

# Vientiane

Transformations of a Lao landscape

**Marc Askew, William S. Logan  
and Colin Long**

Asia's Transformations

# Vientiane

*Vientiane* is the first work of its kind to explore the development and cultural significance of this neglected South-East Asian city, both past and present. The book interprets Vientiane's landscape – physical as well as imagined – as a reflection of key aspects of Lao geo-political history, the nature of Lao urbanism, and its critical relation to constructions of Lao identity in the contemporary period. The authors argue that the patterns of change seen through Vientiane's past embody the key political and economic processes and transformations impacting on the people of Laos.

This work is distinctive in foregrounding the Lao urban past, which has rarely been an object of attention by scholars: Laos, in fact, is most commonly portrayed as a rural backwater with no significant urban present or past, and marginal to the dynamic trends affecting most of the South-East Asian mainland. In contrast to these persistent and static portrayals of Laos as a tiny landlocked backwater, the authors document and evaluate the significance of the Lao urban landscape. They suggest that Vientiane's apparent 'marginality' is in fact a historically produced phenomenon resulting from geo-politics dating from the pre-colonial period and extending into the post-colonial period.

By drawing on a wide range of research material and extensive fieldwork, *Vientiane* will be of huge interest to scholars of South-East Asia history, Asian culture and society, and urban studies and heritage.

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# Note on Lao/Thai transliteration, ordering names and translation

There is no uniformly adopted transliteration system for the rendering of Lao names and words. In rendering most Lao words, personal and place names, we have followed the scheme used by Martin Stuart-Fox in his works *The Lao Kingdom of Lan Xang* and *History of Laos*, except in the case of words where we retain conformity with current Lao spellings. Thus we use ‘Pha’ rather than ‘Phra’ (as in the Thai spelling) in the terms Pha Kaeo, Phaya. However, we retain use of ‘Luang Prabang’ because of its widespread use, instead of the more correct ‘Luang Phabang’, and for the same reason we retain the French term ‘Vientiane’ instead of the more precise *Viang Chan*, as discussed in the introductory chapter. In the citations, bibliography and quotations, variant transcriptions of personal and place names are retained when they appear in published work or in the titles of English or French language publications. Thai terms and names are rendered according to the Thai Royal Institute system, with variant spellings of names reproduced as they appear for published work in English. Lao and Thai names are customarily listed with the personal name appearing first and the surname last. We have followed this convention in citations and the final list of references.

All translated passages, unless otherwise indicated, are the work of the authors.

# Acronyms

ADB	Asian Development Bank
ASEAN	Association of South-East Asian Nations
<i>BEFEO</i>	<i>Bulletin D'Ecole Francaise d'Extreme Orient</i>
CDNI	Committee for the Defence of the National Interest
COMNAPDEV	Comprehensive National Physical Planning and Development
DHUP	Department of Housing and Urban Planning
EFEO	Ecole Francaise d'Extreme Orient
<i>FEER</i>	<i>Far Eastern Economic Review</i>
IPRAUS	Parisian Institute of Research on Architecture, Urban Structures and Society
ITSUP	Institute of Technical Studies and Urban Planning
IUR	Institute for Urban Research
LPRP	Lao Peoples Revolutionary Party
Lao PDR	Lao Peoples Democratic Republic
MAAG	Military Assistance Advisory Group
MCTPC	Ministry for Communication, Transport, Post and Construction
MIC	Ministry of Information and Culture
MRC	Mekong River Commission
NEM	New Economic Mechanism
NLHX	Neo Lao Hak Xat
PEO	Programs Evaluation Office
RLG	Royal Lao Government
UDP	Urban Development Program of Vientiane Prefecture
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USIS	United States Information Service
USOM	United States Operations Mission
VIUDP	Vientiane Integrated Urban Development Program
VUDAA	Vientiane Urban Development and Administration Authority

# Foreword

Cities are the most complex things human beings construct. In their most concentrated, and yet extensive forms ('downtown' centre of a megalopolis, surrounded by endless suburbs) they substitute almost totally for the natural environment. But as constructed habitats, they reflect those who construct them. They are cultural products – which is what gives them their character, their unique differences – and their fascination.

Cities are not constant. Not only do their fabrics change, but their personalities too. Cities suffer, under war, or occupation, or economic depression. And they thrive when the good times roll. Cities may be vibrant, or defiant, or allusive. They have moods, depending on weather, or time of day. The bustling, working, morning city has a quite different feel to the evening city of relaxation and entertainment.

We all feel these differences, even if only visiting briefly and we wonder about them. Few seek to really understand them, however, by peeling back the layers of the city, laid down over time, to reveal in its history changing cultures and changing lives. Cities live and breathe through their inhabitants, and when their inhabitants disperse, for one reason or another, they die. Few dead cities are ever successfully resuscitated.

Vientiane (in Lao: Viang Chan) is one city that has risen from its ruins. It is a small city (with fewer than one million people) in a small country, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, but its history gives it a particular interest. Vientiane, as it exists today, is little more than a century old. In 1895 jungle covered the site where the city now stands, but the site was an ancient one.

The revival of Vientiane in the early years of the twentieth century was due not to the Lao, but to the French. Yet the whole layout of French Vientiane, its principal axes, its key monuments, its urban symbolism, were not French but Lao: they were all defined by the earlier Lao city that was destroyed by the Siamese in 1828. This was a city with deep historical roots going back well before 1560 when Viang Chan became the capital of the Lao Kingdom of Lan Xang, ruling over the whole of the Middle Mekong. It was a city that had left in its ruins an indelible palimpsest that defined precisely the form in which it would be rebuilt – and that form was not French, but Lao.

In a sense Vientiane stands synecdochically for Laos itself, the kingdom and country that, having differentiated itself within the greater Tai cultural area in the fourteenth century, was reabsorbed into it again four centuries later – only to reappear as an independent state in the twentieth century. So to claim that Vientiane, like Laos itself, has no historical roots in the capital and kingdom of Lan Xang is to practice a form of historical amnesia.

This is not a mistake the authors of this study of Vientiane make. The sub-title says it all: ‘Transformations of a Lao Landscape’. The city is placed within a context that is both historical (transformations are traced) and geographical (situated within the specific region of the Middle Mekong) in a way that is quintessentially Lao, for it rests, as I have always argued, on the political culture of the *meuang*, those forms of organisation at the same time political, social and territorial that were subsumed hierarchically, like boxes within boxes, to comprise the greater Lao kingdom, Meuang Lao.

In his two chapters on the periods before and after Viang Chan became the capital of Lan Xang, Marc Askew brilliantly shows how the city became a centre of power for what he calls the ‘Lao Culture Region’. The Lao have at times been thought of as confined to the margins of the Tai world. But centres of power do not arise on the margins of any culture area. The Middle Mekong was a region in its own right, sacrally and symbolically imagined, and Vientiane was its religious, political and economic centre, presiding over the distributed and recursive relations of power of its constitutive *meuang*. The material expression of the concentration of power of Viang Chan as capital of the Lao Culture Region lay in the planning and architecture and art of the city.

William Logan takes up the story from the arrival of the French, neatly bringing out French usurpation of the traditional city plan as a means of claiming France’s right to rule (the *Résidence* in place of the royal palace, the axes of roads parallel to the river and perpendicular to the Great Royal Stupa, the That Luang), which ironically prepared the way for the Lao to reclaim Vientiane as their city. Perhaps this lay at the heart of French ambivalence towards Laos and the Lao – the suppressed suspicion that theirs was a transitory presence, to be exploited just for the moment for career or happiness.

Vientiane *was* marginalised with respect to French Indochina, and so were the Lao who fell under French rule. Independence required the Lao (but which Lao?) to re-imagine Lao space and the place of Vientiane within it. The attempt to do this was drowned by war and the overweening American presence, which stamped an alien, yet modern, mark upon the city. When the revolutionary Pathet Lao seized power in 1975, they toyed for a while, as Colin Long reminds us, with shifting the capital to a more geographically central position, as the Brazilians, and more recently the Burmese, have done. But the plan was dropped, and Vientiane was again declared the capital of the Lao state.

Logan and Long both maintain Askew's broad approach to the history of Vientiane, playing with the tension between colonial and national capital and urban centre, between the political history that shaped the nation and the urban response that shaped the city. So in a real sense this book is more than a history of the transformations of Vientiane: it is also a history of the transformations of Laos itself, from Culture Region to modern state.

It is hard to imagine three authors better qualified to do what Askew, Logan and Long have done. All three have spent considerable time in South-East Asia. Askew and Logan have written well-received studies of Bangkok and Hanoi, respectively – long works on modern cityscapes. Their joint cooperation here works well, based on comprehensive research. The Vientiane they reveal is one I recognize well, for it is a city I have known for more than 40 years. So let me end on a personal note.

I first arrived in Vientiane in 1963, just as the Geneva Agreements of the previous year were breaking down under the inexorable impact of events in Vietnam. One became aware of the different layers of the city imposed one upon the other, like immiscible liquids, touching but never really mixing – Lao, Chinese, French, American. There was a sort of laid-back, frontier feel to Vientiane in those days – laid-back Lao, gung-ho can-do Americans. It was a city of rumours about Pathet Lao offensives, impending coups, secret American operations. The tiny press corps had an informal agreement that we would not file any piece of 'information' we could not confirm from at least three sources, including one, preferably two, non-Lao.

In the early 1970s Vientiane was a city growing tired of war. There were too many internally displaced refugees looking for work, too many young and educated Lao questioning what was happening to their country, too many Americans. Young monks were angry over the breakdown of traditional values, the sleaze that had become pervasive, the corruption of the self-serving political elite. Many Lao felt their country had been used, and the city reflected their concerns.

In 1980, I returned to Vientiane for the first time after the change of regime in December 1975, for the fifth anniversary celebrations. The city had lost its spontaneity: it had a closed-down feel about it. You could see it in people's eyes, and sense it in their reluctance to talk. The procession on the That Luang parade ground had that staged, mechanical feel about it, observed with false gaiety by the bussed-in onlookers. Furthermore the economic life of the city was moribund. It was not that people weren't busy, but street sweepers swept because they had been told to and gardeners grew vegetables to keep their families alive, while the downtown commercial area remained silent and shuttered down.

Five years later there was a glimmer of change, more colour, more movement, but still the wariness in people's eyes, still the poverty in their daily lives, still the socialist conformity – except for the Party hierarchy, whose families had appropriated comfortable villas and official cars. Everyone else rode bicycles, still at a leisurely Lao pace. Westerners were not

quite so suspect, however, and Buddhism was quietly recovering its place in Lao society. Five years later still and the trappings of socialism – the heroic panels on street corners, the loudspeakers blaring exhortation – were well in retreat.

In the 1990s tourists began trickling in, stimulating private enterprise and services. Souvenir shops, new restaurants and the first private guesthouses opened. Women made up; young girls wore jeans again. There were a lot more motorbikes on the streets, and more cars. Western aid agencies and non-governmental organizations were in evidence. The city was livelier, the people more relaxed. Buddhist festivals were well attended. The booming economy (before the Asian economic crisis at the end of the decade) attracted people from elsewhere in the country, to work on road and building construction, or in service industries. Markets flourished. There was still, of course, poverty; but the city was a happier place.

Vientiane today still has something of the relaxed charm of a provincial capital, at least for jaded big-city tourists. But for those who have seen the city change over the last 40 or more years, it has taken on a new air of activity, even modernity. Expansion has been rapid, particularly out along main roads in strip developments of cheap concrete shop-houses interspersed with occasional larger villas or enterprises. Ugly much of it may be, but it reflects new vibrancy, new entrepreneurial activity. And along the Mekong waterfront the evening once again beckons the young and family groups to stroll and mingle with backpackers and tourists, or sit and chat at one of the temporary food stalls.

So the moods and appearance of the city have kept on changing. As Vientiane takes its place as an ASEAN capital, looking expectantly to the future, this is the right time to write its history. This book presents the first comprehensive study of Vientiane, its politics and history, and its relationships to the spaces which it has defined and on which it has drawn. It is a serious study, which not only sets a standard, but also places Vientiane ‘on the scholarly map’ of South-East Asian capitals in a way of which the authors can be proud.

Martin Stuart-Fox  
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April 2006



# 1 Vientiane, capital on the margins: urbanism, history and Lao identity

## Constructing Vientiane's marginality

In this book we present an account of the changing landscape and the cultural and political significance of Vientiane, Laos, from its emergence as an urban centre (dating from at least the thirteenth century) to the present. Although we necessarily rely on a wide range of documentary sources in this endeavour, we use the landscape itself – both physical and imagined – as our principal register, treating it as a form of text (albeit partial and fragmented) through which we might read key features of Lao geo-political history, the nature of Lao urbanism, and the critical relation of this urbanism to constructions of Lao identity in the past and also the present.



*Plate 1.1* A Typical street scene in present day central Vientiane.

## 2 *Vientiane: urbanism, history and Lao identity*

Why, it might be asked, should such an apparently obscure and small place be the object of our study? And why on earth is ‘urbanism’ relevant to it? Vientiane is one of the most neglected of South-East Asia’s capital cities in terms of writings and representation of the region’s urban past and present. Like the small country of which it is the largest city, Vientiane has long been characterized as backward, isolated and marginal both to its immediate region of mainland South-East Asia and to the world. Vientiane, and its related expansive Lao settlement space in the Middle Mekong valley, has experienced over its history a range of marginalizing processes, both in the stark forms of regional politics and warfare as well as in representational terms. Vientiane and the polities it has governed have experienced a troubled history involving physical destruction, political fragmentation, territorial truncation and colonization – the legacies of this history are still visible in Vientiane’s material fabric, its urban form and in numerous ruins and monumental sites throughout its former trans-Mekong hinterland. But enduring epithets that consign Vientiane to some timeless obscurity and geographically determined remoteness are misleading, because they take as necessary those conditions that have in fact been historically contingent: thus, the location of Vientiane and the Lao culture region as an ‘intermediate space’ in the heart of mainland South-East Asia has also been a key factor for the city’s periodic prominence in the past, and arguably, for its future.<sup>1</sup> The standard cluster of adjectives commonly applied to Vientiane and to Laos itself – ‘little’, ‘remote’, ‘quiet’, ‘backward’ – imposes an inevitability that belies the dynamics of history: such terms stand for assumptions that take as necessary, for example, the actual arbitrariness of Laos’ truncated post-colonial boundaries, demarcations in the landscape which have the effect of excising acknowledgement of the historical hinterland of Vientiane which for over 250 years extended across the western bank of the Mekong river into today’s northeastern Thailand.

In the decades after World War II, when Laos first gained world attention as a focus of Cold War confrontation, commentators branded the capital of this tiny new post-colonial state as almost comically rustic, at best quaint; in fact, in their view, Vientiane hardly deserved the designation of ‘city’ or ‘capital’ at all. The opinion of one US Foreign Service official in 1960 is typical of these judgments:

Vientiane ... isn’t really a national capital at all, in any vital, meaningful sense of the term. Vientiane is merely Laos’ largest town. It is located a thousand semi-navigable miles up the Mekong, facing Thailand across the river, and perched on the edge of some of the most bafflingly ill-assorted land that has ever been called a nation state.<sup>2</sup>

As the political centre of a nation wracked by civil war till the mid-1970s, Vientiane was perceived by western observers at the time to be just as incongruous and bemusing as the tiny and internally diverse nation over

which it only partially managed to preside – a quaint, slow-moving town on the banks of the Mekong whose most conspicuous symbol of cosmopolitan modernity in the late 1960s was its solitary set of traffic lights!<sup>3</sup> Yet the fact of a US presence indicates Vientiane's strategic geo-political significance, at least during the Cold War.

In the eighteenth century Vientiane was the seat of the most important Lao principality in the Middle Mekong valley, before falling victim to the power of Siam. And before that the city was the capital of Lan Xang, (the 'Kingdom of a Million Elephants'), which, at its peak during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was one of the major political entities of mainland South-East Asia. During the colonial period, the French made Vientiane's ruined site the capital of their Lao possessions. It is exactly this contrast – between its apparent backwardness and marginality and its political status as a capital city swept up in some of the region's major tides of history – that attracts us as a theme for exploration.

Vientiane's obscurity as a city has been reinforced in much scholarly and specialist discourse (through its absence) as well as popular global representations (through an essentialized trope of bucolic backwardness). Thus, understandably, the Lao capital is noticeably absent from scholars' accounts of dominant urbanization trends in post-World War II South-East Asia. Beginning in the 1950s, these accounts identified the salience of unbalanced economic development patterns and massive rural-urban migration in the burgeoning 'primate cities', or 'great cities', exemplified by Thailand's Bangkok and Indonesia's Jakarta. Vientiane was simply not visible in these trends being identified for urban South-East Asia.<sup>4</sup> And in the 1990s, at the height of Asia's impressive export-driven economic boom, Vientiane had no place in the new 'mega-urban region' models of urban form and global change that were being generated by geographers and regional planners to describe the sprawling cities of the expanding Asian economies.<sup>5</sup> In short, Vientiane did not seem to be on the map of 'urban' South-East Asia.

Contemporary tourism marketing of Laos and its capital reinforces Vientiane's obscurity in the global imaginary of places, presenting images of an unspoiled Asian Shangri La, where the ravages of modern development have yet to destroy the small country's charm. Like most tourism marketing images, it is based on some truth and a lot of embellishment. In reality, rather than being a 'place that time forgot', Vientiane has borne the brunt of some of the most momentous events of regional and global history – the expansion and consolidation of Siam as the pre-eminent mainland South-East Asian state in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and its rivalry with imperial Vietnam; the extension of European power into distant parts of the globe, and the subsequent dislocation of indigenous societies; and the post-WW2 process of de-colonization and socialist revolution.

Yet it is not only in popular tourism images that Vientiane has been confined to the margins. The role of urbanism in general in analyses of Lao history, society and culture has largely been ignored, even though accounts

#### 4 *Vientiane: urbanism, history and Lao identity*

of Luang Prabang and Vientiane play a part in descriptions of the pre-modern Lao kingdoms. The fact that Laos is a predominantly agrarian society, with enormous ethnic diversity and generally poor communications infrastructure has led to the general perception that the links between Vientiane and other Lao cities, and between Vientiane and the rural areas, are tenuous.

In this book we focus on the theme of Vientiane's 'marginality' in its various forms – geographical, economic and political. We interpret this apparent marginality not as a fixed property, as predominant representations might suggest, but as a historically produced phenomenon resulting from geo-political dynamics dating from the pre-colonial period and extending into the post-colonial period. As with all concepts of marginality and centrality, it depends to a considerable extent on where you stand; in Vientiane's case it also depends on *when* you were standing there. Vientiane's marginality has fluctuated, both in its relationship with the rest of the nation and in its relationship with the region and the world, over the centuries. In the 1950s and 1960s Vientiane was a flashpoint in the global ideological struggle between communism and capitalism; at the same time it had only a tenuous relationship with large parts of Laos itself. In the early twenty-first century it barely registers in international consciousness, but is the main motor of Lao economic growth and the vanguard location of the Lao Government's modernization and liberalization efforts.

The Lao urban past and its significance have rarely been objects of direct attention by scholars (with the exception of archaeologists): rather, historical accounts of the Lao urban centres during their heyday as royal pre-modern capitals have been subsumed within broader portraits of Lao political evolution and decline. This book reverses this analytical focus by documenting and interpreting Vientiane's role in defining Lao society and culture, showing that the patterns of change seen through Vientiane's past in many ways embody the key political and economic processes and transformations affecting the people of Laos.

#### **Urbanism, landscape and the Lao culture region**

We approach the study of Vientiane by emphasizing a number of key inter-related concepts: 'urbanism' and 'landscape' (which incorporates 'urban landscape'), and their dynamic connection to an expansive Lao settlement space in the Middle Mekong valley that we describe as the 'Lao Culture Region'. As already highlighted, we view the physical city as a manifestation of the political, economic and social conditions prevailing in various periods; that is, the city and its hinterland's built environment provide an *entrée* into analysis of the past and present forces at work in Laos and its capital.

We use the term 'urbanism' to refer to the social, material and symbolic role of urban centres. As used throughout this book, 'urbanism' embraces two basic dimensions, namely: the ideas and values embodied in the

morphology (spatial arrangements), architecture and physical elements making up particular urban sites; and the functions of urban centres as they articulate with the wider social/symbolic system. 'Urbanism' refers not only to the specific 'urban way of life' of city dwellers, as depicted in classical twentieth century urban sociology; nor is urbanism equivalent to the idea of 'urbanization' – an essentially quantitative concept measuring the proportion of a country's population living in urban areas and linked to associated changes in economic structures. Instead, we see urbanism and its significance as being measured not on the basis of the size of urban centres, nor of their importance in relation to economic functions alone. Broadly speaking, we follow Paul Wheatley's definition of 'urbanism' as the character of urban form and function; but we also add that the city is more than simply a material artefact and a distinctive concentration of various institutions: it is also an 'idea' whose very definition, significance and meaning varies across cultures and history.<sup>6</sup>

The book employs a concept of 'landscape' that is derived from approaches to place, identity and culture developed in the fields of human geography, history, anthropology and heritage studies.<sup>7</sup> Our use of this framework of landscape acknowledges both visible and symbolic/imagined dimensions as well as dynamic and society-space interactions which reproduce and change the urban environment. With this approach we link elements in the landscape (buildings, structures, spatial and symbolic arrangements) to key phases in the history of Vientiane. We also attend to the landscape beyond the immediate city, at a regional level, to more fully contextualize and identify the significance of Vientiane (for example, the key linkage of the city with the Khorat Plateau as a settlement and trading hinterland; the place of Vientiane within the colonial space of French Indochina). We examine also the broader levels of politics and economy (at regional and global levels) which help to explain the changes we can observe in this landscape.

The concept of landscape provides a deep and inclusive way of reading the history of a place. In talking about an urban landscape we are interested in more than just monuments or prominent 'landmark' buildings. We emphasize the dynamic relationship between city forms and urban processes, the interaction between built and natural environments, between the symbolic visions of city dwellers and the physical structures and layout of the city. In sum, the urban landscape, as we use the concept, is a physical manifestation of the natural, cultural and economic environment in which it developed.

### **Lao memory, national heritage and identity**

Today, the Lao Communist Party (The Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP)), like its Vietnamese counterpart, is seeking new sources of legitimacy as the old sources – the struggle against foreign intervention, the

construction of socialism – are rendered redundant. The LPRP has turned to the Lao past, presenting itself as the defender of ancient national and cultural traditions, in order to bolster its claims to power. The effects of the Lao government's efforts to lay claim to and expand the scope of Lao history is being manifested in many ways in contemporary Laos: in new museum exhibits about Lao proto-history; in the construction of a National Cultural hall; in National Day celebrations featuring various aspects of 'traditional culture' instead of the iconography of international socialism; and in the enthusiastic promotion of world heritage sites, particularly at Luang Prabang.

This book offers a contribution to discussions about the constructions of the national past in post-colonial, post-Cold War South-East Asia, with a focus on spatial dimensions. We believe that neither the Lao government's attitude to Vientiane – that its modernization as the nation's capital justifies a sometimes cavalier attitude to the preservation of its heritage – nor the traditional western approach to the city – that it is an insignificant, marginal place – adequately recognizes its significance within what we call the Lao culture region. The recent analyses of changing visions of the Lao past are complemented and enhanced, we believe, by a study that is focused on the nation's capital. In fact, since there has been no comprehensive history of Vientiane written before, we argue that the reassessment of Lao history cannot be complete without an adequate account of urbanism and Laos' primary urban centre in that history.

## **Sources**

The book is based on a research project on Vientiane's cultural landscape, funded by the Australian Research Council covering the period 1997–2001, and includes supplementary work that we conducted until 2005, involving further field visits for interviews and documentary research. It draws on a wide range of documentary source material in the Lao, Thai, French and English languages and field observation in and around Vientiane (on both sides of the Mekong) as well as interviews. We should note here that when compared to other countries of the region, such as Thailand and Vietnam, primary documentary sources for the study of the Lao urban past are sparse. Many documentary sources that might be useful to a study of this type are inaccessible or have been destroyed. In particular, documents from Vientiane's pre-colonial period were destroyed with the Thai sacking of the city in 1828, while other documents were removed to Bangkok and are still inaccessible. Laos was indisputably the least important of France's possessions in Indochina, and records pertaining to its administration are sparse and scattered. We were unfortunately unable to access remaining records of the French Governor of Indochina, kept in Hanoi. Some records of the Royal Lao Government were lost during the assumption of power by the Pathet Lao in the 1970s.