

Revolutionary legacies and socio-cultural challenges in upland Laos – the Hmong and the ‘Lao multi-ethnic people’ of Viengxay, Houaphan Province.

Viengxay, the former base of the Lao revolutionary movement in mountainous Houaphan, is at present promoted as tourism destination and as ‘birthplace of the Lao PDR’. With tourism, transnational trade, development projects, and other influences of globalization, this once peripheral town undergoes considerable socio-cultural transformations. As typical for the highland provinces, Houaphan is characterized by a striking ethnic heterogeneity and thus representative for the so-called ‘Lao multi-ethnic people’. Lowland Lao are the minority, instead the bulk of the 250,000 inhabitants belong to upland Tai groups (with Tai Deng being the majority), Khmu, Hmong, and some smaller groups.

This presentation will focus on the local Hmong community of Viengxay. It consists of former upland villages that in the last two decades have been resettled in the vicinity of the town. Their livelihoods are under pressure by agricultural transformations that result mainly from the state’s official disapproval of swidden cultivation. Yet, the recent changes also provide new opportunities and incentives. Some local Hmong who often consider themselves as heirs of the most prominent Hmong revolutionary, Faydang Lobliayao, are employed as guides for the tours through the famous hideout caves of the Pathet Lao. Others try to take advantage of the chances provided by the growing market economy. In my presentation I want to discuss the tensions between national integration and local aspirations in upland Laos that become manifest in different fields such as official memory politics, socio-economic development, and agricultural subsistence strategies.

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