The Modern Capital of a Modern Nation: Heritage, identity and urban transformation in post-socialist Vientiane

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Abstract

On 2 December each year Laos celebrates its national day. In times past this meant military parades on the That Luang parade ground. In recent years the character of the celebration has changed. Today the parade is more a celebration of Laos’ culture, traditions and ethnic diversity. In 2003 a statue of King Fa Ngum, deemed to be the founder of the Lao nation, was unveiled in Vientiane. The inauguration ceremony included a procession featuring the sacred Prabang image brought specially from Luang Prabang. The absence of socialist iconography and the emphasis on royal and traditional culture surprised some observers.

The transformation of the national day celebrations and the inauguration of the Chao Anou statue reflect broader processes in Laos, which, in turn, are shaping contemporary Vientiane. The abandonment of socialism has opened urban development to new influences. At the same time, however, the Lao Communists remain in power and in need of legitimisation as the sole legitimate political voice. As a result there is considerable emphasis on construction of museums and cultural institutions and on ‘traditional’ elements of the built environment. Thus, the evolution of Vientiane’s urban identity has been conditioned by the specific characteristics of Lao history and by the fluctuating and complex integration of Laos into global economic and political processes. Once again older patterns are re-emerging, with Vientiane the modernised administrative centre and Luang Prabang, in the north, the cultural and heritage centre of the nation – a pattern that replicates the colonial-era urban system.

Introduction

In the cities of the former socialist countries, and those countries undergoing transition from socialism even though they remain under Communist Party rule, the transformation of urban spaces and processes is fundamental to the broader transformation from centrally planned to market economies. The preservation of urban heritage cannot be separated from these processes; indeed, it is a vital component of them. This paper examines heritage preservation in Vientiane in the larger context of urban transformation, with a particular focus on how this transformation conditions the formation of a new urban identity for the Lao capital.

The Limits of Comparison

The extent to which Vientiane and the cities of the remaining Communist Party-ruled states of Asia can be profitably compared with the cities of the former Soviet Union or Eastern Europe is quite limited. While all share the fundamentals of market economies, the very
fact of continuing Communist Party dominance of the political system in Laos, Vietnam and China has real ramifications for the nature of the process of transition from centrally planned urban systems to market-driven urbanisation. Much has been made in the literature on post-socialist urban transition in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) of the shift from government to governance, a trend that has been identified in the cities of western Europe as well (Nedovi-Budi et al 2006: 6). According to this view, post-socialist cities have transitioned from a system dominated by formal government processes ‘conducted under clear procedural rules, involving statutory relationships between politicians, professionals and the public’, to a governance system that is ‘conducted across public, private and voluntary/community sectors through networks and partnerships often ambiguous in their memberships, activities, relationships and accountabilities’. It is a process of multi-stakeholder involvement, of multiple interest resolution, of compromise rather than confrontation, of negotiation rather than administrative fiat. ‘Transaction costs are minimised, trust maximised, collaborative advantage extracted’ (Stewart 2003, cited in Nedovi-Budi et al 2006: 6, note 1). We might question such a rosy-eyed view of the process of urban governance in East or West European cities – the ‘governance’ perspective is strangely ignorant of the power differentials that exist between different stakeholders in the urban system, and tends to grossly underplay the still-important role of government and relations between it and certain stakeholder groups, notably those with capital to invest in cities, who thus have a powerful position in the process. While we can readily accept the idea that socialist cities were run under formal government processes rather than ‘governance’ systems, we might question the appropriateness of characterising these using a concept of government developed to describe urban systems in Western Europe. Can we really recognise socialist urban government systems in the definition given by Stewart of ‘government’ as distinct from ‘governance’: ‘formal governmental systems, conducted under clear procedural rules, involving statutory relationships between politicians, professionals and the public’?

The use of such broad concepts as ‘government’ and ‘governance’ is useful to a limited extent. There has undoubtedly been a shift in the structures of urban management in recent decades in many parts of the world, although the government-to-governance paradigm, while on the right track, tends to overstate it. But we need to be cautious about using concepts designed to explain one socio-political context in another, quite different, context. In the broad sense there has been a shift from government to governance in the post-socialist states. But it was a distinct form of government and it is a distinct form of governance: government with socialist characteristics, we might say, and governance with post-socialist characteristics. These are quite different to government and governance in states that never experienced socialist periods. The ‘relationships between politicians, professionals and the public’ in socialist countries were very different from those relationships in west European or other capitalist states. Similarly, the legacies of socialism for relationships between governments and non-government stakeholders condition the governance system in the post-socialist states in ways that are alien to west Europeans, British or Americans. If the government-to-governance paradigm is to be of any use in the analysis of post-socialist cities it needs to be adapted to the distinct circumstances of socialist and post-socialist cities, and be much more place-specific.

This is even more the case if we are to attempt to use it to understand the cities of Laos, Vietnam or China. In the case of Vientiane there has been an attempt to decentralise urban management, and to broaden understandings of who might be a stakeholder. But the fact remains that there are virtually no civil society organisations outside the party-state apparatus, stakeholder consultation is highly managed, and political pressure over changes to the built environment is minimal.

The concept of governance presumes a certain relationship between inhabitants of a city and the structures of urban management. It presumes a sense of engagement, that inhabitants see themselves as citizens, with certain rights and responsibilities commensurate with such an identity. Governance both depends on citizenship and helps to foster it. When participation and other stakeholder engagement mechanisms are absent – as they are in an independent sense in Laos – it is difficult to see the identity of ‘citizen’ as being anything other than formalistic and empty of content. The distinction is something like that between the formal institutions
of democracy and the socio-political processes that allow citizens to actually participate in
democratic processes.

This formalistic citizen identity surely has ramifications for broader processes of identity formation
and connectedness to particular urban places. In Vientiane it contributes to a bifurcation of
meaning and identity at different scales. It helps to explain the oft-made observation that
the city is more like a collection of villages than a metropolis, since inhabitants feel a deeper
ability to shape and contribute to their local areas than to the wider city. The metropolitan
space of meaning-making is substantially occupied by the state itself and its projects aimed at
fostering national identity – here Vientiane’s role as national capital is important – and party-
state legitimacy, with little scope for the exertion of alternative narratives and identities.

In the face of ever-deepening globalisation processes it is tempting to see convergence in urban
development and management processes in cities around the world. Caution should, however,
be exercised. While some post-socialist east European and Russian cities are experiencing similar
patterns of change to cities in countries that never experienced socialism – de-industrialisation,
the rise of growth coalitions, an emphasis on place marketing and spectacle, entrepreneurial
government, privatisation of infrastructure and service provision, and an enhanced emphasis
on real estate development – this needs to be understood in the context of different historical,
institutional and social legacies, which shape those processes in distinct ways. The reintegration
of the former socialist economies of Asia into the global capitalist system has also ignited in
them urban processes that have some similarities with processes occurring in other parts of the
world: place marketing, spectacular development, entrepreneurialism, privatisation, high levels
of real estate investment. But substantial differences also exist, most notably in the absence of
deindustrialisation – in fact its opposite – at least in China and Vietnam, and the still important
role of government as decision maker, regulator, actor and, particularly important, investor.

In Vientiane’s case, Laos’ reintegration into regional and global networks has certainly had
major ramifications for the city. An enhanced role for private sector investment and initiative, a
liberalisation of regulation, and new prestige development projects are similar manifestations
of change to those occurring in other cities, whether ex-socialist or not. But it is much less
theories of urban change and urban geography that are relevant to an understanding of
identity in contemporary Vientiane than an understanding of Laos’ distinctive position as an
Asian communist state in transition, but still very much under the rule of the Communist Party.

**Post-socialism Under Communist Party Rule**

To understand the post-socialist, and, for that matter, the socialist cities of Asia, it is important
to remember one important fact: unlike in Central and Eastern Europe, socialism – that is,
rule by the Communist Party – was not imposed by an outside, quasi-imperial power. Communist power in the CEE countries always labored under the shadow of its original sin
– its introduction, largely at the barrel of a gun, by the Soviet Union at the end of WW2. In
contrast, the Communist Parties of Asia can all, with considerable justification, lay claim to
nationalist credentials, to having rid their nations of colonialism, and to having established the
foundations of national independence. This may be the main reason that Communist Parties
have managed to retain their privileged political positions while managing the transition to a
market economy in China, Vietnam and Laos (North Korea is a rather unique case, of course,
and the survival of Party rule there appears to be largely a result of raw repression and the
effects of totalitarianism. Cambodia is an even more special case, where Communist Party rule
self-destructed in its original manifestation, while the subsequent version imposed by Vietnam
transformed, under international pressure, into a bastard form of democracy).

Some of the symbols of communism that punctuated the landscapes of Asian socialist cities
were foreign – that is, Soviet-inspired – with Lenin featuring most prominently, although I
can think of no Lenin statue or monument in Laos. In reality, Asian communist regimes had
a pantheon of indigenous heroes to draw on for commemorative and propaganda purposes.
Indeed, maintenance of the continuity of symbolic landscapes is important to the maintenance
of Communist Party power. For the Chinese Communist Party to completely abandon the
cult of personality surrounding Mao Zedong – tens of thousands of Chinese still visit his mausoleum every day – would be to open up reconsideration of the People’s Republic’s past, with unknown but predictably negative ramifications for the Party’s legitimacy. In Vietnam Ho Chi Minh’s embalmed body and ubiquitous, wise visage provide continuity between the Party’s anti-colonial past and its modern present, as it shepherds the nation into the global economy. A similar role is played by Kaysone Phomvihane and to a lesser extent by Prince Souphannouvong in Laos, although the latter may also play a dual role of assuaging the latent longing for royalty amongst many Lao.

While there can be no doubting the influence of the Soviet Union on urban planning and architecture in the broader socialist world, this was always conditioned by local circumstances, including, in particular, political and cultural sensitivities. As Logan (2000) has shown, Vietnamese planners and architects gratefully accepted the advice of their Soviet mentors, but rarely implemented it without variation. However, it also appears to be the case that socialist urbanisation was more readily transplanted into CEE than into Asia. In Asia, historical urban patterns, levels of development, conceptions of urbanism, and relationships between rural and urban areas were much different to those in Central and Eastern Europe, and in Laos proved remarkably resistant to socialisation efforts. In Vietnam and Laos, efforts to control population growth in the big cities, which were considered unproductive centres of consumption, were relatively successful, and the rural population remained, as it does to this day, somewhere in the vicinity of 80 percent of the nation’s population (Forbes 1996; Bounthavy & Taillard 2000: 38). There was never, thus, the same level of housing shortage that existed in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union and which led, in conjunction with the collectivist ethic animating the regimes, to the industrialisation of mass housing provision whose ubiquitous manifestation is the estates of concrete flat blocks. In Vientiane, in particular, such places are virtually non-existent.

Because Laos remains a Communist Party-run state, urban development processes have become bifurcated. In fact, because Laos is also an aid-reliant developing nation, we could say they have become trifurcated. The reintroduction of a market for real estate, facilitated by a World Bank-assisted land titling project, has led to new private construction and the expansion of urban areas, particularly to the east. Private – often foreign – investment in tourism facilities, including large hotels such as the Don Chan Palace Hotel on the bank of the Mekong, and shopping areas like Vientiane’s first mall next to the Talat Sao (Morning Market), complement family investment in new residences and shop-houses. At the same time, the government is able to mobilise substantial amounts of bilateral or multilateral aid for urban infrastructure projects, such as drainage works, or the Nong Chanh wetlands rehabilitation (some might say ‘destruction’) project. These aid-sponsored urban development activities inject international expertise and attitudes to urbanisation into Vientiane, with varying effects, not always positive. Nevertheless, it is wrong to think of countries like Laos, which appear to exist on the periphery of global political, economic and technical processes as being, as a result, marginal to the latest thinking in these fields. It is, indeed, Laos’ very underdevelopment that exposes it to international influences mediated by organisations such as the World Bank, United Nations Development Program and Non-Government Organisations (Long & Sweet 2006).

The third urban development process in contemporary Vientiane is, to a considerable extent, confined to the symbolic landscape. By the mid-1980s, the Lao government was becoming increasingly concerned about the parlous state of the national economy (St John 2006). As in Vietnam, China and the Soviet Union, disillusionment with the old system of

Figure 1: Don Chan Palace Hotel. (Source: Colin Long)
central planning was becoming acute, and at the Fourth Party Congress, held in 1986, the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (LPRP) introduced what it called the New Economic Mechanism (NEM). Despite the rhetoric of ‘market socialism’, the NEM really meant establishing a market economy and the effective abandonment of socialism. It is important to understand the apparent contradiction between a market economy and single party communist rule. We need to recall that the LPRP was always both nationalist and communist, and in both senses a modernising force. ‘Modernisation’ for both communist and non-communist nationalists in the post-colonial world has nearly always meant ‘development’ in a western-influenced sense of economic growth, urbanisation and, usually, industrialisation. For the Communist Parties of Asia the desire for ‘development’ remained strong even as the socialist means of achieving it appeared to falter in the 1980s. ‘Development’ in itself – without the socialist prefix – became their goal from at least the mid-1980s, and even more definitely after the collapse of the Soviet Union. When socialist economic organisation no longer appeared an effective means of achieving development, there was a sufficiently large new guard of reformers to ensure that ‘development’ won out over ‘socialism’ – even if it meant development via market means. Laos, like Vietnam and China, now displays many traits of the authoritarian developmental state also found at various times in Indonesia, Singapore and South Korea.

The communist states of Asia sought their original legitimacy in the struggle against outside powers and in the struggle to build socialism. Now, neither of these sources of legitimacy is relevant. But the failure of socialist economic organisation has not reduced the Party’s need for an overarching ideological justification, and the language in which it expresses this remains distinctively Marxist-Leninist. Indeed, in a period when most investment in the built environment is funded by the private sector (in the case of hotels and shopping centres) or bilateral or multilateral aid (in the case of urban infrastructure improvements), it should come as no surprise that state investment is largely in the form of symbolic buildings (such as museums) or structures of bureaucratic authority (such as the new Prime Minister’s Office). The Kaysone Phomvihane Memorial Museum, erected in 2000, is the major element in a mild effort by the Lao state to construct a personality cult behind the late revolutionary leader. Kaysone’s life provides an example of socialist rectitude and commitment to Lao independence that is intended to provide a model for Lao citizens to follow. It is buildings such as this, and the new Army Museum, that are the main manifestations of state investment (usually with significant assistance from Vietnam or China) in the built environment, and the main contributors to the symbolic landscape of the city.

 Seeking Development and Historical Continuity

The reintroduction of the market economy and the reintegration of Laos into regional and global economic and political networks have had a substantial effect on Vientiane. Economic relationships are more extensive than before, with Thailand playing a major role in trade and investment. This has also brought Thai cultural influences, a trend that is less welcomed by the Lao government, which worries about the influence of Thai popular culture and western culture mediated through it (Enfield 1999). But the government’s concern may ultimately prove fruitless given the linguistic, cultural and physical proximity of the two countries.

Other foreign influences are growing. Korean, Chinese and Sino-Malaysian investment in large-scale urban development projects is increasing.

Figure 2: Kaysone Phomvihane Memorial Museum. (Source: Colin Long)
The Don Chanh Palace Hotel is one manifestation of this. Often these projects are insensitive to Vientiane’s historic urban fabric. The French-era treasury building on Fa Ngum Road was demolished some years ago by Korean interests, while a new town was constructed near the That Luang marsh (the That Luang is Laos’ most important Buddhist monument and a symbol of the nation) by a Chinese company as part of a deal for a new stadium for the Southeast Asian Games of 2009 (Stuart-Fox 2009: 142).

Governments are often susceptible to the promises of investment and development made by big overseas companies, and poor, developing countries like Laos are particularly vulnerable. The absence of any viable civil society organisations means there are few voices able to be raised in opposition to specific projects or in defence of particular places.

Vietnamese influence remains strong, but more commonly at a government and ideological level. Chinese influence, as is the case through much of Southeast Asia, is growing in proportion to its economic and political stature (Stuart-Fox 2009).

Investment and development are welcomed in Vientiane because they contribute to the consolidation of the government’s vision of the city as the modern capital of the modern Lao developmental state (Askew, Logan & Long 2007: Ch. 7). Once again older patterns are re-emerging, with Vientiane the modernised administrative centre and Luang Prabang, in the north, the cultural and heritage centre of the nation – a pattern that replicates the colonial-era urban system (Logan, Long & Hansen 2002).

Great hopes are held by the Lao government and by international agencies alike that Vientiane can become the hub of transport routes linking southern China and northern Vietnam with Thailand (Sisouphanthong & Taillard 2000). Just how realistic these hopes are remains to be seen, but improvements in transport infrastructure are being made, including new and improved roads in the northern provinces, deepened shipping channels in the Mekong and plans to link Nong Khai in Thailand with Vientiane via Laos’ first railway (not counting the short transshipment line built by the French in the early 20th century to bypass the Khone Falls near the border with Cambodia).

These transport improvements are part of a broader effort to do what the Americans couldn’t during the 1960s and 1970s – establish Vientiane as the motor of a monetised market economy that can be spread to the rest of the country. So far the communists appear to be having more success in this effort than their American predecessors, although the persistent imbalance in levels of development between Vientiane and distant rural areas cannot be downplayed. Some 80 percent of Laos’ population remains subsistence farmers and Vientiane is one of relatively few hubs of foreign investment and dynamic economic activity; most of the others are either Mekong valley towns with good trade links with Laos’ neighbours – Pakse and Savannakhet in the south – or sites of major tourism investment, like Luang Prabang in the north. Vientiane is both – a trading centre and the major tourist gateway to Laos – and it is also the location of most of the nation’s industry, however insubstantial that might be. As the largest city and capital, Vientiane is naturally the location of most central government functions. This attracts the head offices of foreign investors such as mining companies – which are responsible for a large proportion of Laos’ foreign exchange earnings – and international agencies and NGOs. In turn this means that Vientiane has by far the largest population of expats, which is reflected in restaurants, bars, shops and schools catering to westerners.

However, this greater engagement of Vientiane with broader regional and international economic networks leaves it more exposed than other parts of the country to the vagaries of international economic conditions. In 1997 this meant that Vientiane was more seriously affected by the Asian Financial Crisis than would be expected if we considered only the level of exposure of Lao banks themselves. This is because of Vientiane’s close relationship with Thailand, whose sharp economic downturn spilled over the Mekong into its smaller neighbor. Similarly, the severe contraction in the global economy from 2008 had noticeable impacts on Vientiane as foreign mining companies, badly hit by falling commodity prices, repatriated hundreds of staff and their families.
It is important to remember, as emphasised at the beginning of this paper, that Laos is still a one party communist state. The continuation of LPRP rule is most clearly manifested in Vientiane, as I have already argued, in the city’s symbolic landscape, in institutions of legitimacy such as museums. The low level of industrialisation and the termination of the socialist project mean that the common features of Central and East European and Soviet socialism – large state-owned industrial and housing complexes – are largely absent from Vientiane. The state’s presence in the urban landscape is largely confined to the expression of power and legitimacy. The rest of the city is shaped by private sector and individual activities as well as – a point that distinguishes Laos from most of the former socialist world and should not be neglected – the Buddhist sangha.

It is sometimes said that Vientiane is more like a collection of villages than a city. Part of the reason for this is that most ‘suburbs’ have a clear focal point of their own – the local Buddhist temple, which continues to play an important role in the local community. Buddhism was never completely repressed by the communists and, although it is monitored by the regime, it is a flourishing element of contemporary Lao life, with large numbers of males experiencing the life of a monk for at least a short period. Indeed, as Evans (1998: Ch 6) has shown, since the abandonment of socialism began in earnest in the late-eighties, there has been a growing interest in Buddhism on behalf of the government. We need to understand that the Leninist state form adopted by the LPRP is in many respects socially and culturally, not to mention politically, alien to Laos. The reassertion of Buddhism in contemporary Laos is not only part of an effort on the behalf of the regime to seek new sources of legitimacy (Evans 1998; Pholsena 2006: 70-71), it also represents a reassertion of older forms of social, cultural and political organisation. Thus, as Keyes, Hardacre and Kendall (1994; see Pholsena 2006: 69) write, the state has ‘been forced to embrace Buddhism, and as such to attempt to control its public manifestations, in order to counteract a popular source of authority that transcends that of the state’ (Pholsena 2006: 69).

**Heritage, Identity and Urban Transformation**

Young and Kaczmarek (2008: 57) make the necessary point that ‘it is important to think of postsocialist place identity formation as locally contingent, as formed in the complex interaction of national, regional and local discourses about identity, and as performed by key actors rather than being inherent in a locality’. The collapse of European and Soviet socialism helped to liberate analyses of socialism from some of the more restrictive and ideologically-loaded categories that had been imposed on them during the Cold War. If there was a need for more culturally and historically nuanced understandings of Soviet and European socialism, then such sophistication was even more valid for understanding the Communist Party-ruled states in other parts of the world. While Soviet and Chinese models of socialist organisation were important for the Lao communists, the historical, social, cultural, economic and political distinctiveness of this small, poor Southeast Asian nation was just as significant in the shaping of Lao socialism. Socialism was never uniform or monolithic in Central and Eastern Europe, and its characteristics changed even more in its translation to Asia. Certainly there were sufficient similarities in economic systems and political organisation across the nations of the former socialist world to justify viewing them as of a particular type. But such a label tells us about as much as pointing out that the USA and Malaysia are both capitalist democracies.

If socialism was manifested differently in different parts of the world, then we must also be careful in drawing comparisons or parallels about the post-socialist evolution of the former socialist states. A good example can be found in the relationship between post-socialist cities and their broader regional contexts. The process of reinforcing the role of cities as competitive nodes within the European spatial system, which has been one of the drivers of the reconfiguration of Central and East European urban identities, doesn’t have an exact parallel in Laos. There is no supra-national entity like the EU (ASEAN [the Association of South East Asian Nations] is a much looser and less powerful organisation) and there is no equivalent of ‘Europe’ as a cultural lodestar providing an ‘image and complexity of positive values’ (Young & Kaczmarek 2008: 54). However, Vientiane’s role as a node of economic vitality and post-
socialist transformation is still strong. This is because of the way that the dynamics of economic liberalisation are concentrated in urban areas in a country that is still predominantly rural. The reinforcement of Vientiane’s role is, to a much greater extent than is the case with Central and East European cities, a result of endogenous factors, although Vientiane’s role as the national capital and hence main mediator of trade and political and cultural interaction with the rest of the world cannot be forgotten.

Perhaps one of the most important aspects of post-socialist transition in which Laos – and other states still ruled by Communist parties – and the CEE and ex-Soviet states diverge is in their relationship to history. As Young and Kaczmarek (2008) show, the governments of many post-socialist CEE cities seek to reclaim some mythical pre-communist golden age, eliding or skipping over the communist past. In Laos there is also a harking back to a golden age – but it is a pre-colonial one, and the Royal Lao Government period and, to a lesser extent, the colonial period are significant only in relation to the struggle for national independence and revolution. The pre-colonial golden age is recuperated as a proto-nationalist phase interrupted by colonialism and restored on its natural trajectory only by the advent of socialism. Thus, rather than the communist past being seen as a shameful period best forgotten, it is portrayed as the political and cultural force that enabled Laos to reclaim its historical national identity (for detailed discussion of developments in Lao historiography and attitudes to the past see Goscha & Ivarsson 2003; particularly the chapters by Stuart-Fox, Evans & Goscha).

On 2 December each year Laos celebrates its national day. In times past this meant military parades on the That Luang parade ground, past the great Buddhist stupa and the National Assembly building. In recent years the character of the celebration has changed. Today the parade is more a celebration of Laos’ culture, traditions and ethnic diversity (Evans 1998: Ch. 3). In 2003 a statue of King Fa Ngum, deemed to be the founder of the Lao nation, was unveiled in Vientiane (Evans 2003). The inauguration ceremony included a procession featuring the sacred Prabang image brought specially from Luang Prabang. The absence of socialist iconography and the emphasis on royal and traditional culture surprised some observers. A Lao academic in Bangkok suggested:

Thus, that the communist government of Laos now allows royal symbolism and promotes monarchical sentiment can be considered as a re-traditionalisation of the totalitarian regime to garner political security. The Lao government is urgently in need of new symbols for its legitimacy after long years of authoritarianism (Pavin Chachavalpongponpun 2003).

But the transformation of the national day celebrations and the inauguration of the Chao Anouvong statue reflect broader processes in Laos, which, in turn, are shaping contemporary Vientiane. The quiet abandonment of socialism has opened urban development processes to new influences, including private, family and international investment. At the same time, however, the LPRP remains in power and in need of legitimisation as the sole legitimate political voice. As a result there is considerable emphasis on symbolic construction of museums and cultural institutions – much of it with Chinese and Vietnamese assistance – and on ‘traditional’ elements of the built environment. Thus, the evolution of Vientiane’s socialist and post-socialist urban identity has been conditioned by the specific characteristics of Lao history – particularly the two decades immediately prior to the victory of the revolutionary forces in 1975, and the ideological and political traits of those forces – and by the fluctuating and complex integration of Laos into global economic and political processes.
References


**Endnotes**

1 Throughout this chapter, unless otherwise indicated, I exclude the rather special case of North Korea from any discussion of the remaining Asian communist or transitional communist states.

2 Souphannouvong was a prince of the Lao royal family who, in the years after WW2, took a leadership role in the Lao forces resisting the re-imposition of French control over the country. He developed close connections with the Vietnamese communist-led resistance forces, the Viet Minh, and went on to become the public face of the Lao revolutionary forces, commonly known as the Pathet Lao.

3 ‘Sangha’ might be loosely translated as the ‘monkhood’, or ‘the church’, in the sense that Catholics might speak of the organisational hierarchy of their religion.