for women to dress with *Pasin*, Lao traditional skirt, in public areas. For national identity, when Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Laos decreed its first constitution, and changed the symbol of the nation from the sickle to the Tatlaung, a grand pagoda in Vientiane.

In *Social Viewpoints and Concepts in Lao S.E.A Write Award Literature from 1998-2002* Cha-Umpol studies the link between the concept and value in the Lao award SEA write literature. In her study, Cha-umpol covered five different writers who were awarded S.E.A Write award from 1998-2002, namely, Dr. Thongkam On-maneeorn from Poetry collection, *Nam Ta Mae* (1998), Chanti Deungsawan from the short story collection, *Kang Kung Nai Pa Luk* (1999), Suwanthong Buppanuwong from short story collection *Song Aiu Noy* (2000), Somsri Dechakamphu from the poetry collection *Liao Lang Beng Na* (2001), and Viset Sawangsusa from the Novel *Nok Aiang Kee Kway* (2002).

Cha-umpol asserts that these five writers use materials from the situation in 1950-1980. As the ideology of the short stories is overwhelmingly based on the socialist ideology which is only one ideology that was approved by Laos’s government, most themes suggest the failure of capitalism and consumerism. She concludes that the main theme of these 5 consecutive years rely on history and revolution of Laos reflecting the fragmentation of the country caused by war, xenophobia, and the longing for nation pride.

In her findings, Cha-umpol argues that the genesis of Laos short story started almost 100 years later than that of other Southeast Asian countries. All the works that were awarded reflect the social problems occurring in 1950-1980. She concludes that all the awarded works are the Socialist Realism sharing the common ideology approved by Laos's government. She remarks that the social viewpoints portrayed in most works are narrowly limited to the policy of the socialist party. As a result, the reason that many interesting literary works discussing the social problems were not awarded is because the authors wrote about government's incompetence.

In 2005, Supaporn Kongsirirat conducts a research entitled *The Identities and Worldviews of Thai and Laos from Primary School Textbooks* for the Department of Thai at Naresuan University. In this study, Kongsirirat uses Anthropological approach to compare five Primary School textbooks of Laos and twelve Primary School textbooks of Thailand to find out the main characteristics of each nation. Kongsirirat argues that in both countries' Primary School textbooks repeatedly emphasize the strategy of implementing "national consciousness" into the children's mind. She also asserts that ethnic diversity is not the barrier of sharing the same identity.

In her findings, she argues that Primary school textbooks of Laos contains ten outstanding characteristics namely; harmony, pride of nation, pride of government and its leader, hygiene, obedience to the elderly, sense of responsibility, sense of gratitude, generosity, sense of order, sense of perseverance as well as pride of art and culture. Meanwhile, the main characteristics of Thailand are also pride of nation. Besides, there are attachment to the democratic monarchy, modernity, environmentally friendliness, business expertise, generosity, sense of responsibility, as well as awareness of education and honesty. She concludes that Thai identity portrayed in the textbooks is somehow ambiguous and lacks clarity.