The Lao American Diaspora and its Changing Relations with the Ethnic Homeland

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This thesis titled
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Abstract

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This thesis research examines how Lao Americans have maintained their relations with family members and relatives in Laos after their settlement in the U.S. in the 1970s and 1980s and how their views of the home country have changed in the Post–Cold War period. Six weeks of participant observation fieldwork and in-depth personal interviews with members of the Lao diaspora community in Columbus, Ohio revealed that since the end of the Cold War, their connection to the homeland has changed dramatically, as they have finally been allowed to visit Laos. However, their current socio-economic status in the U.S. and prior relations with the homeland government explain individual differences in their decision to visit the homeland. Many Lao American diaspora people are involved in one of the three types of homeland–diasporas connections that include, expanding familial and financial obligations, social networks and business opportunities, and involvement with transnational and humanitarian projects in Laos.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The largest flow of migrants from Southeast Asia, particularly the Indochina Peninsular, to the U.S. occurred during the 1970s and 1980s, the years immediately following the Vietnam War. By 1995, it is estimated that more than 2 million refugees from Cambodia, Laos\(^1\), and Vietnam, the three former socialist countries of Indochina, had settled outside their homelands. Of those, nearly one million people had settled in the U.S., while another half million settled in other Western nations, including France, Canada, and Australia (Robinson, 1998). According to the 2000 U.S. Census, which is the latest data available, approximately 204,000 Lao\(^2\) diaspora people resided in the U.S. The two major groups of Lao refugees from Laos have settled in the U.S. included the Hmong and the lowland Lao, and the latter accounted for the majority. Although they have dispersed throughout the country, their largest concentrations are located in California (30%), Minnesota (12%), and Wisconsin (8%).

There is a large body of literature examining immigration and integration of refugees in the host society, including those of the second generation (Zhou, 1997; Minh, 2002; Haines, 2007). While much attention has been paid to the Vietnamese refugees and their children, refugees from Laos, particularly those from the lowland, have received relatively little academic attention (Rutledge, 1992; Blanc, 1997; Sonneborn, 2007). Much of the research assume that Lao refugees have not been able

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\(^1\) Laos is a country name of officially the Lao People Democratic Republic  
\(^2\) I use “Lao” instead of “Laotian” to refer to ethnic Lao diaspora or Lao refugee community that consist of both economic and political refugee, exclude the Hmong ethnic.
to maintain their ties to the homeland, given the hostile nature of their departure and their lack of success in acquiring high socioeconomic status in the U.S. (Newbold, 2002; Rumbault 1995). However, there are at least two aspects that the existing literature has not discussed: first, how the Lao American diaspora maintained their sense of connection to the homeland during the Cold War; second, how that sense has changed in the post Cold War era after they were allowed to visit the homeland.

This study examines how member of the Lao American diaspora have maintained their relations with people in Laos; in particular, how their sense of connection and belonging to the homeland, has changed over time and what has caused such changes. I also examine the changing socioeconomic and political conditions in Laos as well as the foreign relations between Laos and the U.S. that have factored into the Lao American diaspora’s emotional and material links with their homeland. The specific research questions include: 1) what has been the history of the Lao diaspora in the U.S. regarding their settlement and integration in American society; 2) how and why the Lao government has changed its position on the Lao overseas; 3) how Lao American people view their homeland through interactions with their relatives stayed behind in Laos; and 4) what contribution could the Lao American diaspora make to the socioeconomic development of Laos in the future.

1.1 Research Methods

This study draws on the descriptive findings from the ethnographic fieldwork in the Lao community, located in Columbus, Ohio, through participation observation and
a series of in-depth personal interviews conducted in winter 2008. I obtained policy data from the Embassy of Laos in Washington D.C., regarding its promotion of socio-economic connections between Laos and Lao American people. The research also involved an analysis of policy documents and publications from international institutions that actively participate in Laos’s socioeconomic development, such as The World Bank and The Asian Development Bank (ADB). To analyze personal interview data, the present study applied a data-driven approach in order to understand the experience and perspective of the Lao American diaspora concerning their sense of connection with the homeland. Therefore, the interactions with families and relatives staying behind in Laos were analyzed in the findings as supportive factual evidence of how the Lao American diaspora have maintained or changed their connections with the homeland. Thus, the analysis is descriptive and consisted of some of informants’ own narratives that describe their feelings and attitudes toward the homeland over time.

1.2 Participant Observation

Participant observation is an important foundation of my data collecting. I stayed with Lao American diaspora people in community in Columbus, Ohio, to observe and engage in various aspects of community interactions, such as joining their ritual practice at the Lao Buddhist temple on weekends and attending their social gatherings including visiting friends, and parties. I chose this method to gain a deeper understanding of the social interactions of my informants and the community dynamics, as stated in Dewalt and Dewalt (2002, p. 2) that participant observation “is a way of approaching the field work experience, gaining understanding of the most fundamental
processes of social life.” Moreover, participant observation allowed me to experience the daily lives and conditions of the Lao community through “the voices of the informants” rather than my point of view (Finn, 1994, p. 26-27). Since I was in a way a stranger to the community studied and had no previous contacts before the fieldwork, I chose to be involved with its formal and informal gatherings in the Buddhist temple as much as possible in order to establish initial contact and set the foreground for further dialogue with the community.

1.3 In-depth Personal Interviews

I selected the Lao American diaspora community in Columbus, Ohio, to be the subject of my fieldwork for the purpose of sampling. Selection was based on several criteria: first, the subjects were selected for convenient samplings; the state of Ohio has a medium size Lao American diaspora population compared to other states across the country. The vast majority of the population was born in Laos and fled to the U.S. during the 1970s-1980s. According to the US Census 2000, of the 3,277 Lao American diaspora residents in Ohio, 2,770 indicated that they were born in Laos. All my informants entered the U.S. between 1975–1985; therefore, those who shared with me their life histories and experiences in Lao and the U.S. they are among the first generation of refugees.

The fieldwork was conducted from November 23rd to December 30th 2008. I chose the Lao Buddhist temple as a starting point of the fieldwork. The temple is the center of social and political activities, such as a meeting venue and communal space to
celebrate festivals, where I established and developed relationships with the informants. In fact, prior to my fieldwork, I first visited the temple in September 2008, and began my observation for an ethnography term paper, which helped me begin to familiarize myself with the community. The monk of the temple, one of the most respected and active leader in the community offered me valuable advice and introduced me to number of diaspora community. Therefore, although I was a stranger to the community, I was able to approach more informants by attending the community social events, such as the celebrations of the end of Buddhist Lent, new born babies, and Thanksgiving.

I used in-depth, semi-structured personal interviews to obtain stories from the informants who agreed to participate in the research. Personal interviews are used to understand the informants’ feeling, experience, and expectation on the studied topic from the informants’ point of view (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 2). However, the procedure of how to obtain participation in the most effective way depends largely on how the informants understand their role in the research and their willingness to share their information. Because my research is dealing with personal behaviors in relation to homeland politics and family interactions, it was important for me to encourage the informants to share their personal stories relevant to the topic in order to explore their interactions with relatives in Laos as well as among the Lao American diaspora community in the US. In this case, in-depth personal interviews are considered most appropriate. This interview technique is not only a good way to establish rapport, but also a way to make casual conversation within the limited time frame that most informants might be concerned about (Bernard, 2002, p. 204-205). This approach
helped me to have control over the topic of my conversation and made my conversation more informal, which I believe would encourage the informants’ willingness to share their life stories.

My interview procedures were guided by four sets of questions (Appendix A). The questions were organized into the topics of migration, settlement, family, and relationship with Laos. The first two question sets seek to understand their migration process, starting from their escape from Laos to arrival in the U.S. The third is to explore how the informants have maintained their relationship with the families and relatives in Laos over the years. The final question set is concerning the informants’ perspective of homeland affairs, with particular focus on Lao Americans, changed views of Laos after they have re-established connection with their families in Laos and/or after their visit to the homeland.

Interviews were conducted with ten informants, with five females and five males. Eight interviews were conducted in person, while the remaining two were conducted by phone due to the informants’ preferences. Three of my initial contacts decided not to have interviews. All data related to informants’ identities are confidential. For convenient reference, I used “F” as female and “M” as male, and added the number to indicate the order of the interviews. The informants are referred to as F1, F2, F3, M4, F5, M6, M7, F8, M9, and M10 together with their created names. The brief personal information of each informant is presented in Table 1.
The interview data were recorded by shorthand note taking. All interviews were conducted in the Lao language and later translated the interviews into English when writing up field-notes.
Diaspora is a concept used to capture the characteristics of a displaced population, and it is studied in a wide range of academic discourse and research areas, such as anthropology, cultural studies, and political science (Adamson, 2002; Bose, 2008; Cohen, 2005). Originally, the concept of diaspora referred to the Jews after being expelled from their historic homeland and scattered and resettled in other places outside of their homeland. In recent time, the increase population movements around the globe has given rise to different forms of dispersed populations, such as refugees, guest workers, and labor migrants, who are “residing and acting in the host countries but maintaining strong sentimental and material links with their countries of origin – their homelands.” Sheffer referred these populations as “modern diasporas” (1986, p. 3). Since the definition of diaspora broadly encompasses different types of migration populations, this makes it difficult to distinguish diaspora from volunteer migration. On the other hand, other leading scholars such as William Safran (1991), James Clifford (1994) and Tölölyan (1996) attempt to synthesize the basic features that are central to the diaspora definition by placing emphasis on collective characteristics, including history of forced dispersal, minority status in the host country, strong sense of memories, and on-going interaction with the homeland.

Cohen (1997), in *Global Diaspora*, further categorizes different features of diaspora in order to develop a more definitive typology. For example, a certain diaspora group could be referred to as a victim diaspora, such as the enslaved African diaspora, a displaced diaspora from Armenia to Europe, a trade diaspora such as overseas Chinese
in Southeast Asia, and a labor diaspora, such as Indians during British colonialism. However, the author admits that, indeed, there is no clear division between different categories: one diasporic group may not fall into only one “diaspora typology” but oftentimes may overlap with other types; especially, the status of a certain diasporic group may change according to the historical context.

One important discussion attempting to reduce the ambiguous definition and expand the application of theories related to diasporas was the work of Shuval (2000). The author not only differentiates between migration and diaspora, but also further discuss the actors with whom the diaspora connects or interacts with (host and home countries), theories (e.g. ethnicity, transnationalism and globalization, state and its authority), and social and political dynamics within the diaspora communities.

Further discussion is made by Butler (2001) who adapts Safran’ diaspora paradigm. He proposes that the study of diaspora should be conducted within the boundary of diasporic characteristics. By using the same criteria, this would allow us to compare and contrast different diaspora communities, which should, in turn, contribute to a broader aspects and a more valid methodology of diaspora studies. He suggests that researchers look at the following contexts (Butlure, 2001, p. 195):

1) reason for, and conditions of, the dispersal
2) relationship with the homeland
3) relationship with the host lands
4) interrelationships within communities of the diaspora
5) The comparative studies of different diasporas
Most studies indicate that a common characteristic of all diasporas are displaced people who have been directly or indirectly forced to leave their homeland to settle in different countries. Unwillingness to leave the homeland is the main characteristic that explains the reasons why these people would often have longing memories about their original homeland. Indeed, in order to be able to describe the life experience of one diaspora community, one must examine their historical context as well as the social, economic, and political settings of both departure and hosts country. These factors are the conditions that diasporic people respond to in order to maintain their social interaction both within the host country and with the homeland.

Despite on-going debates over the concept of diaspora, it is still one of the most productive tools that can be used to study and describe refugees’ emotional and physical connections with the homeland. Wahlbeck argues that “the concept of diaspora can take into account the refugees’ specific transnational experiences and social relationships,” (2002, p. 222). In order to understand the complexity of diasporic homeland connections, Vertovec and Cohen (1999) discussed three approaches to study and describe different dimensions of diaspora social interaction. First, diaspora can be understood as a “social form” – this “social relationships” refers to interactions between a diaspora’s connection with history of place, homeland politics, and “economic strategies”. Second, diaspora can be explained as a “type of consciousnesses”; this refers to diaspora’s awareness of ‘multi-locality’ which is defined by a diaspora’s sense of place between “here” and “there,” or the home of residence and ethnic homeland. The third aspect is to consider diaspora as a “mode of cultural production” which looks
at diaspora as one of the transnational communities that is influenced by globalization. Diaspora, under this definition, can facilitate and reproduce cultural production, and influence social change (Vertovec and Cohen, 1999, p. xix). Examining different approaches to the understand of diaspora not only provides explanations of different aspects of a diaspora community, but also confirms the essentials of diaspora social dimensions that are determined by the historical context of homeland connections, which is a primary component in understanding a diasporic community.

In this study, I refer to the Lao refugee community in the U.S. as the Lao American diaspora or Lao diaspora interchangeably. The Lao diaspora that I have studied made up of a group of refugees who left their homeland unprepared because of unfriendly political and economic environment during the 1970s in the Indochina peninsular. More importantly, they have resettled in a country which holds contrast political philosophy from their native country, Laos as a communist state versus the U.S. as a capitalist state. As a result, the Lao American diaspora was considered as opposition group by the homeland authority. This status made it difficult for them to maintain their emotional or physical connections with the homeland and people there, particularly during the Cold War as compared to the Post-Cold War era of the 21st century.

2.1 Diaspora in the Host Society

This section examines how the diaspora within the host society express their emotional connection with their homeland. Diaspora consciousness is characteristic of
diaspora emotional attachment to the native homeland, despite the fact that not all members of diaspora hope to return (Tölöyan, 1996). Based on common observations across different diaspora communities, they express their consciousness and construct ethnic identity and social mechanisms to assist their ethnic community in the host country (Bankston & Zhou, 2000). These ethnic ties can be forged through a formation of a self-help community, preserving of religious institutions, including the business cluster locates in a particular geographical location formed by different diaspora communities in the U.S. For example, local shops that sell traditional food and provide services such as video rental for a certain ethnic community is one way to emulate the home country’s way of life. Examples include Chinatowns in many cities around the U.S., little Saigon in San Francisco, or Korean-town in Chicago. This clustering of ethnic groups in these regions can be best described by Vertovec and Cohen’s term as an “imagine homeland” (1999, xix). It does not matter if the homeland is imaginary or real, this awareness brings the diaspora to realize the differences of their identity, belief, and social network from the mainstream society of their host country. Angew (2005, p. 5) asserts that the diaspora is a community that defines itself based on various forms of ethnic identities such as language, culture, and religion, while their construction of community is part of the process of forming their own way of life that adapt features of both native homeland and the host country culture. This practice reveals flexibility and fluidity of diasporas’ identities that could be formed and re-formed in different periods, and social settings.
A diaspora community is living under a consciousness of triangular interactions among three actors – diaspora community, home country and host society. Each pair of actors such as diaspora community and host country or home country and host country is closely related to homeland culture and politics. Anderson & Lee (2005, p. 13) suggest that for many Asian American diasporas, the notion of homeland may not always refer to the ancestral homeland, but the space in which they used to share physical or emotional experiences. It could represent political, social, economic, and cultural spaces and vary among different migrant groups. Therefore, diaspora consciousness cannot refer to a particular place alone, but it is indeed constructed from the diaspora’s abstract memories and experiences that are rooted in their homeland which in turn form their identity in the host country. Bose (2008, p. 119) added that in the case of refugees or populations who are forced to leave their homeland, the bond to the homeland is not a connection to the entire state boundaries, but rather to a particular heritage place where they originally depart from. Further research is needed to assess the validity of this claim.

However, ethnic identities that are presented through cultural practice are not static nor “fixed, rigid, or homogeneous, but are instead fluid, always changing, and heterogeneous” (Hua, 2005, p. 193). Even within the ethnic community, the meaning of “ethnicity seems to imply a more human sense of the cultural aspects of people’s lives: their beliefs, language, family lives, social relations, and most emblematically their cultural expressions. It also usually implies at least some fluidity, some potential for change” Haines (2007, p. 286). Haines’ argument, even though acknowledging culture
as a form of social practice that has roots and pass down from heritage culture from
generations to generations, it is a social adaptation process which continually re-
produced over time. Some diasporas communities that maintain cultural activities in the
host country claim that this is not only to preserve ethnic identity or build homeland-
like environment, but is also a re-creation of a social network that provides a social
mechanism to assist and facilitate community members to acquire better socioeconomic
status in the host country (Bankston & Zhou, 2000). However, understanding of
diaspora in this approach tends to imply that a diaspora has full control over whether or
not to integrate itself into the host society or retain its ethnic identity. This argument
seems to fail to look at the structural conditions of the host country that may be a factor
in driving the diaspora to form the ethnic community as a survival strategy.

2.2 Diaspora and Homeland Connection

For many refugees, physical connections with the homeland are disrupted
because of political conflicts. However, in a contemporary world the increasing flow of
populations cross borders are involved in various aspects of transnational activities (Al-
Ali and Koser, 2002). On the one hand, globalization and the advancement of
communication and transportation technologies not only assist the flow of information
from one continent to another, they also facilitate the flow of products and people
around the globe at a lower cost in shorter time. On the other hand, the conditions that
provoked diasporas, particularly those of refugees from the communist states to the
West, enable them to resume their physical connection with the homeland when the
Cold War ended in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This opportunity not only facilitated
the diaspora to reconnect with their kin in the homeland society, but also signified a process of turning their homeland from their memories into reality when “each return has important political, social, economic, and cultural consequences” (Long and Oxfeld, 2004, p. 4). These returns bring essential meanings and affect their lives in the host country as well as the way they continue interacting with the home society, which in turn could reshape the diaspora’s sense of the homeland. However, the reality of the diaspora’s social, economic, and political positions and conditions as well as the changing political and socioeconomic landscape within the homeland play an important role in shaping this connection as well as defining the diaspora’s decision to be involved in the homeland’s affairs on the macro or micro level or in a public or private sphere.

The most recognized role of diaspora in participating in the homeland affairs is the remittances they have long been supporting relatives and family in the home society, as discussed in the migration literature (Massey et al. 1999; Özden & Schiff, 2005) and many studies by the international agencies such as The International Organization of Migration (IOM), multilateral, and bilateral banks (IOM, 2005). Moreover, some diasporas also facilitate the investment and growth by providing capital investment as well as knowledge transfer through transnational activities. These people take advantage of the social connections obtained from the host country and make a link to people and institutions in the home country. For example, many Chinese in the diaspora have organized transnational business activities across the globe based on their kinship networks. Indeed, diasporas’ participation in the socioeconomic
development in the homeland is well recognized. Remittances have become a survival tool and a major source of income for millions of families in the homeland, especially for Latin American countries (Solimano, 2003). Thus, those migrants are considered as an alternative solution for development and are most encouraged by their homeland authorities. However, many studies still tend to downplay the distinction between diaspora and other groups of migration.

Some scholars had emphasized the role of diaspora in the political arena and their potential to influence international relations, particularly the case of a diaspora lobbying the host country to effect changes in foreign policy toward their home country (Shain, 1994; Shain and Barth, 2003). The diasporas’ political interests and actions can be an interventional factor in international relations in both constructive and destructive manners. Some have contributed to nation-building activities, while others can influence and prolong conflicts inside their homeland (Shan and Barth, 2003, p. 453-454). In fact, many studies emphasize the negative impacts of diaspora in homeland conflict, while the positive influence has been neglected or needs further investigation (Cohen, 2005). Baser (2008) provides an overview and an example of a diaspora’s role in their homeland conflicts, but the author also proposed that diaspora members can be a mediator in the peace-building process, particularly in a post-conflict country. For example, an Afghan diaspora played a significant role in consolidating different Afghan tribes to form the new government after the war in 2001-2002. Some diasporic groups have provided financial support to the relatives during the peace-building processes such as Somalia diaspora communities in the West. Diaspora community can also
exercise their role in the political sphere of the host country to influence the international relations by manipulating the community needs and posing threats to the host country security or home country, depending on their political interests (Shain and Sherman, 1998).

Before I discuss further the role of diaspora community in their native homeland, I will give an overview of different motives and processes of the experience of returning home and case studies about home return and home visit. These are important areas of consideration in order for us to understand a diaspora’s perception about homeland and to comprehend their further involvement in the homeland affairs.

2.3 Home return and Home visiting

Many case studies of diaspora communities have focused on home return and long-term resettlement in the homeland (Tsuda, 2004; Levy, 2004), while fewer have studied short term home visits and the diaspora’s reactions from their visits on the future connection with the homeland that might lead to “the beginning of diaspora,” – when a homecoming, a diasporas’ mission searching for a home, could be contested with the change of homeland economic, social, and political conditions at the time of return (Markowitz, 2004, p. 27). Long and Oxfeld (2004) provided cases studies of return movement of diasporas and refugees focusing on their motives and consequences of home return. They described the return experience in three stages: “imagined, provisional, and repatriated.” The authors argue that despite diasporas’ motivation of home return might influence by their imagination of the homeland, diasporas tend to
make a “provisional return” or resettlement in the homeland if they have good experience of their initial visits, such experience varies among different diaspora groups and their conditions and relations with the homeland before migration. However, the motive of home return does not necessarily follow this sequence.

According to the Long’s (2004) work on home return of the Vietnamese diaspora in France to Vietnam, provisional return was largely driven by the homeland opening up as well as the homeland government’s efforts to increase the Vietnamese diasporas involvement in homeland development. The case study found that the “Viet Kiew”, or Vietnamese diaspora returnees, showed hope for the future in their ancestors’ place, although there were some trust issues with the government. The returnees were able to establish and reconnect with their kin and utilize such connections for a new global social network. The new social space that the Viet Kiew has created in Vietnam is assumed to be another home or place that they are part of and where they have room to engage in Vietnamese society.

For some diaspora groups, especially the later generations of the diaspora who have never lived in the homeland, their search for home and spiritual renewal can be motivation for a homeland visit. Their home visiting is not only to experience their ancestors’ historical space, but also to trace back their roots and identity as well as to experience spiritual fulfillment. Holsey (2004) narrated that Ghanaian kinship tourism provides service to the Ghanaian diaspora in the U.S. to visit the historical place where their ancestors were enslaved for trade centuries ago. While the visitors gained a sense of the past and spiritual fulfillment through their home visiting experience, the
receivers, natives in the homeland, seemed more appreciative of the presents of wealthy Ghanaian Americans, who they assumed, lived in a better place or had more prosperity in the U.S.

By practicing homecoming/returning, the diaspora re-defines its concept of home versus homeland. Markowitz and Stefansson (2004) find diverse notions of home among different diaspora groups; for example, Black Hebrews refuse to perceive the U.S. as their true home, and longing to return to Israel as a mission to search for their historic ancestors’ homeland. This contrasts with Palestinian refugees who view their true home as a particular place or village that they used to inhabit rather than referring to the history of their ancestral land which might be located somewhere else before their generation. The study also discusses the interconnection between individual, political, and economic motivations that have driven people in seeking for home, and presents a temporary home visiting as a form of cultural tourism by the Ghanaian Africans, which are also practiced by other diaspora groups.

Refugees as well as other migrant groups can construct a home or “senses of home” in their native homeland or somewhere else (Black and Koser 1999; Hammond 1999). The acquiring of two homes – native home and residency home – is a strategy to fill gaps that either of those by themselves lacks. For example, the original homeland might perpetuate and give a sense of identity such as culture, language, and geographical identity to returnees, while the host country offers a safe place, peace of mind, and better security in terms of economic and social welfare.
The problem between diaspora and people in the homeland sometimes can be a reflection of change in the diaspora’s perception, which could have been influenced by new social systems in the host country. Diasporic people have adapted and adjusted themselves to new social functions in terms of work ethic, gender role, and other social norms which might confront what are usually practiced by people who remain in the home country (Bascom, 1998, p. 158; Constable, 1999; Stefansson, 2004).
Chapter 3: The Vietnam War and the Lao Diaspora

This chapter reviews the history of the ethnic Lao in Indochina and their overseas migration. The Lao American diaspora was a direct outcome of the Vietnam War following the political conflicts and economic stagnation in Laos. In fact, the Lao people were dispersed outside their territory throughout history, but their emigration increased dramatically during the late 19th century. French colonial rule played an essential role in establishing Laos as a nation state and forming its relations with neighboring countries, in particular with Thailand and Vietnam. The political turmoil during the period from the French rule to the Vietnam War had not only shaped social, economic, and political conditions in Laos, but also defined characteristics of Lao people living outside the Indochina region.

In order to understand the status, motive, and migration process of the Lao people who have settled in the U.S, one must understand the history of Lao settlement and migration in Indochina and beyond. By situating this research in its historical context which relevant to the migration of the Lao American diaspora, one can better understand the factors that could influence the home building process of the Lao Americans diaspora in the U.S. and their connection to the homeland. Such understanding is essential before we examine their changing perceptions of homeland through home-coming experiences and interactions with families and relatives in Laos.

This chapter reviews the history of ethnic Lao settlements in Indochina and the French colonial government’s role in dispersing local people to neighboring countries.
It then examines the Laos’s involvement in the Vietnam War and the issue of Lao refugees as a result of the war as well as the humanitarian aids from the West. The final section discuses the U.S. role in resettling of Lao refugees in the U.S.

3.1 Lao Ethnic Settlement in Indochina (8th – 19th century)

The ethnic Lao are believed to have migrated from Southern China and relocated along the Mekong Valley before the 8th century. Due to the growing power of the Mongols in the 12th century, many ethnic Lao migrated even further south in the Indochina Peninsular. By the 14th century, the Tai speaking population had settled in the current territory of Laos, particularly in the north of the Laos-Vietnam border region, which caused some Laos to move to Thailand (Perter & Simme, 2001, p.20-22). However, there are still controversies over the origin of the ethnic Lao. Berva (1959) suggests that they were a part of the “Tai-Lao” or the Tai speaking people who were considered by the Chinese as of a lower social class and rather uncivilized compared to the Han in Mainland China, while Manich (1967) believe they were an independent population called “Ai Lao” in the southern China before the 8th century (p.13). Manich argues that the Tai people in the Chinese historical record are referred to as the independent population or “barbarians” who were not related to the Chinese ethnically. Thus the long and complex settlement history of ethnic Lao is still widely debated. It is highly believed that the migration and relocation of the ethnic Tai influences the origin of the contemporary Lao nation, and the Lan-Xang kingdom, formed in the 14th century (Appendix B), was the first Lao kingdom in Indochina.
In the late 17th century the Lao Lan-Xang kingdom was divided into three administration areas due to the internal conflicts and external invasions in the late 17th century. Vientiane, capital city of Laos, and Champasak located in the middle and southern provinces respectively, were controlled by Siam (the former name of Thailand), while the north was later occupied by the Vietnamese (Goscha & Ivarsson, 2003, p. 241). After the French came to rule Vietnam in the mid-19th century, claimed as their colony the entire land on the east side of the Mekong River, occupied by both the Vietnamese and the Thai at that time. A treaty was signed between the Thai government and the French colonial government in 1893 to redraw the borders between the Thailand and Vietnam (Stuart Fox Martin, 1997). However, the population size of the Lao residing in Thailand at that time was difficult to estimate because there was no official census data for the Laos before the division of the kingdom. Toye (1968, p. 44-49) reports that according to a Yale study the estimation of the Lao population settled in Thailand could have been six times as large as that of in Laos.

3.2 French Colonialism and the Lao People beyond the Borders (1893-1954)

The major turning point in the settlement of Lao people in Indochina was French colonialism. Although people living on both sides of the Mekong River share the same ethnic origin, French colonialism divided the Lan-Xang kingdom into two different states: the land and population living on the west side of the Mekong River belonged to the Thai, while the east side belonged to the French, which is the current territory of Lao (Appendix C). More than 20 millions of ethnic Lao are believed to be living in northeastern Thailand, while less than 7 millions are in Lao.
During the first half of the 20th century, the French colonial government introduced modern European nationalism to the Lao people under French rule, which prompted the Thai government to do the same to those who were on the other side of the Mekong River. Both authorities, the French and the Thai, divided permanently the Lao people into two nationalities by creating new historical records as well as by enforcing an official language (Manich, 1967). The Thai government recognized only the Thai language as the official one, while in Lao schools and official documents only the French was allowed. The contents of historical lessons taught in schools were modified to promote a national identity distinct from that of the neighboring country. Despite these government efforts, the Lao people living on both sides of the Mekong River did not completely lose their sense of common roots by maintaining similar customs and beliefs. Many Lao families had relatives living on the other side of the Mekong and still retained their ties with each other. Indeed, some ethnic Lao in Thailand helped their relatives in Laos cross the Mekong River to Thai refugee camps during the 1970s and 1980s.

Besides the national division between the Lao and the Thai, the French administration restructured the relationship between the Lao and the Vietnamese by its immigration policy. In fact, the Vietnamese migrating and settlement in southern Laos along the Mekong valley beginning in the mid-1880s, played a key role in the Lao communist revolution in the 1960s and 1970s (Perter & Simms, 2001, p 206). The French colonial government allowed and, indeed, promoted free cross-border migration between Laos and Vietnam so that they could make use of cheap Vietnamese labor in
extracting natural resources in Laos (Gunn, 1990, p.33). The French had no intention to
develop Laos, and development efforts were minimal due to country’s small size and
sparse population. Infrastructure was developed at a minimal level, except for the
purpose of facilitating the military and administrative services between Vietnam and
Laos. In 1945, at least 50,000 Vietnamese were believed to be living in Laos (Toye,
1968, p. 44).

The French colonial power withdrew from Indochina, including Laos in 1954.
However, the 1950s witnessed an intense internal political conflict in Laos that later on,
was manipulated by the US and the communists in Vietnam. Both used Laos as a
strategic geographical location to win the war, thus dragging Laos into the maelstrom
of the Vietnam War in the 1960s.

3.3 The Vietnam War: Foreground of the Lao American Diaspora (1960s-1975)

Laos was fully involved in the Vietnam War in the late 1950s after the US
discovered North Vietnamese troops moving across through the Lao- Vietnam border
and constructing the Ho Chi Minh trail. By the time the conflict in Indochina peaked in
the 1960s, Vietnam was already divided into two administrations: the capitalist South
versus the communist North. In their fight against the South, North Vietnam used its
close relations with the Pathet Lao group in northern Laos to build and maintain its
connections with communist supports in the South.
In the meantime, the internal conflicts divided the country into three groups under different political ideologies: first, the Royal Lao government\(^3\) was characterized as pro-French, second the Royal Lao group was anti-colonialism, and third the Pathet Lao\(^4\), a communist group, was operating in a close collaboration with the Vietnamese communist party and being assisted by other socialist countries.

Therefore, Laos was used as a strategic route for the North Vietnamese troops to fight against the U.S.-backed regime in Saigon, South Vietnam. As a result, when the U.S. found out about the trail, it began a massive air attack in Laos. The airforce operation was launched from the U.S. military bases in both Saigon and Thailand to bomb the trail. Over 200 million tons of bombs were dropped in Laos from 1964 to 1973, which indeed made Laos the country hit by the highest number of bombs per capita in any country in the whole world. Although Laos was recognized by the Geneva Accords as a neutral state in 1962, the U.S. as well as the communist states did not intend to give up their influence in Indochina. Therefore, Laos was inevitably used as the battleground between the great powers. However, the U.S. mission in Laos was kept secret during the war. Indeed, Kissinger (2003, p.125) states that “to spell out the limits publicity was as dangerous to this strategy as to spell out the extent of involvement.” In order to avoid public controversy of the U.S. action over the Geneva Accords, the U.S. government kept its military pressure in Laos secret.

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3 Royal Lao government is “successive government appointed by the king during the existing of the Kingdom of Laos from 1947-1975, the Royal Lao Government came designate the political Right in contradistinction to the Pathet Lao.” (Staur Fox, 2009,p. 285)

4 Pathet Lao is “ refer to anti-French guerrilla movement allied to the Vietminh and subsequently to the procommunist” (Stuart Fox, 2009,p. 249)
Besides bombing the trail, the U.S. operation strategy on the ground was to employ the Hmong, the second largest ethnic group of Laos, to attack the communist troops that occupied the northern provinces of Laos. The Hmong, in their pursuit of their ethnic independence from the Laos, served as local military troops to fight against the Pathet Lao in the mountainous areas in the North, which was highly strategic territory for the communist group. The Hmong were paid, trained and equipped with supplies and weapons working under the directions of the Central Intelligent Agency (CIA), and facilitated by the U.S. embassy in Laos. Moreover, Hmong involvement in the opium trade was permitted by the U.S. military in return for their military cooperation (Evans, 2002; p144). The relations between the Hmong and the U.S. placed the Hmong as an enemy to the Lao communist government, while they received favorable treatment from the U.S. government in their migration to and settlement in the U.S.

The US air war in Laos lasted for nine years from 1964 till the cease-fire of 1973. The war displaced hundreds of thousands. One six of population was internally displaced from villages to other parts of the country (Stuart Fax Martin, 2008, p. xlii), and the war also caused massive refugee flows to the refugee camps located in Thailand. After the fall of Saigon in April 1975, the U.S. withdrew its military operations from Vietnam and reduced its support for the Hmong in Laos. At the same time, the communist party used this opportunity to seize the power in Lao from the Royal government in Vientiane and announced its victory in December 1975. The rule
of the communist party led to an end of the Lao monarchy and re-shaped social and political landscape in Laos in the following decades.


Approximately 350,000 people, roughly 10 percents of the total population fled from Laos after the end of the Vietnam War. There were three different waves of Lao refugees fleeing from Laos. The first wave was a group of political elites or the French associated group who was against communism and feared of prosecution in the newly established communist state. Most of them were wealthy families who had connections with the French government or financial resources to travel to France by themselves. They were also able to seek asylum and settled in France without having to go through the refugee camps as other groups.

The second refugee group was the lowland Lao, the population that my study focuses on. They are the group that were most affected by both external and internal conflict in Laos during the Cold War. Among these people, many did not have any intention to leave Laos, but the extremely hostile political environment in the late 1970s forced them to leave, which I will discuss later in the following section.

The third group was the refugees who were more concerned with economic difficulties, as the country’s economy deteriorated in the 1970s and 1980s. It is difficult to distinguish economic migrants from political refugees because many reported themselves as asylum seekers in order to be admitted to the refugee camps; thus, they are categorized as asylum seekers as well as the second group. The key difference
between the second and the third group is that the latter were more concerned about the humanitarian aid provided in the refugee camps in Thailand rather than political reasons. Another important refugee group was the Hmong, which this study does not cover due to their different characteristics, motives, migration and settlement process from the Lowland Lao. In fact, as discussed in the previous section regarding the relations between the Hmong and the US, the US had assisted the Hmong leaders to resettle in the US since the late 1960s (Castle, 1993). Besides, there were around several hundred thousands of them who might have been killed when the Lao government sent troops to destroy the Hmong’s military in the 1970s. Some of them successfully escaped to the refugee camps in Thailand, while unknown numbers remained hiding in the jungles till today.

However, it should be noted here that some Lao people, opted to stay, while some chose to migrate. This could be due to the lack of financial resources needed for the journey. The majority of those who stayed were among the lowest social and economic status, and they did not have connections with institutions or relations with the people who could facilitate the migration. In addition, the migration was highly risky as they could have been killed by the authorities as well as by smugglers during the process. Another group of people who remained in Laos, excluding the communist party members and its troops, was the returned educated students from the Former Soviet Union and other socialist nations who believed in the socialist principle and chose to join the communist party for nation building in the following decades.
Refugee camps were established in Thailand along the Thai-Lao and Thai-
Cambodia borders (Appendix D), and they were part of the U.S. effort to compensate
Lao people for their involvement in the Vietnam War. The well-known refugee camps
where all of my informants and the majority of the Lao American diaspora stayed were
the “Pananikom Camps” in Nong Kai province. Without refugee camps in Thailand,
large numbers of Lao people might have not been able to come to the US. In the section
I discuss the issue of refugees and the refugee camps in Thailand.

My study of the Lao American diaspora focuses the second wave of refugees
who had experienced the down side of the new policies of the communist party
implemented from 1975 to 1985. These refugees consisted of people from various
socioeconomic backgrounds: former military or government officials, farmers, and
merchants. Clearly, internal political unrest and the gloomy economy in Laos served as
the push factors that were forcing people to flee their villages and country.

The policies that generated the social and political unrest and caused the large
flow of refugees from Lao into Thai camps in the late 1970s were the establishment of
re-education camps throughout the country. The camps were highly controlled places to
teach the socialist ideology as well as the new government policy to former military
and former government officials. In 1976, 100,000 people were sent to “seminar
camps” where they were living under difficult conditions, both physically and mentally
(Bouphanouvong, 2003, p.171). According to one of my informant’s husband who
spent two years inside the education camps, attending the education camps was
compulsory for high-ranking former government officials, but he believed there were
different types of camps that were operating differently depending on the attendees’ political status. He described the choking experience when he found that joining the education camps was not just attending meetings or seminars; everyone had to work in the fields, build their own house to stay in, grow rice and vegetables to feed themselves, and many other manual works required by the authority. The labor was intensive within a routine schedule; moreover, communication with families or people outsides the camps was controlled and monitored.

In early years, people’s understanding of re-education camps was that they were ordinary training places. Thus, not many people were aware of the harsh conditions, and some even volunteered to join the camps (Stuart Fox, 1997, p 162-163). However, some people never came back to their families after joining the camps. Some stayed inside the camp without knowing when he/she would be able to be free. Later on, rampant rumors were spread about the camps’ operations regarding the lack of transparency in the selection procedure, length of stay, level of persecution, and poor living conditions created fear and insecurity in the society (Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, 1989).

For people living outside the education camps, the country’s deteriorating economic conditions drove people into deeper poverty. Laos had already been devastated by the war, yet the country’s economy was further worsened by its government’s implementation of the closed and central planned economic policies coupled with flooding in 1969 resulting in a severe food shortage. Although Laos was receiving aid from some of the former socialist countries, it was not sufficient.
Moreover, the government set unrealistic market prices and limited the exchange of goods and services within the existing system that drove people into dire poverty.

Another informant of mine who worked for the Lao government as a banker during 1975-1977 told me about his mission at the southern provinces where he was assigned to buy rice from farmers. Since production of rice was abundant in the south, the government tried to redistribute it to the areas where there was lower production of rice. Yet, the rice’s market price was about ten times higher than the price the government offered. Therefore, no one sold rice to the government. However, at the same time, the government restricted transaction of rice in the market and monopolized the supplies of necessary goods such as soap, cloth, and medicine. Therefore, farmers had to sell rice to the government in order to trade for other necessities. These circumstances lowered farmer’s incentives to continue rice farming because its market price was lower than the production cost incurred. In reality, farmers had to work harder in order to produce enough rice to consume and also to use as means of trade. Another economic failure was the collective farming which encouraged people to group their private properties such as paddy fields to be managed under the central government administers and distributors. Many people lost their rights to their inheritance, and some had to sell gold or other saving assets at a cheap price for cash, thinking that it was still a better option than continuing to participate in the collective farming system. The lack of market efficiency, low productivity of agriculture, and limitation of private business drove people to an extreme poverty. As a result, the stressful politics and economic situations
created an unpleasant and desperate social environment in Lao. All these factors compelled many people to flee from Laos.

3.5 The US Settlement Policy on Lao Refugees (1970-1990s)

This section discusses the humanitarian aid and the US settlement policies provided to Lao refugees which played an essential role in the massive emigration of people from Laos during the Cold War. A numbers of refugee camps were established in the 1970s-1980s in many Asian countries such as Thailand, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Indonesia supported by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). The U.S. played a key role in setting up and maintaining these camps, as it was pressured to take responsibility for dragging Laos into the Vietnam War. Other western countries that joined the U.S. for the refugee camps include Canada, France, and Australia, and they also allowed them to settle permanently in their own territories.

The refugee camps in Thailand had a very negative reputation among Lao refugees, as living conditions there were often marred by various crimes including rapes. The violations in the refugee camps were investigated by independent organizations and reported to the UNHCR. In addition, the length of time refugees stayed in the camps varied depending on the availability of volunteer sponsors from destination countries. Several of my informants said that they stayed for only a few months or less than a year before they were relocated to the U.S. because they had family members who had already settled in the U.S. to speed the process, while some
people had to stay longer than a year waiting for a sponsor. Thus, having relatives and other connections in the West was critical to the resettlement of refugees.

The US was the largest receiving county of Lao refugees. The Social Security Administration Office of Refugee Resettlement (1983) reported that in fiscal year 1981, at least 30,000 people from Laos were admitted into the U.S. According to the 2000 US Census, there were more than 204,000 Lao people who reported their ancestor as Lao or member of the Lao diaspora living in the United States. The Lao American was diaspora dispersed around the country with its highest concentrations in the states of California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, although many live in major immigration gateway cities such as New York, Washington D.C., and Chicago. The scattered Lao settlements across the U.S. were not a coincidence, but intended and, throughout the process designed by US government policies. In 1980, the US declared the Refugee Act that allowed private agencies or individuals to apply to be resettlement agencies that could legally operate resettlement programs with the support of public funding.

According to the U.S. settlement policy, after arriving, refugees would be introduced to the reception and placement procedures offered by communities or non-profit agencies before being assigned to resettlement destinations. These policies reflected the intention of the government in relocating refugees in multiple destinations by expanding the network agencies. The reason was to avoid putting too much financial responsibility on handful of popular destinations during the economic downturn of the 1980s. In addition, it was widely believed that dispersing refugees to multiple locations would help refugees become assimilated more easily into the host society, which would
also work to prevent them from forming ethnic communities. According to Hiens (1995), the former migrants played a key role in helping new arrivals to settle by providing them with social networks, job opportunities, which in turn had a neutralization effect on the government policy to disperse them. Many refugees re-immigrated after their initial settlement in the U.S. in pursuit of better economic resources by living close to other Lao refugees.

Many studies on socioeconomic achievements of refugees are related to the settlement policy and the level of human capital of refugees prior to their entering to the U.S. (Butler, 2000). The research found that the more human capital\(^5\) immigrants have, the higher wage they earn and the better job categories they can acquire (Rumbaut, 1995). However, some studies claim that human capital is less significant than the social networks refugees utilize to access to jobs opportunities and economic resources. According to the historical migration patterns, Lao refugees who entered the US during the 1970s and 80s were mixed within two different socioeconomic statuses: former government officials and civil servants who had higher education and farmers or ordinary people. Both of them escaped from the political and economic difficulties. Therefore, majority of the Lao American diaspora was a result of the political containment coupled with the social stratification and economic disruption of Laos.

\(^5\) Human capital refers to the stock of skills and knowledge embodied in the ability to perform labor so as to produce economic value. It is the skills and knowledge gained by a worker through education and experience (O'Sullivan & Sheffrin, 2003, p.5)
Chapter 4: Laos’s Development and International Relations (1975 To Present)

This chapter examines the transition and development of Laos from the middle of the Cold War to present. Like other socialist countries, Laos’s economic development policy has been in transition to the one that is market–oriented since the late 1980s. In 1986, the Lao government introduced the New Economic Mechanism (NEM) policy that would have a lasting effect on the Lao economy. The new policies have re-oriented the previously isolated Lao economy toward the wider world, particularly developed capitalist markets in the West. By 2000, Laos has integrated itself into regional cooperation and gradually gained more attention from the neighboring countries concerning trade and investment. Moreover, it has improved its foreign relations with the capitalist nations such as Japan, Australia, and the US to search for alternative sources of capital investment through foreign aid. The changing directions of socioeconomic development in Laos aimed to get the country out of poverty have altered not only the economic landscape of Laos but also the culture and way of life for people in Laos. More importantly, this shifting of Laos’ focus toward the market economy has caused fundamental changed in the interactions between the Lao people in Laos and those living outside the country. In this chapter, I analyze Laos’s development policies since its independence in 1975 to present and its international relations, including the Lao-U.S. relations that affect the way the Lao diaspora relates to their homeland.
4.1 Laos’s Development Policies (1975 – 1985)

Since the communist Lao government took over the country in 1975, Lao foreign relations focused mainly on continuing collaboration with socialist countries while promoting and encouraging centrally-planned development policies. The Lao government was strictly concerned with controlling production and distribution of goods and services. The government interfered and managed market functions and transactions by setting unrealistic prices and limiting types of goods and services that the private sector could trade. Moreover, transportation and communication within and outside the borders, especially with countries that held different political ideologies and economic principles, were strictly monitored for the sake of national security – in other words, shielding the Lao people from capitalist influence. In the mean time, Laos increased its ties with Vietnam by signing the twenty-five-year Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in 1977. The Vietnamese military had stationed in Laos until 1989. The withdrawal was followed by regular visits of leaders of both countries – a sign of the two countries’ more intimate relations (Library of Congress, 1994).

On the other hand, despite the summit-level dialogue in 1979 to improve cooperation between Laos and Thailand, and their relations were strained from 1975 to the 1980s. Not only did the Lao government limit the importation of goods and services from Thailand, which is Laos’s only capitalist neighbor, but also the Lao people who crossed the borders with Thailand were implicitly expressing themselves as resistant to and in opposition to the Lao government. For example, magazines and cosmetics were considered as symbols of luxury and capitalist lifestyle that could influence people’s
behaviors and morals. Thus, these items were not permitted to be imported to Laos. Laos was concerned for the role of Thailand in supporting anti-Lao government groups along the Lao-Thai borders. The situation deteriorated when the border disputes eventually led to military actions in the northwestern provinces of Laos in the late 1980s.

The Lao government carried out a highly authoritarian of development policies. Western organizations were not allowed to operate inside Laos until the late 1980s. Concerning the specifics of public policy, formal announcement were made and repeat in any level of institutions through seminars and meetings including at schools, village community gatherings, and official meetings of unions, such as women, youth, and labor unions. This collective management practice was not only to ensure that the regulation would be implemented in a consistent fashion, but also to reaffirm the government’s political standpoint which required the Lao people to conform accordingly. In an effort to legitimate government policies and actions, a variety of media tools were used to portray the Lao communist government working hard to free the nation from any potential harm. For example, there were a number of billboards that portrayed revolutionary actions around major cities such as Vientiane and Savannakhet (Grant Evans, 2002, p.178). Statistical data concerning trade, business, and investment were inaccurately reported to the public while boasting the achievements of the government’s role and leadership, such as the length of paved roads state enterprises had completed or the volumes of rice produced from collective farming. In general, government reports of production and infrastructure development were classified as
achievement indicators measuring government success despite their lack of veracity. Ten years of this failed governance resulted in massive economic crises, despite sizable assistance from other socialist countries. Therefore, policy reform was urgently needed, and in the mid-1980s Laos revised its development strategy and its foreign relations.

During the 1980s, business activities in Laos were minimal and functioned in an ineffective and inefficient manner. The Lao government monopolized the market which reduced market competition as well as initiative among government officials. This limitation of business freedom left the vast majority of the population impoverished. In fact, the Lao government’s budget also relied on external assistance from socialist countries which gradually declined after the end of the Cold War in 1990. As a result, the failures of Laos to carry out the collective planned policies pulled the country into extreme poverty which was one of the driving factors that increased the number of refugees.

4.2 Laos’s Economic Reform (1986-1990)

The NEM was developed and implemented in 1986 after the Lao economy had been stagnated by the governments’ collective economic practices during the first ten years after its independence. The NEM was a major turning point for the Lao government, opening up the country to the capitalist economy after recognizing failure of a central planned economy (Laos Committee for Planning and Cooperation, 2001). The NEM policy emphasized improving and increasing productivity, especially in the agricultural and industrial sectors. A number of state-owned enterprises were
privatized, and farmlands were redistributed. Private property was returned to individuals, and market prices were no long set by the government, but by individuals and private businesses. The strategy of resource reallocation aimed to raise productivity and lessen the government’s responsibility and burden. However, the whole reform process was slow, particularly due to the government’s lack of financial resources and competence in free market functions and privatization processes (Bourdet, 2000, p. 14).

By 1990, despite the border disputes in 1988 with Thailand, the cross-border activities with neighboring countries had unofficially become more relaxed than before. They were mainly organized by small business operators that emerged after the introduction of the NEM. Even though the government still monitored and limited the types of goods and services for cross-border trade, it was poorly managed, and regulations were unclear at best. Thus, since the second half of the 1980s, varieties of goods, both permitted and unpermitted for importation, appeared in the market. They ranged from soaps, candies, and medicines to alcohol, electronic equipment, and Western magazines. At the same time, the Lao government finally decided to end the operation of the re-education camps and to release hundreds of prisoners in 1988 (Stuart Fax, 1989, p. 86).

The NEM not only marked a trend of more liberal economic policies, but also laid the foundations for dialogue between Laos and international development organizations. The collaborating development agencies, such as the World Bank, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), expanded the scope and scale of development cooperation into areas of
governance, health, and education. As a result, the first Lao constitution was instituted in 1991, followed by a number of legal development frameworks such as a foreign investment law in 1991, land laws in 1997 and other related business laws. Foreign relations with neighbors such as Thailand, Vietnam, and China as well as with developed economies like Japan, France, and the U.S. were also improved dramatically (Stuart Fax, 1989). Cross-border activities increased significantly after the completion of the Friendship Bridge between Laos and Thailand in 1994, which facilitated business opportunities and population mobility.

4.3 Laos and the ASEAN (1990s – Present)

Laos is a landlocked country rich in natural resources, yet the poorest and least understood in Southeast Asia. It was fairly invisible to the outside world during the Cold War. Laos’ economic potential was recognized only after it opened up its market in the Post-Cold War period. Given its small market, Laos must integrate itself into the regional development framework, which seems to be the most practical solution for the country to improve its economic situation and to alleviate poverty. Its development policies are characterized by two long-term Socio-Economic Development Plans of 2000 to 2005 and 2006 to 2010. These national Socioeconomic Development Plans are aimed at both promoting domestic industrial sectors and creating a new Laos in the eyes of the world, one which will attract more trade, investment, and visitors, and remove Laos from the list of the less developed countries in the world by 2020.
Laos took a big step in terms of regional cooperation when it became a full member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1997 which was the year that the ASEAN members pledged their commitment to implement the ASEAN vision 2020. It aims to “established a peaceful and stable Southeast Asia where each nation is at peace with itself and where the causes for conflict have been eliminated, through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law and through the strengthening of national and regional resilience.” (ASEAN, 1997). Becoming an ASEAN member, Laos was not only required to observe a number of policies, but also to modify regulations to meet the ASEAN agreements. At the time it entered ASEAN, Laos had just implemented its first constitution, while a long list of laws and regulations were still on the formative stage. ASEAN required its members to maintain socioeconomic development at a level as similar as possible in order to achieve its common goal of the ASEAN Vision 2020. This vision was initiated by the ASEAN nations to build a common framework and timeline for regional cooperation. The areas of cooperation focused on macroeconomics, financial stabilities, peace, and shared benefits. Given that economic development levels and government capacity vary between members, sub-region cooperation was established. In addition, the sub-region projects implemented development initiatives on a small scale to prepare fundamental conditions for the ASEAN regional bloc, as indicated in the ASEAN Vision 2020:
Advance economic integration and cooperation by undertaking the following general strategies: fully implement the ASEAN Free Trade Area and accelerate liberalization of trade in services, realise the ASEAN Investment Area by 2010 and free flow of investments by 2020; intensify and expand sub-regional cooperation in existing and new sub-regional growth areas; further consolidate and expand extra-ASEAN regional linkages for mutual benefit cooperate to strengthen the multilateral trading system, and reinforce the role of the business sector as the engine of growth. (ASEAN, 1997)

Laos is an active member of the Greater Mekong Sub-Region (GMS), which is one of the sub-regional development programs. The GMS member countries include Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam, countries that share both borderlines and natural resources, especially the Mekong River that runs through all member countries. The main areas of co-operation focus on cross-border trade and investment, private sector participation, human resource development, environmental protection, and promotion of sustainable and shared natural resources. The GMS was initiated with the assistance of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in 1992, while the action plan was formally adopted in 2001, the delay due to the slowdown of economy in Asia caused by the Financial Crisis in 1997.

Laos’s preparation and implementation of infrastructure, institutions, and legal frameworks to support the GMS have been in a good shape although there are challenging issues. Laos still needs assistance from international agencies in the form of financial and technical assistance, and concession loans in supporting the implementation of development projects as well as improving of human resource and institutional arrangement. Laos has experienced socioeconomic growth at the rate of six percent annually since 1990s despite the downturn of regional economy during 1997-
1998. The distribution of development has not been equally distributed. Special industrial zones were established to attract investment in the country, and transportation and telecommunication infrastructure were developed to facilitate trade to and from these strategic areas. However, the distribution of development has concentrated in urban cities such as Vientiane, Luangprabang, and Savannakhet where they would serve as tourist destinations or strategic locations for regional development. On the other hand, road construction, urban planning, telecommunications networks and drainage systems have developed slowly and not yet reached rural villages. For example, the majorities of rural communities do not have paved roads and are far from hospitals and schools. Moreover, many of the transportation routes were cut off during the rainy seasons due to flooding. The contrasting development patterns and results between the urban and the rural directly influence the way outsiders and visitors see Laos. Development in Laos is not only defining the Lao American diaspora’s perceptions about homeland, but also constantly redefining their sense of belonging concerning the ‘home’ in their memory versus the “home” in reality.

Overall, the lack of human resources and effective institutions has constrained and slowed the development process in Laos. Almost ninety percent of the educated people left Laos after the Vietnam War, while the remaining two-thirds of the Lao population have been working in subsistence agriculture. Despite the fact that agriculture contributed to nearly half of the GDP, Laos has had to re-build the pool of skilled workers as well as its intellectual resources in order to support sustainable socioeconomic development. To have a better picture of how Laos has improved its
development policy in cooperation with partners around the world, I will explore the foreign policy related to the Lao-US cooperation since the end of the Vietnam War to present, and then I will examine the conditions that have allowed the Lao American Diaspora to visit Laos and the recent trend of visitors from the US entering Laos.

4.4 Laos and the US Relations (1992 – Present)

The restoration of diplomatic relations and political cooperation between Laos and the U.S. began to emerge in 1992. The re-establishment of relationship not only made it possible for the Lao American diaspora to physically return to the homeland, but also changed their perception of the homeland and those who stayed behind.

During the Cold War, collaboration between Laos and the U.S. was minimal, and as the little cooperation that did exist between the two countries focused mostly on the unsolved issues from the Vietnam War, such as the project dealing with investigations into missing Americans in Laos during the war and human rights issues relating to political prisoners (U.S. embassy website, 2009). It is clear that the cooperation between Laos and the U.S. after 1975 did not extend to other areas relating to military actions of the Vietnam War. The tensions between the two nations returned again in the 1980s when the U.S. Congress pointed out that the Lao government played a part in the production and transportation of opium in the Northern Provinces, which the Lao government denied (Stuart Fox, 1997). Criticism and accusation of each party that placed on the other had clouded their relations.
The 1992 restoration of diplomatic relations between Laos and the US had defined the historical circumstances for the Lao American diaspora which allowed to visit Laos. These activities not only suggested the way the Lao American diaspora constructed the new interactions with their homeland through their families and relatives in Laos, but also reflected the way the Lao American diaspora view their life in the US when a longing for a return to their ethnic homeland could become a reality. I will discuss this in detail in the following chapters.

One of the important achievements was that the US granted normal trade agreement to Laos, which led to the formation of the bilateral trade agreement in 2005. On macro level, this agreement has increased humanitarian aid as well as the value of trade between the two countries. From 2003 to 2006 increased total trade between the two countries increased from $8.9 to $15.7 million. Cooperation also emerged in the humanitarian programs such as the clearance of unexploded ordnances program in 1996 and the recent expansion of the Fulbright and Humphrey exchange visitors programs. In addition, the first military cooperation agreement was signed in December 2008, known as the Defense Attaché Office (DAO). According to unofficial conversations with an officer at the embassy of Laos in Washington D.C., the US has negotiated with the Lao government to repatriate Lao prisoners in the US who have not had US citizenship since the early 2000s while the Lao government is considering allowing the Lao diaspora who are older than 65 years of age to apply for a long-term residence or citizenship if they would like to buy property in Laos.
As a result of the implementation of the new development strategy that opened Laos to both the region and the world by adopting a regional cooperation development policy as well as re-establishing the foreign relations with Western countries, particularly with the US, many Lao American diasporic people have finally been allowed to visit and reconnect with their relatives in Laos. Numbers of American visitors’ entering Laos rose from 1,760 in 1992 to 5,229 people in 1995 and was up to 35,734 in 2002 and 47,427 in 2005, and U.S. sends the third largest numbers of visitors after Thailand and Vietnam (Lao Tourism Statistical Report, 2007). Even though this figure reflects only the total number of visitors holding the US passport and does not distinguish who were the Lao American diaspora, the tourism authority assured me that the vast majority of these visitors were indeed the Lao American diaspora who changed their citizenship. This information was confirmed by the officials at the embassy of Laos in the Washington D.C.; that greater than eighty percent of the visa applications were submitted by Lao Americans. The trend of the Lao American diaspora visiting Laos is also observed on the rise among the Lao American community in Columbus, Ohio. Each year, there are at least five to ten families visiting relatives or spending their holidays in Laos. This number excludes people who go to Laos for an emergency reason, such as visiting immediate family members who are serious illness or attending funerals.

Six of my informants went back to Laos in the 1990s, while the remaining four went to Laos after 2000. Two informants went back to Laos more than four times to explore family business and to provide humanitarian assistance to the local community.
Moreover, several people in the community planned to visit Laos in the end of December 2008 and January 2009; at least ten families informed me that they planned to go to Laos next year to attend the Southeast Asian Games (SEA Games) which will be held in Vientiane, Laos in December 2009.

However, it is important to note that although Laos has relaxed its immigration regulations, this is part of the strategy to attract tourists from all around the world rather than focusing on the Lao diaspora or the Lao American diaspora in particular. According to the information from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Lao government permitted visitors to obtain the visa at the international borders was the first indicator of the relaxation of cross-border activities, which was implemented before joining the ASEAN. The Lao-Thai Friendship Bridge was the first international cross border point that allowed visa on arrival in 1994 and then later at the international airport in 1997. Now visitors can apply for the visa at 16 out of the total 19 international border check points. With these efforts, Laos is trying to transform itself from a “landlocked” to a “land-linked” country, allowing transportation to and from neighboring countries passing through Laos. For example, the program of the East-West and the North-West corridors that invested in the road construction will link the GMS countries in the future and Laos is in the middle of the sub regional geographical location (Figure 4: Map of GMS). Moreover, the “Visit Laos Year 1999-2000,” a tourism promotion campaign the Lao tourism authority launched in 1999, was a successful event that brought attention to the Lao diaspora from all over the world.
However, during an informal discussion with the embassy official, he refused to discuss the issue of the rejected cases of visa application for some members of the diaspora. The official referred me to the immigration police department. However, I was not able to obtain the data due to the fact that I had no connections with the department; no information is available from other sources. Thus, I could not obtain further information about the case. This incident revealed that the Lao government is still keeping the record of the Lao diaspora, but they practice this under the operation of other institutions so that this would be more difficult for outsiders to have access. Therefore, the relaxation of granting visit visas for the Lao diaspora does not indicate that the Lao government no longer views the Lao diaspora as a threat to the authority, but it is reasonable to speculate that the government may be still concerned about the Lao diaspora people who might have associated with an anti-Lao government group.
Chapter 5: The Lao Community in Columbus, Ohio

The present chapter examines the characteristics and community dynamics of the Lao American diaspora community in Columbus, Ohio. Although the community is characterized by their distinctive, shared cultural and religious values, it also consists of many sub-groups that represent different beliefs, classes, and backgrounds. Therefore, the community is driven by different levels of social dynamics both within and outside their sub-groups. Members of the community use these social networks to obtain and exchange information about socioeconomic resources as well as to assist the members in a time of need. Therefore, in order to understand how the Lao American diaspora have struggled to maintain their connections with the families in Laos which I will discuss in the next chapter, it is important to understand how this diaspora community has developed over the years.

Based on the findings of my fieldwork, I will first sketch the difficulties of the Lao American diaspora in acquiring socioeconomic status in the US which have shaped the community characteristics today. Then I will discuss the formation and development of various community associations and social sub-groups. Finally, I will illustrate the role of the Buddhist temple in maintaining and promoting solidarity among Lao Americans in Columbus.

5.1 Lao Refugees in Columbus, Ohio

Establishing life in the US has been a difficult and trade-off process for the Lao American diaspora in Columbus, Ohio. Generally speaking Lao Americans have
occupied a relative low socioeconomic status compared to the others Southeast Asian refugees, notably Vietnamese Americans (Newbold, 2002; Rumbault, 1995). The majority of the Lao American diaspora in Columbus, Ohio are employed in low-skilled job categories. Three major constraints that have limited their opportunity to attain higher education or to obtain a professional occupation include: first, low level of human capital and English language proficiency, second, lack of recognition of their qualifications by the US employers, and third, need of financial support for their family members. Most people did not continue their education after settling in the U.S. which is required in order to enter the skilled labor sector in the host society. Only two of my ten informants furthered their education after their settlement: one holds a Master’s degree and another associate degree. The language barrier has been a major constraint that prevented most from continuing education and having skilled jobs. Some informants who had a college education and worked as a teacher, an urban planner, and a doctor in Laos were not able to continue their past professional careers in the U.S. due to their poor command of English. Some of my informants spoke French fluently, but they did not speak English when first arrived in the US. Therefore, the most important factor that limited the Lao American diaspora from continuing their professional career was their lacking fluency in English rather than education attainment.

Moreover, U.S. employers did not recognize the knowledge, skills and experience that many Lao Americans had before their arrival in the US. The different educational systems between Laos and the US made it difficult for American employers to evaluate these people’s qualifications. For the Lao American diaspora, they did not
have documents and references to prove their qualifications. This condition has forced
them to enter the lowest entry level jobs in the U.S. labor market. These people were
denied admission into professional careers or managerial positions, because they were
required to have degrees conferred by American institutions as a pre-condition of
admission to professional jobs in the US. One of my informants, Somphon, was a
former doctor who worked in the hospital in Laos for more than a decade before
coming to the US. He first tried to work in the hospital after he arrived in Columbus,
Ohio in 1980. Yet he was rejected; instead, he started his first job at the car
manufacturing factory as a full time worker and at the same time worked for a cleaning
company part-time in order to earn enough to make a living. Nowadays Somphon is
still working with the car manufacturing company, recalling that:

Life was so tough at the beginning. I used to be a doctor, but could not work [as
a doctor] here. My degree not equal, they [employers] told me that I have to
start everything all over again by going to college for at least 4 years. I could
not do that because I had to support my family, particularly kids. So I decided
to look for a job…, I remember I earned USD$ 3.25/hr and I had to work two
jobs to make enough to pay bills.

In his case, the employers failed to recognize his skills which he acquired
outside the US, and low English proficiency further prevented him from continuing his
career. Besides, attending medical school could take up to six years or longer because
he had to learn English first before applying for a medical school, which added more
time to the process. For many Lao Americans, the extra cost, time, and resource they
had to invest in education, combined with their family’s needs, made them give up on
their wish to attain higher education in the U.S. For those who had low education in
Laos, they suffered from low confidence or incentive to further their educations after their arrival. Therefore, many people looked for manual jobs that did not require degrees or English skills.

The urgent need of financial independence forced the Lao American diaspora to take up any job that was available to them. There is no time to spend in school or extra training. Thus, income was the first priority, while social status was less compelling. In addition, most of the Lao families had small children. The income from the welfare program was not enough to cover their large-size family, especially the cost of day care for their young children. This condition forced many mothers to stay home taking care of the kids, while only the head of family, a father, worked. The income earned by a single low-skilled worker often times was not enough to cover the family’s living expenses. Therefore, most of Lao people from various socioeconomic backgrounds had to work at least a couple of jobs in order to support the family on their early stage of settlement.

The story an informant, named Ms. Veingkham, told me illustrates how family conditions prevented her from further education and better career. Veingkham was a former high school teacher in Laos; she came from a middle class family who was able to support her education in Thailand in the 1960s. After coming to the US in 1980, she had two kids. One was five and another one was three. She decided to take care of her kids at home and studied English at the same time. She hoped to go to college after her kids went to school. In the meantime, her husband who was a former accountant at a bank in Laos started working at a factory and was running a small food retail business.
with friends. However, his earnings were not enough to support the family. They spent four years during the 1980-1985 period moving from one city to another, such as Toledo and Lima, unsuccessfully looking for better paying jobs. After a while, they decided to return and settle in Columbus, and Viengkham had to give up her school and started working at the entry level at a medical supply factory where she is still working today.

The lack of education opportunities also explains another characteristic in this community. Many of the Lao Americans tend to be satisfied with their job although at the beginning they had to learn to adjust themselves to different, unfamiliar working conditions. The big difference in job types between what they once had in Laos, such as government officials, teachers, or merchants, and what they now have as factory workers in the U.S. required a lot of adapting. Most Southeast Asian refugees had to cope with psychological stress during their resettlement due to their experience of forced migration from their homeland, and they were also very unprepared for living or working in the destination country (Pernice & Brook, 1994; Hsu, 2004). However, most of my informants seem to think that the decision to work as factory workers rather than going to school or seeking better career was a practical, if not correct one. They enjoy material benefits from their working and use them to compensate for the loss of their social status. One informant told me about how he sees the job in the US and has adjusted himself into the work culture.
Working here is about time. I think the job is hard but the pay is good enough for a living. At the beginning, it was exhausting for me to stand all day at work…if you stand you have to stand all the time, or if you have to lift things you have to do the same over and over again.

It is true that the benefits from labor jobs in the US, despite being not as much as working in high skilled labor, are more attractive than what they used to have in Laos or during their stay in the refugee camps. Thus, being a factory worker continues to be considered a decent option. More people started following this pattern when they saw others Lao Americans working in the factory and doing better than those who staying home waiting for a welfare check to arrive.

According to one of my informant, Somchan, a young lady who came to the US at the age of 20, she used to follow her parents who were in a military group that moved from place to place in Laos before her migration. Somchan spent a difficult life in the refugee camp in Thailand for almost three years, from 1981 to 1984. She did a small business in the camp by selling cooked food. She met her husband there and had one child when she first arrived in Connecticut in 1984. Somchan did not think about going to school or looking for skilled jobs. She moved to Ohio a year later because she heard about better paying farm jobs in Ohio. When I asked her about her job, she seemed very happy about landing job more easily than she had done previously. Somchan confidently described her experience as follows

It’s an easy job unless you are lazy. I am not going to school because I am not good at studying, so work is better because I can start saving to buy a car, buy a house and save some for my kids in the future. I can buy what I want and get to eat what I want to eat, even though I am not rich.
Somchan stated that as far as she was concerned by getting a job, she considered her life as a success because she can take care of herself. In general, Somchan is not the only person who appreciates and learned to be satisfied with being a factory worker. Many educated Lao do the same.

Another informant who received education in France also showed similar attitude. Khamphan, a former pilot in Laos, had six children accompanying him when he first arrived in Buffalo, New York, before moving to Columbus, Ohio. Despite the fact that the job he took was not as prestigious as his previous one in Laos, it provided better material benefits. He decided to work in a hat production factory where his friends and some other Lao were working. He had been employed there for more than twenty years from 1980 to 2005. When I asked him about whether he tried to continue his pilot career and how he made decision to work in a factory, a job that is so different from his previous job in Laos, he noted that the new job was easy and the payment was good enough for him and family to have a comfortable life. Currently, he is staying with his daughter in Ohio to take care of his granddaughter after having retired in 2006. He calmly discussed his past experience,

I had to accept that we could not have the same job because it’s different here [the US], but my job was good enough to support my family. I needed to earn enough to support my kids to school because for me I am too old for school. My job might not be a respectful job, but I have enough for living and a much better life in comparison to the one in the refugee camp, so I am happy.

Stories similar to Khamphan’s were heard from other Lao Americans in the temple. Therefore, despite the Lao American diaspora has been struggling with
establishing socioeconomic status in the host country due to their lack of education and English proficiency, they tend to learn to appreciate what their jobs have allowed them to achieve. In fact, their language barrier has widened the gap between the Lao American diaspora and the larger society because of the very limited of communication between the two. In contrast, it has fostered ties among community members who speak the same language, share similar life experiences, and social values.

The next section will address how diaspora community associations help Lao Americans foster solidarity within and outside the community. The above-mentioned difficulties have played an important role on the formation of the community organization in the form of formal organization and informal social groups.

5.2 The Lao Welfare Association

The community dynamics of the Lao American diaspora in Columbus, Ohio consists of different levels of communication and interaction. There are three formal Lao community associations operating independently, while under them there are many different social groups based on shared socioeconomic interest, social values, and regional background. The community dynamic is very complex and functions in multiple levels, involving interactions between individuals and different social groups. Given that while social power and social hierarchy in these interactions is not a focus of this study, a great emphasis is on understanding how community members are able to maintain their social network and use it to gain access to information and resources that they need for not only jobs, but also people back in Laos.
The Lao population in Columbus, Ohio was aided by different sponsors in their early resettlement. The sponsor group consisted of volunteering individuals, church or private organizations; they were responsible for the refugees’ initial economic and social wellbeing during their early settlement (Caplan, Whitmore, and Choy, 1989, p. 32). After several years of migration flow into the area, they became acquainted with each other through attending welfare assistance programs such as English classes, healthcare check-ups, and group meetings. The shared identity as Lao refugees pulled them together and helped them maintain regular contacts so that they could share experience and exchange consultations about their daily matters. Until the mid-1980s, when the flow of Lao refugees coming to Columbus had increased, there were growing concerns about the difficulty of the new comers in adapting to the host society due to the language barrier and job issues. These concerns motivated some of the educated members, among the first group of refugees to form an association that could receive state settlement funding to provide newly arrived Lao with much need help, such as English translation, consultation, and social events arrangement.

The very first Lao association was founded in 1985 known as The Lao Welfare Association; it is the oldest and most well-known among the Lao American community in Columbus, Ohio. The Lao Welfare Association is formally organized and the most active association. I also learned from this association’s leader that there are two other Lao associations which were formed within the past several years. Unfortunately, I did not have an opportunity to participate or interact with the members of these associations because they did not organize any activities during my fieldwork. The division of social
groups is very common among the Southeast Asian refugees depending on the group leader’s position relation to the homeland and host country. Therefore, different groups and associations had different goals: one group focuses on the homeland politics, while another group focuses on socioeconomic support to sustain a communal life in the host country (Hein, 1995, p. 111). Different visions among different groups sometimes can create internal tensions and lead to conflicts in the diaspora community. For the Lao American diaspora in Columbus, Ohio, despite the fact that each association is constructed by different social groups and might take different approaches to serve the interests of the members, they share the rationale of providing self-help mechanism as well as fostering networking among members. Most of the time, they serve as facilitators in providing financial assistance to the members for funeral arrangements.

The *Lao Welfare Association* works closely with the temple and focuses on religious activities. They recruit the highest number of members – it was about 100 families when it was established, and now more than 270 families are active members. The members came from various social and economic backgrounds when they were in Laos, although their current social status in the U.S. is very similar to one another. In addition, most of them have relatives and friends from a wide range of social, economic, and political classes in Laos. Therefore, the people who join the associations not only have close social connection with the entire community, but also can extend their networks to people living in Laos who can provide the most recent, firsthand information about the political and other situations in the homeland. The conversational topics pertaining to Laos such as infrastructure development projects, changing
government policies, and poverty and social issues are most common among the members during the social events.

The association recruits its members through personal contacts. At the early stage of its organization, the association provided a full range of services to support and assist the members in order to help establish their life in the US. One of the senior members of the association told me about how the association helped her when she first arrived.

I don’t know anybody here before I came, but my sponsor brought me to the association to meet other Lao people. I was so happy that there were Lao people I could talk to…. everyone was helping each other and I made friends… we shared information on where to buy cheap food, where was good place to work, how to ride a bus, to get help on English translation and to fill out a form when going to the hospital and so on.

Over the years the members have gradually become independent and integrated into American society, so understandably, the association has changed its role to meet the community needs by changing their areas of assistance, ranging from language translation to financial support. The association’s committee is responsible to manage the association administration and operation such as maintaining association accounts, collecting donations, circulating information to members whenever needed, and organizing cultural activities. By strengthening these beliefs the community association is able to foster members’ sense of belonging and feeling of obligation to help one another. The head of the association stated,
We should help each other. We are all Lao no matter where we live…many of Lao people do not speak English, they don’t know what to do and how to start…if we do not help one another, who will…we have the same experience, so the one who comes first can give advice to the later comers.

In addition, the association members’ desire to preserve Lao culture and social values is very evident in both volunteers and non-volunteers’ assistance to other members in funeral preparation. The community is very aware of the difficulty of arranging a Lao traditional funereal in the U.S., as it requires various resources to carry out the funeral procedure which can last from one day to longer than a week. Friends and relatives are expected to spend time with the bereaved as a way to show their sympathies through emotional support as well as assistance with other tasks. In return, the bereaved family is responsible for taking care of the guests in terms of food and temporary accommodation during their stay. All of my participants informed me that they are still practicing this tradition.

Although community dynamics is largely driven by spontaneous interaction of members, certain obligations are set by the association leaders in order to ensure the members’ commitment to the good of the community. In this sense the association plays its role in carrying-out community activities in order to maintain the momentum of community dynamics. The only requirement for the members to maintain their status and eligibility to receive assistance is to contribute US$30 as donation to the bereaved family. When the incident occurs, the family of the deceased will notify the temple and arrange a funeral; then the monk will inform association leaders. If the family is an association member, the association will collect donations; if not, the leaders still join
the funeral, but without providing financial assistance. By practicing the social support to the community, the association has gained the respect and trust from the members. Providing social support during the funeral not only reveals a collective value of Lao culture, which is well-preserved by the Lao American diaspora in Columbus, Ohio, but also facilitates social bonding among members.

Financial assistance for funerals is not the only form of preservation of Lao culture that the association has practiced. Other social and religious activities that are also organized by the association throughout the year include the Lao New Year’s Day celebration in mid-April and cerebration of the Buddhist lent from July to October, among others. The association plays a key role in designing activities and themes of the ceremonies while the members are encouraged to participate based on their willingness and ability to contribute their time, labor, or other types of services such as setting up the booths for events, cooking and selling food, providing entertainment equipment or getting involved in fund raising activities.

As discussed the above, diversity of the Lao American diaspora in terms of class, gender, and education level explains the existence of different interests within the community. Although Lao Americans have an embracing community and a working association, they are still divided into small units of social groups. Those small social groups have been formed by extended families and close friends who shared interests, socioeconomic status, or hometown in Laos. One particular group that I observed is more concerned with current issues in the U.S. such as jobs, children education, and health issues rather than religious or cultural practices.
Comparing the two social events I participated in – a birthday party and a Thanksgiving dinner organized by different groups, I found the participants were different in terms of geographical identity as well as economic conditions. The birthday party was organized in an informal arrangement. There were about twenty people attending and all were very close friends and extended family members. We sat on the floor surrounding the shared plates of food. This practice had reminded me of a common scene when the Lao people arrange their home party in rural Laos. I found that all the guests were from rural southern provinces of Laos. Most of their conversations were related to their concerns about jobs and payment conditions in the US, but no one mentioned Laos. When I asked whether they had been back to Laos, only few couples including my informants who brought me to the party had been back to Laos once. Most of the guests expressed their interest and hope to visit Laos some day, but they were more concerned about the cost of travel.

In contrast, the Thanksgiving Party was quite a formal party in terms of setting and scale. There were more than 60 people attending who were required to share the cost of $50 per family. There was live music and both Lao and American food were ordered from the restaurant of the brother of the party’s host. The majority of the guests came from northern provinces of Laos, and they seemed better off than the previous group. Most of them had already been back to Laos at least once, indeed, many went back several times and started looking for business partners in Laos. The party organizer owned a construction company and many of his guests engaged in food supply and restaurant businesses. The common conversation topics were about business
opportunities including the conversation between the persons who just returned from visiting Laos and those who planned to visit. I also met several Lao men who married Lao women from Laos during or after their home visit, while a few of the bachelors plan to visit Laos in 2009. Their main reason is to visit cousins, but also to have a chance to look for partners.

However, the association leader did not attend either party though a few members of the association committee did. In both parties, the issues concerning the role and the operation of the Lao Welfare Association were openly discussed, including the issue of transparency of association administration and participation in the decision-making process on future activities. Some of the members began to question whether the association should change its focus from religious activities to business. In fact, one reason why the members might cast doubts on the operation of the association is that the committee does not have standard recording and reporting system. The reporting of association achievements is done by verbal announcement at the temple or association meetings. The association has no official list of members or contact information. Only the committee members have up-to-date information about the members and financial status of the association, while there was no formal system of reporting and auditing to inform other members about its activities. Given that the association committees are volunteers, this might be the reason why they have less incentive to improve the quality of management. Despite the association’ good intention, the fact that the members have lost their faith in its transparency causes segmentation of the community, moving toward smaller, tightly-knit social groups.
The activities that the community association organizes are fostering the social network, while the informal social groups seem to promote individuals’ interests and benefits. It is also true that, without the association as a cohesive force, the community might be reduced into fragmented groups which might not have sufficient incentive to carry out the traditional cultural activities or remain as a Lao American diaspora community.

5.3 Buddhist Temple and the Lao Community

For the Lao diaspora in Columbus, Ohio, the Buddhist temple is not only a worship place for religious purposes, but also a social and political sphere of the community members. The temple serves as a place of emotional comfort when they experience psychological stress. Believers often times resort to the helpful advice of the monk who in Lao society is a person respected for his religious devotion and knowledge. In this sense, the monk performs a social function involving in people’s daily life such as teaching children and consultation (Dommen, 1985, as cited in Bhookong, 1990, p. 50). Similarly, for the Lao community in Columbus, Ohio, going to the temple is not necessarily for the religious practice, but to socialize or consult with the monk about daily life. Thus, Sunday has been set as a worship day when the monks are available at the temple. This is not a Buddhist convention, but it is an attempt of the associations and the religious institution to carry out Buddhist values of Lao people in America. In addition, scholars argue that practicing Buddhist activities is one of the ways to retain ethnic identity and “ethnic resources” (Bankston & Zhou, 2000; Min, 1992). Hence, the adjusting of the religious structure, in this case is to meet at the time
when the majority of the community members are available. Although many studies have been conducted on the role of religions in a variety of immigrant groups such as Korean and Vietnamese, they focused on how the religious institutions provided psychological comfort on the immigrant’s adaptation into the host society (Hurh and Kim, 1990; Min, 1992; Bankston and Zhou, 1995). However, these researches offer limited discussion on the role of religion especially in providing information on economic resources to immigrants. The Lao American diaspora I studied suggested this is an important role of the Buddhist temple.

*Watlao Buddha Mamakaram* is the official name of the temple located on the Eastside in the suburban area, in Columbus, Ohio. It was established in 1987 with the assistance of the *Lao Welfare Association*, two years after its founding. The temple has only one main hall that serves as the main house of worship, a place where the monks reside and the ritual and temple activities normally take place including the Sunday activities in which I participated. The main hall is a simple one-story house that has been decorated with the help of the members. The Abbot⁶ told me that, “We help each other fix this hall and many people volunteer to do it.” Indeed, the ordination hall, or *Sima*⁷ is under construction with the financial and labor support from the Lao community. The Abbot stated “The Sima is a very important place to perform Buddhist ordination; without it the temple is not a complete religious place.” Together with the main hall, Sima resembles Buddhist temples in Laos in terms of architecture. The abbot

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⁶ The head of the monks at the temple

⁷ Ordination hall use as the ritual place where the monk perform ordination
proudly explained that the support from the community allows for the success of the construction of this ordination hall.

The front wall next to the entrance is covered by a piece of a paper, on which there is a naming list donators for the construction of the Sima. The amount of money that each person donated ranged from $20 to $3,000. The list is to announce the temple’s recognition of the contributions from the members to the whole community. This proves how the community has intended to preserve the temple. The fund raising was very successful and still going on. Such dedication conveys how important this Buddhist temple is to the Lao American diaspora community.

The temple is a central place for organizing activities that have been a driving force in fostering the solidarity among diaspora community members. In Laos, the temple is a center of social activities where many festivals take place. In Columbus, Ohio, the temple has been the community’s center since it was established. A study by Bankston & Zhou (2000, p.456) reveals that “although religions may not exist for the sake of networking, they do create social networks, connecting people to others who have information and resources.” The authors provide a case study from their extensive fieldwork with the Southeast Asian refugee communities including the Lao community in New Iberia, Louisiana during 1996-1997 and particularly studied the social role of the temple on the community. This is very similar to the case of the Lao community in Columbus, Ohio. The interaction between Buddhist temple activities and the Lao community has two connotations – to preserve Buddhist religious’ practice and to help tighten the community social network.
The activities that the temple organizes are oftentimes in cooperation with *The Lao Welfare Association*. According to the monks, of the 500 Lao families that reside in the suburban area of Columbus, an average of 20 to 30 families join the temple activities on Sunday on a regular basis depending on their time and resources available. Although majority of community activities are initiated and organized at the temple, it opens to all. Thus, none Buddhist Lao diaspora members of who transferred to other religions are also encourage to participate in the community activities such as international New Year ceremony and fund raising for children activity. Hence, the temple is not only serves as ritual place for Buddhist members, but a social space for the community members.
Chapter 6: The Lao American Diaspora and the Homeland

This chapter discusses the changing connections of the Lao American diaspora in Columbus, Ohio, with their relatives and families in Laos. First, I examine the communication channels that have facilitated the interactions between Lao Americans and those who stayed back at home in Laos. Second, Lao Americans’ home visiting experiences are examined in terms of their changing views of and relations with the homeland. Finally, different types of connections with the homeland will be examined.

6.1 Changes in Communication Channels

6.1.1 The Cold War Period

During the early 1980s, the Lao American diaspora had temporarily lost their contact with people in Laos. The absence of diplomatic relations between Laos and the U.S. prevented the diasporic community from having direct contacts with the people of the homeland. For the Lao American diaspora in Columbus, Ohio, the difficulty of establishing a new life in the host country became their primary preoccupation, and thus they had no time or resources to develop meaningful sorts of relationships with the left behind families in Laos. Nine of my ten informants told me that they could finally contact their families in Laos only after they acquired permanent jobs and residence.

One of my informants, Viengkham, admitted that contacting relatives in Laos was not her priority in her first few years in the U.S. Her family was struggling with moving around Ohio to find a better job as well as a suitable residence to raise her children. As Viengkham stated,
I decided to flee with my husband and children, which no one in my family knew about; my parents were in Laos with all my siblings. I missed my parents and felt bad to leave them... after we got here, it was difficult for us to contact them... we moved from place to place often. I did not contact my parents for five to six years until we bought this house and our kids were doing well. Then we started to think about how our family members were doing in Laos.

Another informant Somphon also said, “contacting home was not my priority; I didn’t have time or money. I didn’t think about anything, except to find a good residence for my children because the welfare house was crowded and not suitable for raising kids.” These are the only two examples of my informants who shared similar experiences: they first contacted their families in Laos after they settled in stable housing and occupations.

In fact, there was a combination of unfavorable circumstances that limited the interactions between the diaspora and their kin in Laos. For the people remaining in Laos, most of them could not initiate contacts unless their relatives who fled informed them of their whereabouts. In addition, the limitation of telecommunication infrastructure was another discouraging factor that restricted communication channels between the two. The communication facilities and services in Laos during the Cold War period were insufficient and unreliable.

Since the mid-1980s, when a growing number of Lao Americans had settled in the host society, some started contracting families and relatives in Laos. My informants revealed that they used the regular mail to contact their relatives to see whether they were still living in the same place in Laos. Oftentimes their packages and letters were
opened before they were delivered to the addressed recipients. Sometimes there were missing items, especially money; or in the worst case, the letters never reached the intended receivers. The problem of the postal system in Laos was well known, but it was still the cheapest and most accessible option. Besides the unreliable delivery service, they were also concerned about censorship. Therefore, the content of letters that were sent through the official postal service had to be as neutral as possible in order to avoid any suspicion by the Lao government or other problem that might lead to safety concerns for their relatives in Laos.

In the late 1980s, a new communication channel was established. After The Lao Welfare Association was founded in 1985, the diaspora community in Columbus, Ohio, was very soon able to establish the first Lao Buddhist temple in 1987 and sponsored the Lao monk who was living in Thailand at that time to be a religious leader at the temple. Since the monk has non-refugee status, unlike people in the community, he could travel back and forth between the U.S. and Thailand or sometimes to Laos under religious missions. Therefore, the monk became an important messenger and communication facilitator for the diaspora community. On his trip to Laos or Thailand, the monk carried with him letters and money for Lao Americans’ families back home. Upon his return to the U.S., he brought the updated information on socio-political situations in the homeland. More importantly, he carried the messages from their relatives back to the members, especially important ones related to plans of bringing the relatives in Laos to join them in the U.S., a highly sensitive issue which could not be discussed in regular mail. However, the monk could not assist the entire community in delivering
letters and relying critical messengers because it was not the primary role of the monk. Therefore, the community started searching for alternative communication channels. The community members who were in a better economic position were able to travel to Thailand and oftentimes performed a messenger role when required, yet it was on volunteeery basis. Therefore, the service cost and the commitment of the messenger to the task were depended on their relationship between senders and messengers. Sometimes the senders had to pay a messenger a high price for the needed delivery, but it was safer and most commonly used because they could exchange more intimate letters without worrying about censorship.

6.1.2 In the Post Cold War Period

The changing socioeconomic development in Laos after the end of the Cold War in the 1990s played a significant role in allowing more flexible communication and transportation between people in Laos and those living abroad. The quality of postal and telephone services has remarkably improved and their geographical coverage in Laos was expanded greatly. The Lao government allowed the state-owned telephone company to join with the Thai telephone company in 1996, as part of its liberalization scheme. Indeed, telephone service was the most advanced communication channel in Laos during the 1990s. The number of home telephone lines had increased almost six-fold from 6,910 in 1990 to 40,876 users in 2000, and further increased to 94,828 users in 2007, while the Internet was introduced in 2000 (World Bank, 2009). My informants had switched their means of communication to telephone calls since the 1990s. Letters
are still occasionally used, but only for non-urgent communications. Somchan told me about how she communicates with her cousins in Laos nowadays. She said,

I don’t write letters as often as I used to after I found that I could use the phone. It is cheap and fast. I bought telephone for my parents in Laos and paid for the installation fees, so I can call them anytime. I still use letters sometimes, but I normally call.

However, poverty and other difficult social conditions in Laos were the predominant topics that the diaspora learned from their relatives back home. According to the World Bank Report 2007, people in Laos were still very poor – about 85% of the population living under USD$2 a day in 1992 and still about 80% in 1997. My informants expressed a similar concern that the more they communicate with their relatives in Laos, the more empathy and obligation they have for those who are left behind. Therefore, the most common conversation topics would concern financial assistance from the Lao American diaspora to relatives in Laos.

In 1992, the restoration of diplomatic relations between Laos and the U.S. was a remarkable turning point that has re-shaped the nature of interactions between the Lao American diaspora and their homeland. According to the Lao Embassy in Washington D.C., the number of the Lao diaspora visiting Laos has been increasing every year since the 1990s, particularly after 2000. Among those visitors, there were the Lao American diaspora in Columbus, Ohio. However, many Lao Americans who were deceived by the Lao government during the 1970s were concerned about security issues in visiting Laos, despite the opening of economic policies and more liberalized form of
government there. Relatively recent memories of maltreatment in the re-education camps in Laos were still vivid in the minds of many Lao Americans. On the other hand, the informants who have connections with the Lao government officials tend to be convinced that it is safe to return. A senior former government official who spent four years in the seminar camp before coming to the U.S. in 1980 hesitated to visit Laos during the 1990s, although he wanted to. He made his first visit in 2004. As he said,

I was not sure if it was safe to go to Laos for people like me. Many of my friends who had similar experiences in the re-education camp also hesitated to go back. Therefore, we waited until we were confident that we were able to travel around and knew whom to contact if there was a problem to make sure that we would be able to come back to the U.S. safely.

For my informants, their reasons to return to Laos were to visit families and search for the homeland, the ultimate place they believed they fully belonged to. The views about the homeland, after a long period of settlement in and adaptation to the culture of the host country, were diverse among different classes, gender, and social groups, which is to be discussed in the following section.

6.2 Home Visiting Experiences and New Types of Connection

This section discusses various aspects of home visiting experiences of the Lao American diaspora in Columbus, Ohio. The outcome of their experience is diverse and attributed to complex factors that might have influenced diaspora connections with the homeland, especially whether to discontinue or re-establish new types of connections to the homeland.
Nine of my ten informants have living parents and/or siblings in Laos. Their common responses were first, their decision to return to Laos was for visiting parents and relatives, and second, their improved financial capacity largely determined their visit agendas. Those who had more disposable incomes were the ones who visited Laos right after they were allowed to and have made repeated trips. Seven of my informants went back to Laos the first time in the 1990s and the other two in the 2000s. Among these people, five people made second or third trips to Laos within the past few years, and two plan to go to Laos again in 2009. Some visitors have extended their involvement in the homeland affairs beyond visiting family members.

My field research findings indicate that the home visiting experiences among the Lao American diaspora in Columbus, Ohio, have established and fostered three new types of connections with the homeland: 1) those whose relations to Laos remain on the level of familial with financial obligations, 2) those who have built and expanded social networks and business opportunities in Laos, and 3) those who have been involved with transnational humanitarian projects in Laos.

6.2.1 Familial and Financial Obligations

Despite the fact that the first visit gave most diasporic returnees an overwhelming experience, given the long period of separation, a clash between expectations and realities was inevitably going to happen, and it has indeed created an emotional distance between member of the diaspora and their relatives. Some of those who fled Laos in their young age and left their adolescent siblings behind have not met
each other for long time. The first visit was not only an exciting moment for the
visitors, but also for the relatives in Laos. The international airport in Laos was full of
people waiting to pick up their cousins from abroad. The scenes of people hugging,
crying, laughing, and staring were common. Viengkham, who visited Laos for the first
time in 1999 after twenty years having been away, described her feelings of seeing her
father at the airport,

I almost did not recognize my father when I saw him at the airport….he looked
very old and had a lot of grey hair, but he still dressed nicely as he used to. I
saw him standing in the middle of the crowd looking at the door where I walked
through. I knew exactly that it was him when he smiled and walked towards me.
I did not know how to tell those feelings; it was a mixture of happiness,
excitement, sorrow and pity at the same time. I jumped to hug him…and we
both cried.

Another factor that informs the Lao diaspora’s perception of Laos is the
socioeconomic status of their relatives in Laos. For those whose relatives in Laos are
financially better -off and/or have decent jobs, they tend to have positive relations with
the homeland. In contrast, those who have impoverished relatives and are asked for
financial support tend to develop somewhat negative views of the homeland. The case
of Viengkham’s sisters and brothers in Laos who were poor working class people
illuminates the disillusioned home visiting experiences. As she recalled,

I met so many cousins; I am the first child and left home when my sisters and
brothers were very young…when I went back everyone was coming to see
me…I could not recognize some of them or remember their names. They came
to me for money and assumed that I was rich. It seemed like it is my
responsibility to help them. Some people asked for money to fix their house, to
buy a motorcycle…I knew my cousins are poor in Laos, but I am not rich
either. They never asked how difficult my life here is, just money.
Viengkham has committed and obligated herself to provide financial support for her parents to compensate for the period of her absence. For example, she opened a savings account for her parents and regularly sends about USD$100 to USD$300 per month. As she stated,

I opened a savings account for my parents when I visited them and send money every month. I send more money when they get sick so that they can buy medicine, or on occasion when they ask for it. I would like to take care of them by myself, but I could not.

After that trip, Viengkham has not been back to Laos. Viengkham added, “I did not know when I would go back again. I still miss my parents but I don’t have much money to give to my relatives.” She still sends some money to her sisters and brothers occasionally, but it depends on their case. Viengkham has maintained her relations with family in Laos mostly on a level of familial and financial obligation. She proudly told me that she has fulfilled her responsibility as a good child to her parents, but she could not take care of all of her relatives. Home visiting for Viengkham was a happy moment to rejoin her family, but she found herself frustrated with her relatives’ behaviors, notably asking for money. The Lao diaspora have somewhat adapted to a more independent American lifestyle, while their relatives in Laos are living in a more reliable on a kinship network and a social support system. When both are living in different social conditions and with different social expectations, certain behaviors could create distance or even tension in their relationship. Somchan who went to Laos in 1997 was disappointed with her relatives as she said,
My relatives had a party at home almost every evening. They said to celebrate my visiting, but I was the one who had to pay for it. I spent a lot of money during my three weeks for parties and my relatives’ friends. I did not spend that much money in America. They told me they were poor, but they spent a lot of money and did not do much work as I did.

In contrast, Savan who visited her parents in Laos in 1996, had different feelings from Somchan or Viengkham. Savan was pleased to meet her family and found that her cousin was doing well in financial terms. Her sisters’ families are wealthy farmers; they own farmland and her brothers are working with the government authorities at the provincial level. Her relatives welcomed and supported her during her stay in Laos which gave her positive impressions about life in Laos. Savan does not send money to parents in Laos regularly, but occasionally when requested; and she still communicates with them on a regular basis.

In a similar vein, Khamphan has a mother and two sisters living in Laos. He visited Laos three times from 1999 to 2005. He enjoyed the food and received hospitality during his visit, the kind of happiness which he said is missing in the U.S. Khamphan also sends money to his mother every month through Western Union and offers financial assistance to his nephews and nieces in Laos. He plans to visits Laos again, but has no intention to return to live there permanently.

Despite different impressions on their relatives in Laos, all my informants have engaged in fulfilling financial obligations for them. At the same time, they have no intention to return to Laos permanently at this point. Those visitors revealed that visiting Laos allowed them to see what reality of life in Laos was. While most of them
see home visiting as the realization their longing for the homeland, some visitors found themselves distant from Lao society in the sense that they lost touch with the job market and social network there.

6.2.2 Development of Transnational Social Network

Another aspect of change in the diaspora’s connection with the homeland is the development of a transnational social network and expansion of business opportunities in Laos. Socioeconomic status of relatives or people in Laos who the diaspora have contacted plays an essential role in facilitating and encouraging them to be involved in homeland affairs. For some Lao Americans, the opportunity to visit Laos allowed them to expand their social networks in Laos as well as provide a wider network with people in Laos. This network sometimes leads to a new development of transnational activities, ranging from a family business between people living in two places to a joint venture for transnational business. Therefore, many people who can afford and have incentives to make several visits tend to have an interest in socioeconomic activities in Laos rather than just visiting families.

One informant who has explored a transnational business opportunity between Laos and the U.S. visited Laos more than three times during 1990 to 2003. Despite none of his immediate family members living in Laos, Phou went to Laos the first time in 1990 when he learned about its opening economic policies. Phou is in his mid-50s and owns a private construction company in the U.S. His first visit was to explore the conditions and opportunities that Laos could offer to his plan of having a company in
Laos that would supply wooden furniture to his company in the U.S. Phou has a good understanding of the local context in terms of social and political networking in Laos. He has established close relations with businessmen, government officials, and his extended family and friends in Laos to assist him in this process. He has accumulated substantial knowledge about Laos not only through his experience, but also through his connections with the locals there who offered him various aspects of business opportunity in Laos. Unfortunately, his attempts were not successful due to technical problems. He also complained about overhead expenditures which he could not afford. As Phou said,

"I could not pay for the cost of administration; it was too expensive… every time I met the government officials, I had to pay for their expenses of eating and drinking. I was not stingy, but they did these too often. It was too expensive, and I could not afford it."

Despite the failure of his business, Phou has gained tremendous benefits in establishing relations with many people in Laos including extended relatives, businessmen and political leaders. He acknowledged to me that he still sees the potential for this business in Laos, but he would rather wait and see how the government responds to the business environment in the future. In addition to the business visits, Phou went to Laos in 1999 and 2003 to arrange marriages for his two younger brothers who live in the U.S. with Lao women. Although Phou has not made frequent trips to Laos since 2003, he still maintains connections with his friends and relatives in Laos hoping that he would be able to do business in Laos when the laws and
regulations are more developed and better enforced. Indeed, he plans to visit Laos in 2009 to attend the Southeast Asian Games that will be held in Laos.

Currently, Phou owns a couple of pieces of land in Laos which he first bought and had to put under his relatives’ name. His case is similar to many Lao in the diaspora who have visited Laos and would like to own property such as a piece of land or a house. However, a non-Lao citizen is not allowed to own property in Laos, and the Lao diaspora are no exception to this. These practices often create conflicts between member of the diaspora and their relatives in Laos, especially when the relatives have the legal rights to the property, while the non-nationals are the real owners per se.

According to this researcher’s conversation with the staff from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, land right disputes between the Lao diaspora and relatives in Laos have increased recently. The needs of the overseas Lao who want to have land in Laos reveal their interests in the homeland and desire to engage themselves in homeland affairs at some point in the future. However, some relatives take advantage of this situation by selling or transferring the property’s ownership without consulting or having approval from the real owners. Still, the Lao government has not seriously responded to these disputes. This issue seems to imply that the Lao government still has not paid much attention to the member of the Lao diaspora on their activities in Laos. The only policy about which the Lao government has shown flexibility was in allowing the Lao diaspora to change their citizenship back to Lao if they would like to be treated as a Lao citizen.
Somphon is another informant who sees business opportunities in Laos after his visit in 2008. He has no immediate family members in Laos, but he went to Laos to see the real situations in Laos after hearing from many returnees. Prior to his visit, his view of the Lao government was negative and he never thought that the government would change its position on the Lao diaspora. His visit in 2003 gave him good impressions, but it was not until his recent visit in 2008 that he was more interested in doing business in Laos. The fact that his friends own one of the largest public transportation companies in Laos could be one influential factor that changed his attitude toward socioeconomic development and business opportunities in Laos. Somphon is considering participating in his friends’ hotel business in the near future. He told me that

Many of my friends are very successful businessmen. They are building apartments and hotels. It was so much fun; they took good care of me. We travelled from north to south. If I want to return to live in Laos, these people will help me…they even offered me to be their business partner. I am thinking about that.

In addition, many people expressed that their home visiting allowed them to build new social networks in Laos. It is common to find the Lao American diaspora revisit Laos to attend the weddings or other social events for their friends in Laos as their obligation to maintain good social relations with them. However, the frequency of home visiting varies among different ages, financial status, and level of closeness with people in Laos. Furthermore, some of the Lao diaspora visit Laos to participate in cultural festivals and religious ceremonies. Lao Americans in Columbus, Ohio, have also shown their interest in attending those festivals. Most of them chose to visit Laos
at the time when the festivals were taking place, such as Lao New Years, in April in Laung Phrabang province or That-Laung festival in November in Vientiane province. Another growing trend among the Lao American diaspora is that men visit Laos to seek partners. Although there are no official records published on how many Lao American men married Lao women, I met four men in the Lao community in Columbus, Ohio, who married women from Laos. I also learned that several men from the Lao community in Columbus are going to Laos in 2009, not only to join the SEAGAMS and visit relatives, but also to find Lao brides.

6.2.3 U.S.-Lao Humanitarian Projects

Going back to Laos is not only an opportunity to reunite with families, but also a process of facing the reality of place where once they considered as an undesirables place to live. The Lao American diaspora in Columbus, Ohio, constantly compare their lives in the U.S. with their relatives’ in Laos after home visiting. Despite the fact that many found their relatives in Laos whose have slower pace of life and leisure time to spend with friends and family, most of them have more appreciation for their fortunate life in the U.S. in terms of job, living standard, and a better education opportunity for their children. Many of the Lao diaspora have observed and expressed similar views on Lao society, that there were huge gaps between the rich and the poor which they found less in the U.S. No matter how much development and change Laos has acquired since the diaspora left, the poverty of their relatives in Laos is the reality of homeland conditions as they perceived them.
Recently, there have been discussions among the members to carry out humanitarian projects in a remote village in Laos. The monk initiated the projects after his visit to villages and the nearby area in Southern provinces of Laos in the early 2000s. He found the villagers were poor rural farmers; there was no primary school near the villages, and the hospital was faraway. He proposed to build a school located between two villages by raising the funds from the Lao community in Columbus, Ohio. The project is still in its fund-raising stage. Unfortunately, the projects was unable to be implemented due to conflicts between the local authority in Laos and the monk on the location of school and the issue of who would take credit when the project is complete.

There are also some individuals who have initiated humanitarian projects in Laos on their own. A Lao American woman, Manichan, was the first person from Columbus, Ohio, who established a humanitarian project in Laos since the early 1990s. Manichan was the co-founder of one NGO in the U.S. in 1997 working on providing equipment and medical supplies to a hospital in Laos. Now the organization has expanded its assistance to other aspects of development, such as energy, computer network, and the internet for educational purposes in rural villages. Manichan has recognized the poverty and vulnerability of people in Laos in terms of health, lack of access to economic resources and social opportunities. However, in the early stage of the project, she encountered difficulties in persuading the Lao government to collaborate in approving the use of technology in rural areas because it was still concerned with the national security issues. The incident shows the fragile relationship between the Lao government and the Lao diaspora.
However, the staff of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs informed me that the Lao government used to collaborate with the Lao diaspora in the U.S. working on a humanitarian project by sending used clothes from the Lao Americans to poor people in rural Laos in 2000. The Lao government paid for the transportation cost, while Lao Americans collected the clothes. The project lasted for only two years because the Lao government found it was uneconomical to pay the high cost of shipment, considering the value of the products. Currently, the Lao government accepts only medicine and medical supplies which are considered as of high value and high demand in Laos.
Chapter 7: Conclusions

This chapter discusses the implications of my research findings on the Lao American diaspora regarding how they have maintained and expanded their connection to the homeland over the years. The Lao American diaspora in Columbus, Ohio, consists of people from various socioeconomic backgrounds ranging from farmers, doctors, government officials to high-ranking military officers; the majority of them emigrated from Laos during the late 1970s and 1980s. As is often the case with a young diaspora, Lao Americans have not yet achieved high socioeconomic status in the U.S. Instead, they have worked hard to build an ethnic community with strong ties among community members and practices of Buddhist values. The fact that the Lao diaspora is positioned at the lower level of socioeconomic status in the U.S. has played an essential role in its interactions with the homeland.

Self-help Organization and Buddhist Temple: Communication Mediators

The community association and the Buddhist temple of the Lao community in Columbus, Ohio have not only provided social and economic resources to the members, but has also served as a communication mediator and facilitator between the members and their relatives in Laos, especially during the Cold War era when communications and transportation between the U.S. and Laos were severely restricted. Both the Buddhist temple and the welfare association collaborated and mobilized resources to sustain the community and provide social and financial supports to the members in order to build a new life in the U.S. Thus, the community formation as well as cultural
preservation the community has retained might not be their intentional practice in order to maintain Lao ethnic identity, but it could be a survival strategy to gain an access to social and economic resources in establishing their new life in the host society. However, it might be wrong to see the Lao community as a closed society within the host country because we may overlook the fact that the social space within which the Lao American diaspora have interacted with one another is subject to change and is likely to expand beyond the formal structures of the temple and the Lao association.

**Home Country Policies as Factors Encouraging Homevisit**

The opened economic policies of the Lao government, after the Cold War, mark the turning point of the relationship between the Lao American diaspora and their homeland. An increasing number of the diasporic people in Columbus started to have a growing confidence in the Lao government, which has reassured the diaspora’s concern about the safety of home visits. Although the Lao government has changed its attitudes and policies toward the Lao diaspora, these changes have not fully persuaded the diaspora to return to the homeland permanently. Instead, they are only willing to make short visits. Moreover, the Lao government, as reflected from its policies, has not shown a sufficient understanding of diaspora’s potential contribution to Laos’ development.
Home Visiting as a Process of Socio Re-adaption

The present research also suggests that home visiting of the Lao diaspora is not only a necessary process to turn the “imagined homeland” into reality, but also a process of social re-adaptation. Home visiting experiences are influenced by the socioeconomic status of the people with whom the diaspora interacted in Laos. Their long separation from the home society and adjustment to the culture of the host country is the cause of a clash of expectations between the Lao diaspora and their relatives in Laos.

Furthermore, a “provisional return” to the homeland can also be an encouraging motivation to develop other types of homeland connections, though some people still retain minimal interactions only at a level of familial and financial obligation. However, if the networking in the homeland can support access to social and economic resources, some Lao Americans draft transnational business plans and initiate humanitarian projects in Laos. Different home visiting experiences influence the Lao diaspora on their future visit and foster different relations to the ethnic homeland.

Home Visiting and Changing Perceptions of the Homeland

All my interviewees revealed their longing for visiting Laos, though not returning on a permanent return at this moment. In addition, their motivations and decisions to visit were mixed depending on various factors ranging from their relations with family members back in Laos, financial situations, and prior experiences with the homeland government. By practicing home visiting, the Lao diaspora have constantly
evaluated and reflected their positions toward the development in Laos. This pattern of thinking is similar to other diaspora community who has settled in a more advanced host country compared to the home country in their process of searching for home in contemporary world such as Bosnian refugee returned to Sarajevo (Steffanson, 2004) despite the fact that most of the member of the Lao diaspora has spent only a short visit to their homeland at this moment. However, the Lao overseas who experienced hostile confrontations with the Lao government find it hard to trust the Lao government due to their vivid negative memories about the homeland. Therefore, they are more concerned about the security issues in Laos. I found many former military officials, who had been avoiding to meet with me or even living isolated from the community, are the ones who have never been back to Laos and will not do so in the near future. More efforts are needed from the Lao government in terms of policy changes in order to build understanding between the government and the Lao diaspora.

Reflection of ‘Living home’ versus ‘Ethnic home’

The Lao American diaspora has re-constructed their home in two places– the ‘living home’ is the one that provides economic resource and where the member of the Lao diaspora find more secure in the U.S., while the ‘ethnic home’ is the homeland to which they feel spiritual attachment and identity belonging, Laos. Many people spend time in Laos as tourists and some people visit Laos for the sake of joining festivals or cultural ceremonies. Some have no family connection to the homeland, but they still fine themselves linked to people, cultural practice, and places of the homeland. In contrast, the Lao diaspora found their home in the U.S. to be a ‘living home’ where
their everyday life is situated. The majority of the Lao American diaspora are still full time workers in the U.S., age between 40-60. Although in the U.S. they are employed in low wage jobs, they still have a better incomes as well as better social welfare compared to those in Laos. Most people tend to declare that the U.S. is their living home, while Laos is an ethnic place where their kin and people of the same ethnicity are living.

In sum, the Lao American diaspora have changed their connection with homeland in many ways after they were allowed to visit the homeland. Visiting Laos is a starting point of restoring physical connections and reconnecting with the families and friends in Laos. The Lao American diaspora in Columbus, Ohio, is ‘young diaspora’ as the first generation of diaspora in the U.S., which has placed them in a context of complex historical relations with their home country. Even though most of the Lao diaspora views the host country as their permanent settlement place, this does not necessarily suggest that their sense of home or emotional connections to the homeland has disappeared. One remarkable response among the people I interviewed is that they are strongly and emotionally attached to their ethnic identity, as they always call themselves “Lao people,” sing Lao songs, go to the temple, participate in Lao traditional festivals, and more importantly, retain their ties to the Lao American diaspora community.

Although the Lao diaspora community has changed their relations with the ethnic homeland since the end of the Cold War, they are still at the very beginning stage to re-connect with the homeland—while some has contested views about home
return, some expressed their interests in transnational activities follows similar patterns of some Vietnamese and Chinese diaspora. If I conducted this research in the next ten years when the same diaspora group is in retirement and when their children are able to establish their life in American society, I might find that their relations with the homeland have changed. The ethnic home may turn to be a living home as living conditions in Laos improved dramatically in the next decade or the diaspora’s obligations in the U.S. are less. It will also be interesting to study the notion of ethnic homeland among the second generation of the Lao American diaspora.
References


National Socio-Economic Development Plan (2006-2010).


Refugee resettlement program (1994). Refugee Resettlement Program (Reports to the Congress).


Appendix A: Interview Questionnaire

Migration Questions

• Tell me about your migration experiences?
• Where did you live in Laos before migrated? How did you plan to leave?
• Why did you decide to migrate?
• How long did you stay in the refugees’ camp in Thailand?
• What did you know about the US before migration?

Resettlement Questions

• Tell me about your life (experiences) living in the US since you first arrived up to now?
• How did you feel when you first arrived in the US? (to place, people, and etc)
• How do you like your life in the US? Why or why not?

Family Questions

• Tell me about your family and relatives in the US?
• Who accompanied you on your journey to the US?
• What do your family members do in the US?
• Tell me about your family and relatives who are in Laos?
• Who in your family are left behind in Laos? Why?
• How have you maintained your connection with them? Any changes over time?
• What Lao diaspora community activities are you involved with?

Relationship to Laos Questions

• How do you learn about social and political affairs in Laos?
• What was your first impression about Laos after the first visit (please describe)? How it had been changed since you left?
• Do you plan to return to live in Laos for temporary or permanently in the future? Why?
• What is your expectation and hope to see Laos in the future? Why?

--- End of Interview ---
Appendix B: Map of the Kingdom of Lan Xang: Late 14th Century

Appendix C: Map of Lao on the Mainland Southeast Asia

Appendix D: Map of Refugee Camps in Thailand

Appendix E: Map of Location of the Lao Buddhist Temple, in Columbus, Ohio
## Table 1. Informant Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Created Name</th>
<th>Year escaped from Laos</th>
<th>Year first entered the U.S.</th>
<th>Family members stayed in Laos</th>
<th>Occupation in Laos</th>
<th>Current Job</th>
<th>Visit Laos</th>
<th>Future Visit</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F1</td>
<td>Ms. Vieng Kham</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Parents and siblings</td>
<td>High school teacher</td>
<td>Clerk at Pharmacy support factory</td>
<td>1999 visit parents</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F2</td>
<td>Ms. Chan</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>Relatives</td>
<td>Primary school teacher</td>
<td>Factory worker</td>
<td>2007 visit families</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F3</td>
<td>Ms. Somchan</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>Parents and sisters</td>
<td>Teenager – un-attending school</td>
<td>Furniture Factory worker</td>
<td>1997 visit family</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M4</td>
<td>Mr. Phou</td>
<td>1979</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Relatives</td>
<td>High school Student</td>
<td>Own and operate a Construction company</td>
<td>1990 visit relatives; 1999 business survey; 2001 business survey; 2003 business survey</td>
<td>2009 to attend SEA Games</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F5</td>
<td>Ms. Savan</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Parents and siblings</td>
<td>Primary school teacher</td>
<td>Factory worker</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F8</td>
<td>Ms. Manichan</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>1979</td>
<td>Parents and siblings</td>
<td>The US embassy staff</td>
<td>Program Coordinator at the State of Ohio Commission on Minority Health</td>
<td>1982 pick up parents; 1991 visit parents; 1996 visit + NGO; 2002 NGO; 2005 to 2009 NGO</td>
<td>From 2005 made annual visits Laos to follow up project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M9</td>
<td>Mr. Khamphane</td>
<td>1979</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Mother and sisters</td>
<td>Pilot</td>
<td>Retirement</td>
<td>1999 visit mother; 2002 visit mother</td>
<td>In the next couple years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M10</td>
<td>Mr. Thong</td>
<td>1979</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Relatives</td>
<td>Lao Community Leaders and part-time coordinator at office of immigration</td>
<td>2000 visit friends; 2008 village</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td></td>
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