

A State of Uncertainty: Interpretations of Forests and Wildlife in Laos

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PhD Thesis Abstract

A State of Uncertainty: Interpretations of Forests and Wildlife in Laos explores understandings of forest resources in contemporary Laos as a means to study the state. Through fieldwork with government officials, villagers and international organisations this research comprehends the political significance of discourses surrounding forests and wildlife. Notably, the state is approached from the viewpoint of those outside as well as those inside the bureaucracy, and also with consideration of the intersection between local, national, regional and international interests.

Internationally, common representations of the Lao state emphasise either progress or failure. A focus on the alternative notion of potentiality broadens the view beyond these absolute judgments and draws attention to local views of the state. This thesis contends that an informed understanding of the state can only be achieved when strategies of government are considered along with local notions of what constitutes legitimate or illegitimate authority. Worldviews, as historically embedded conceptual frameworks that help interpret life experiences, provide a means to understand such local interpretations of the state.

A key aspect of this study is the focus on Tai worldviews, namely, the *muang – paa* dialectic, a contrast between the wild forest and civilised settlements. The *muang – paa* dialectic provides clear conceptual links between forest resources and the Lao state. Local interpretations suggest that use of forests and wildlife represents the harnessing of the potential of the *paa*, and is thus a sign of development, desired social transformation and righteous authority. Yet resource decline without recompense in the form of prosperity is a sign of unworthy authority. Forests and wildlife thus form a potent medium for the expression of political statements in a context where direct and open articulation is greatly restricted.

State authority in contemporary Laos is based on the potential to grant future prosperity – its uncertainty conveys both allure and caution. Heightened ambiguity is crucial for Tai worldviews to support perceptions of state authority since uncertainty

allows the Lao state to assert its as yet unrealised potentiality. Yet this process is far from being an uncontested exercise of state hegemony. Ambiguity in Tai worldviews also opens the door to divergent interpretations that suggest illegitimate authority, and thus provides a unique means for people to comment on the Lao state.

Numerous studies have used forest resources as a means to understand the social processes that constitute the state, however this has usually been with a focus on the material dimensions of forests. Furthermore, the symbolic potency of animals, and particularly wild forest-dwelling animals, is not a common feature in political studies of the state. The significance of forests and wildlife in Tai worldviews means that these resources link material concerns about everyday life to the symbolic legitimacy of the Lao state. I see the material and symbolic dimensions of forest resources as interwoven – studies of the state that use forests as their focus need to consider both of these dimensions. The interpretative but grounded approach used in this study demonstrates the political significance of local worldviews and reveals how understanding the state requires attention to local perceptions of authority and legitimacy.