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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.
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.¹ 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.²

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! 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. 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. 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 unspoil 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
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.\(^6\)

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.\(^7\) 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.
In the research for this book we cannot claim to have unearthed strikingly new evidence in our account of Vientiane; rather, this study takes on the character of a synthesis of our own and other scholars' work, and is distinctive more for its focus on Vientiane and urbanism than any discovery of new sources as such. We have, however, paid more attention to the history and historical landscape of the west bank (now the Thai side) of the Mekong than most students of Lao history in exploring Vientiane's historical hinterland. We do not claim that this book is a comprehensive social history, or a treatment of contemporary life in Vientiane, or a study of the ways that the people of contemporary Vientiane dynamically interact with and perceive their urban past and environment. Some studies on these important topics are currently being done by scholars, or remain to be undertaken by historians, archaeologists and ethnographers. As we conceived it, our task has been to explore the character and significance of the Lao capital of Vientiane by undertaking a historical and spatially informed study of the city's landscape and that of its hinterland and in so doing re-evaluate the significance of urbanism in the past and present of the Lao people.

In this research we have thus drawn on the published work (and in some cases have benefited from the direct advice) of a range of Western, Thai and Lao scholars who have made important contributions to specific and general knowledge and discussion on Vientiane's role, character and landscape. Their contributions and insights are acknowledged throughout the text and citations of this book. In particular we should highlight here the importance of the archaeological and art historical investigations of the remarkably dedicated and skilled scholars of the École Française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO), in the early twentieth century. While they were part of the French colonial project that aimed to 'map' colonial Indochina and represent Laos as part of France's colonial possessions, their research has left a valuable legacy, even if some of their interpretations have been questioned by later EFEO scholars. Later generations of French researchers—such as anthropologists Charles Archambeault and Georges Condominas, art historians P. M. Gagneux and Madeleine Giteau, geographer Christian Taillard and epigrapher Michel Lorrillard, among others—have generated significant ideas and perspectives concerning Lao civic ritual, socio-spatial organization, art, literature, legends, chronicles and aspects of urbanism.

Lao, as well as some Thai scholars have also made vital contributions in archaeology and documentary study. Notably, of course, it was Maha Sila Viravong (a native of Roi Et in today's Isan region of Thailand) who compiled the first modern Lao history, based largely on his research into Lao documents held in Thai archives during the 1940s. However flawed, simplistic and conventional Sila Viravong's Phongsawadan Lao appears now to twenty-first century scholars of Laos (focusing on linear, dynastic-based history), it remains the first Lao-authored work that presents Lao history as autonomous. Sila Viravong literally recovered Lao history, particularly
Vientiane's history, from erasure at the hands of the Thai who had destroyed the city and polity in the early nineteenth century. He also produced a notable essay on Vientiane based on surviving Lao literature and his own observation. One of the very few Lao-language essays dedicated to an analysis of the origins and significance of the capital, this essay continues to be republished. Most recently, the Lao scholar Souneth Phothisane has produced a comprehensive comparative study of all extant versions of the Nithan Khun Borom chronicles as well as undertaking other research projects concerning epigraphic and religious art materials. The studies of the historians Mayoury and Pheuiphan Ngaosivathin have offered useful correctives to previous Thai-centred interpretations of the Lao-Siamese conflict of the early nineteenth century, and their accounts of Vientiane under the rule of Chao Anuvong are especially valuable. Among Thai scholars it has been the archaeologist Srisaka Valliphodom who has made the most notable contribution to exploration of the Lao legacy that is so conspicuous in north-eastern Thailand.

Among contemporary Western scholars we have drawn in particular on the work of Martin Stuart-Fox and Grant Evans, historian and anthropologist, respectively. These two have perhaps done more than any others to subject Lao history to concerted analysis and documentation, and made it accessible. In the process they have raised important historiographical questions about the origins of the Lao nation, and how Lao history contributes to contemporary debates and government policies concerning Lao identity and nationhood. In recent years a number of new edited collections of historical and anthropological studies have been published which further explore issues of importance in the previously neglected field of Lao studies. We have drawn on these works in the writing of this book.

The structure of the book

Each of the chapters in the book describes the history of Vientiane as an urban site, interpreting its functions and significance within the wider political and cultural configuration of the Lao in the Mekong valley. In these accounts we engage with the key themes of marginality, urbanism and landscape, and link key phases of the capital's past with the legacies visible in its material fabric and spatial form.

Chapters 2 and 3 trace Vientiane's pre-modern history until the nineteenth century. This is not an easy task, given the paucity of written and physical evidence of the city's pre-colonial history. In Chapter 2 we argue that although the events of history have conspired to destroy much of Vientiane's material landscape and written records, the reclamation of the significance of urbanism to the early Lao principalities is crucial to understanding the Lao culture region. Today's national territory of Laos is truncated in the same way as the urban territory of Vientiane is: without its hinterland on the western banks extending across much of the Khorat
Plateau in today's Thailand. Understanding the Lao and their culture region, and understanding Vientiane, requires casting one's eyes across the Mekong.

Chapter 2 commences with a discussion of the nature of Lao urbanism in the context of 'Tai' urbanism in order to provide a framework for interpreting Vientiane's role as a city that shared in the idioms of the broader 'Tai World' of mainland South-East Asia. We emphasize the need to evaluate urban significance in the context of the political and symbolic centrality of the 'meuang' and their centres of power, in contrast to the economic and demographic-centred models of Western-focused urbanists. The chapter provides an outline of the 'Lao culture region' in mainland South-East Asia and the functions of urban centres in articulating and binding this region as it evolved in the space of the Mekong river valley and its tributaries. We outline urban patterns and significance in the period of 'Indianization' in the region, and link the symbolic and political evolution of the early Lao mandala kingdom of Lan Xang with this process. Using archaeological evidence (drawn from the work of Thai and French scholars in particular) and chronicle records, the chapter describes the pattern and distribution of Lao settlements in the Mekong region. We emphasize the symbolic importance of urban sites and the legends surrounding the process of Lao settlement (traced from the Khun Borom Legends onwards), in particular the enigmatic figure of Fa Ngum, who today has been transmuted into a nationalist symbol. Lao urban centres are interpreted in the meuang context as key centres of symbolic accumulation and artistic production. The chapter emphasizes in particular the significance of the western Mekong settlements of the Khorat Plateau as a key part of the cultural geography of the pre-modern Lao world. Shrines and sites are discussed, in particular the That Phanom chedi in today's Nakhon Phanom Province of Thailand. This chapter covers the period to 1560, when the Lan Xang capital was shifted from Luang Prabang to Vientiane.

Chapter 3 provides an account of the early settlement history of 'Wiang Chan' (or Viang Chan), drawn from archaeological reports, Lao chronicles and various folk legends. We outline the rise and prominence of Vientiane as a major meuang centre in the Lan Xang confederation and later as the new royal capital of Lan Xang under King Xaya Xetthathirath (from 1560). We consider some scholars' suggestions about factors behind the shift of the capital from Luang Prabang to Vientiane: that the site was an advantageous location for trade, or advantageous for defence. The chapter provides an account of Vientiane's seventeenth-century landscape, based on the few European visitors' reports and other evidence. This is followed by a discussion of Vientiane's meuang hinterland on the Khorat plateau with reference to surviving physical landscape elements on both sides of the Mekong River. We then proceed to a discussion of the political fragmentation of Lan Xang from the early eighteenth century and the foundation of the new southern meuang of Champasak, and outline the progressive weakening and
marginalization of the principality of Vientiane at the hands of Siam through the eighteenth century, as it steadily lost control of the Khorat Plateau, both in terms of trade and political influence.

The second major part of Chapter 3 describes the last flowering of Vientiane during the first decades of the nineteenth century as a capital under its final ruler, Chao Anuvong. Anuvong presided over a period which saw new landscape elements developed in his capital and hinterland as symbols of identity and political sovereignty—cultural markers of grandeur and also defiance against the vassal status imposed by the Bangkok court. They include Vat Sisaket and the Ho Pha Kaeo, which still survive (the latter reconstructed under the French). We describe the defeat of Chao Anu’s military offensive against Siam in 1827–1828, the destruction of Vientiane and the dispersal of its population. This comprehensive physical, demographic and political erasure created a power vacuum on the central Mekong that was contested by Siam and Vietnam, with Siam eventually gaining sway by mid-century. After the destruction of Vientiane and the elimination of its dynasty, urban settlement by the Lao, such as it was, henceforth took place on the western side of the Mekong under Bangkok sponsorship, and the site of Vientiane was left virtually abandoned until the arrival of the French.

The destruction of the capital by the Siamese in 1828 and the subsequent French reconstruction from the end of the nineteenth century means that contemporary Vientiane is largely a twentieth century artefact. Yet the city’s ancient form, the origins of which are traced in Chapters 2 and 3, are still clearly manifested in its basic morphology. Crucial ancient morphological elements that have shaped the modern city include the alignment with the Mekong. Vientiane’s urban, symbolic and political space once occupied both sides of the river; an understanding of this is essential to a full comprehension of the city’s spatial context and meaning.

In Chapter 4 we show how the arrival of the French in Laos led to the revival of the old site of ‘Viang Chan’ as ‘Vientiane’, the site of a new administrative capital. When they arrived in the 1890s to assume control of their protectorate the city was in ruins; when they left in the early 1950s it was a small, quiet capital, its rebuilt Buddhist vat and other pre-colonial monuments interspersed with modest French administrative buildings and villas. But the majority of the population continued to live in suburbs that were little more than villages, with timber houses and unsealed roads. Vientiane was reconstructed by the French as the administrative and commercial centre of their Lao colonies. While the ruined Ho Pha Kaeo, the That Luang, and Vat Sisaket evoked the presence of an ancient royal house, there was no surviving elite of the old meuang for the French to negotiate with or reinstate, and except for the Lao Phuan—displaced by the Siamese from their heartland of Xiang Khuang decades earlier—who had settled a few villages, the ruined and forested site of the old capital was virtually unpopulated, even though the That Luang and its surrounding temples
remained places of reverence. Until the French assumption of control over the east bank in the early 1890s the kings of Luang Prabang had ruled their weakened meuang at the behest of Bangkok, but they held no jurisdiction over the old political space of Vientiane. Since the destruction of Vientiane and until the arrival of the French, the site of the old city and the plain beyond its ruined walls was a virtual tabula rasa in political and demographic terms, although the area was nominally under the suzerainty of Siam. During the 1880s, as a response to increasing French activities, Siam’s King Chulalongkorn appointed a commissioner (based in Nongkhai) to oversee eastern bank territories, including the Vientiane plain, but direct Siamese presence in the Vientiane area was weak. When the French moved in to Vientiane and cleared the forested ruins, they inherited a capital without a king or a population, and without much of the territory that had sustained both. A straggling new colonial capital now rose on its funereal site. As for the beleaguered ruler of the principality of Luang Prabang to Vientiane’s north – whose appeals for French protection against his Siamese overlord were a key pretext for French occupation of the Lao territories – the French built him a charming little palace while stripping him of any effective political power, leaving the old northern royal centre to slip, despite its continuing ceremonial significance, into picturesque irrelevance. Luang Prabang’s fate was essentially the fate of Laos as a whole within the assemblage of territories that was ‘l’Indochine Française’: the Lao territories were a marginal colonial appendage whose role was to be less a place of investment or an object of the ‘Mission Civilisatrice’, than a territorial buffer against British interests to the west of the peninsula. Vietnam remained the focus of French investment and French visions of colonial grandeur while Laos, together with Vientiane, became a backwater.

Nevertheless, as we highlight in Chapter 4, the imprint of the French on Vientiane was indelible. After stripping away the jungle the city’s new rulers commenced to re-design its street layout and organise its space according to French concepts of efficiency, attractiveness, healthiness, and socially and racially appropriate use. The old royal core of the city was taken over for the principal functions of the colonial bureaucracy, with the Résidence Superieure constructed within the grounds of the ruined royal palace. Administrative buildings, hospitals and houses for French officials were constructed, while the infrastructure of the modern city – water, electricity and telegraph – were gradually introduced. As in many colonial cities, the arrival of Europeans made the social constitution of space more complex. On top of existing conceptions of urban space the French imposed new divisions based on race and different attitudes to social hierarchy – even the lowest class Frenchman had privileges not afforded to the most distinguished Lao. We show how these differing visions were expressed to greater or lesser extents in the physical fabric of Vientiane, in the destruction of indigenous elements of the city and the designation – either formally or informally – of specific areas as ‘European’ or ‘native’.
Laos' incorporation in l'Indochine Française was also reflected in Vientiane's population. French scepticism about Lao capabilities, as well as the inadequacies of colonial education policies, combined with the French vision of the Indochinese Federation as being more important than its component parts to produce a colonial civil service dominated by Vietnamese in the lower level positions (the upper levels were reserved, of course, for French officials). The presence of relatively large numbers of Vietnamese civil servants, together with the dominance of urban commerce by Vietnamese and Chinese merchants, gave Vientiane a majority non-Lao population until after World War II.

We also discuss the way that the French as colonizers resuscitated and reconfigured the symbolic landscape of Vientiane, and how (as with their efforts in Cambodia) notions of cultural heritage and identity were put to use in their colonial project. We show in Chapter 4 how from an early stage the French combined a modernizing and colonizing project with selective rehabilitation of the city's historical fabric, through their restoration of monuments and reinforcement of the city's symbolic morphology. This heritage preservation effort, which had as one of its primary goals the binding of the Lao elite to the French colonial project, took on a real sense of urgency during WWII when the colonial authorities thought that the best way to resist the threats posed to French control by Thai territorial and cultural expansionism and Japanese aggression was to stimulate a sense of Lao patriotism (as distinct from nationalism) within an overall sense of allegiance to l'Indochine Française.

As we show at the beginning of Chapter 5, however, the French were unable to control either the development of Lao national consciousness or the direction of events. The Japanese intervention in South-East Asia fundamentally altered the relationship between the European colonizers and their colonial subjects. The pangs of nationalism fostered by the Japanese and exploited desperately and in vain by the French in the early 1940s, as well as by the neighbouring Thai, were to lead, by 1954, to the end of French colonial rule over Indochina.

If the French left Vientiane a relative backwater, small and underdeveloped, like the country of which it was the capital, the years after independence were to shatter its relative tranquillity. The two decades after independence – from 1954 to 1975 – were to produce dramatic changes in Vientiane, more so than in any other part of the country. The eclipse of the French paved the way for the arrival of an even more powerful, wealthy and assertive influence – the United States. It was unfortunate for the Lao that, just as the interests of their country were subordinated by the French to larger plans for the Indochinese federation, the future of independent Laos was conditional on the US fight against the global spread of communism.

Chapter 5 reveals the enormous impact of the US on Vientiane, as the Americans attempted to develop the city into a modern national capital.
from which the purported benefits of a free market economy could be spread throughout the country, thus inoculating the Lao population against the effects of communism. Unfortunately, as we show, improvements to urban infrastructure and living standards were seriously undermined by wasteful spending of aid money, rampant corruption, decadent consumerism, a growing gap between rich and poor, rapid and poorly controlled development, vice, and destructive fighting, the most serious of which occurred in 1960, in what has become known as the Battle of Vientiane. These were years of substantial growth for Vientiane, and much of the physical fabric and morphology of the contemporary city is a product of this period. US-built facilities, such as the residential compound at Km6, built to house American personnel, remain as fascinating, often little-known, legacies.

In Chapter 6 we evaluate the effects of the Lao communist victory on the form and functions of Vientiane. When the Pathet Lao finally took over the country in December 1975, they viewed Vientiane with considerable suspicion. The city had been the administrative and political heart of their enemies, the Royal Lao Government (RLG), and was viewed as a corrupt island of capitalist decadence run by puppets of American imperialism. The first years of communist rule witnessed a major effort to stamp out the vice and excessive consumption that characterized the RLG years. Nightclubs were closed, prostitutes, drug addicts and servants of the former regime packed off to re-education camps, and socialization of the economy commenced. Partly through necessity – the Thais closed the border and US aid ceased – and partly through ideological propensity, the national economy was directed towards self-sufficiency or towards interaction with the new regime’s socialist mentors, Vietnam and the Soviet Union. As a result of the communist takeover, large numbers of the educated and business elite fled to Thailand and other countries, thus reversing the process of urban growth that had been taking place in Vientiane during the Second Indochinese War.

Chapter 6 argues that the imprint of the first 10 years of the Lao Communist Party rule was relatively light. Vientiane was neglected due to a range of factors, including policy priorities to improve rural living standards, an economic crisis caused by long years of war, the departure of many of the Chinese business class and the abrupt end of western aid. Overshadowing this was a persistent ideologically inspired unease among the Communist leadership with cities as places of unproductive consumption. Some traces of this early period of socialism can be found in Vientiane – such as hospitals, schools and some administrative buildings, not to mention the Russian-built circus, surely one of the more unusual legacies of Soviet influence around the world!

But, as we point out, Vientiane does not look or feel like a socialist city – one of the advantages of low population pressure, especially in the years after 1975, was the absence of a general housing crisis: thus, there are few
examples of large, hastily built flat blocks. Even the symbolism of socialism is strangely subdued in the built environment. Billboards with revolutionary messages can still be seen in Vientiane, but the pantheon of public statuary largely consists of images of three kings, and some incongruous socialist realist ensembles (and a statue of Kaysone) outside the Kaysone Phomvihane Museum.

In Chapter 7, which acts as a concluding essay to the book, we discuss the effects on Vientiane of the multiple changes that have taken place since the end of the Cold War period, economic reform, and the opening of Laos to a range of global influences. Interestingly, the buildings with the clearest ideological purpose – the National Assembly Building and Kaysone Museum – have been constructed after the period of doctrinaire socialism. We argue in Chapter 7 that this is because as the Lao Government has opened the economy to market forces, the pressure on it to find new sources of legitimacy other than those with which it initially claimed the right to rule, has become acute. The collapse of communism in Europe and the abandonment of communist economic policy in most of the remaining nominally communist nations, including Laos, have had a marked effect on Vientiane, where monetization of the economy is most thorough, most industrial enterprises are located and which serves as the ‘front door’ for overseas investors. In effect Vientiane has become what the Americans hoped it would become – the centre from which the free market can spread to the rest of the country. That it is the Lao communists who have led the way in making this possible is surely ironic.

In Chapter 7 we reveal the fundamental direction of contemporary government policy for Vientiane: the city is to become the modern national capital of a modern nation state. To this end, significant work has been done on improving urban infrastructure, living standards and facilities for business and tourists. The perennial problems of poor drainage, sewerage and roads have been tackled with some determination in recent years, although major deficits remain in all areas. Efforts to improve the planning of the city have been made, although while policies and plans have been drawn up, implementation continues to be neglected. As a result of the pressures created by Laos’ greater integration in the regional and global economy, economic liberalization, and the government’s vision of a ‘modern capital’, Vientiane’s urban environment and its heritage are under some stress. As we argue in Chapter 7, these factors, but particularly the government’s vision for Vientiane’s symbolic landscape, are having a major effect on the city’s townscape and historical environment.

We conclude with a number of reflections about the meaning of Vientiane’s surviving historical landscape in contemporary Laos. While it is clear that the dynamics of Lao urbanism are now being shaped primarily by policy imperatives favouring modernization as well as global and regional economic forces, echoes of Vientiane’s earlier symbolic role in Lao society and culture may still be discerned.
The name of the city

It is important for readers to be aware of the fact that the widespread use of the term ‘Vientiane’ as the name of Laos’ capital city is a French construction, a reflection of French inability to pronounce the actual Lao name. The correct rendering, as used among the Lao and the Thai is ‘Viang Chan’, which embodies the key elements of the city’s identity, as a ‘Viang’ (original meaning is ‘walled settlement’) connected with the descriptor term ‘Chan’, which may refer to ‘sandalwood’, or to ‘moon’ (for which see discussion in Chapter 3). We at first considered using the name ‘Viang Chan’, at least in our account of the city until the colonial period; however, since this different usage would possibly cause some confusion for readers, we opted, reluctantly, to render the capital’s name as ‘Vientiane’ throughout the text, and hope that our Lao readers will indulge this inaccuracy.