Big Brother Mouse Portraits of Laos
The publication of this book was made possible by support from Lyle and Agnes Schaller and GlobeAware. Thank you!

We thank the photographer, Joel Martin Halpern; the University of Wisconsin; and Larry Ashmun, for their cooperation in making this book possible. Damrong Tayanin, Co-Director of the Kammu Research Project at the University of Lund in Sweden contributed to the captions prepared at the University of Wisconsin.

These photographs are part of a larger collection hosted by the University of Wisconsin in Madison, in the USA; the full collection may be seen at:

http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/SEAIT.Laos
ประเท_SCLAW
1957
Laos

ผู้รับผิดชอบไม่ระดม Karl
Historic Photographs

โดย: โจเอล มาติม ฮาแลม

By Joel Martin Halpern

ปิ่นผึ้ง

ปิ่นผึ้งผึ้งเก่ากลับยาม
ការបâ

ការបâ ក្នុងឆ្នាំ 1957 បានស្នើឱ្យរីនាមតុង១៤ បានរីនាម និងបានប្រការឹតឹតជាព័ត៌មាន៖ និងបង្ហាញមុនប្រការឹតឹតមុនរីនាម និងបង្ហាញមុនប្រការឹតឹតមុនរីនាម និងបង្ហាញមុនប្រការឹតឹតមុនរីនាម និងបង្ហាញមុនប្រការឹតឹតមុនរី

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Introduction

In 1957, an American anthropologist named Joel Martin Halpern spent time in Laos, learning about the people, culture, and customs of the country. He took thousands of photographs, with a special emphasis on Buddhism, and on the ethnic groups of Laos. In Luang Prabang province, where most of these photographs were taken, he particularly photographed the Khmu and Hmong.

Just as important as the photographs, Mr. Halpern kept careful records about each picture, with details about where it was taken, and about the people or events shown.

The year 1957 was very special. It marked the 2500th anniversary of the Buddha’s death. One section of this book focuses on this anniversary; photographs from it appear in other sections, as well. (A small number of photographs were taken when Mr. Halpern returned to Laos in 1959; the year is given in these cases.)

These pictures are from long ago. Large towns and cities have greatly changed, even small villages have changed, but often not as much. Many laws and customs are different. All of us at Big Brother Mouse have enjoyed the opportunity to learn more about our country and culture through Mr. Halpern’s pictures. We hope that you will, too.
The Lord Buddha died in 543 BC, and some Buddhist countries date their calendar from that year. The 2500th anniversary of Buddhism, in 1957, was occasion for a grand celebration in Luang Prabang.

Elephants were brought from nearby villages. Here the chairs (palanquins) are empty, but they sometimes carried royalty and officials.
After attaining enlightenment the Buddha gave his first sermon under the Bodhi tree in Sarnath, India. The Prime Minister of India presented to Laos a sapling from that tree, which is carried by the royal guards.

Children and townspeople join at the end of the parade, along the Mekong River.
As part of the anniversary celebration, these novice monks were ordained, as shown here, and received their robes.

These girls clearly enjoyed the opportunity to dress up for this procession. They carry robes, food, and flowers, as offerings for the monks.

Lao Boy Scouts also joined the march.
A trainer uses his bare feet to guide his elephant at a procession in Luang Prabang.

The Crown Prince and other officials enter Wat Mai. Their traditional attire contrasts with the colonial French uniforms.

Before a royal ceremony, the provincial governor of Luang Prabang summoned royal honor guards to participate. The royal guards are followed by Lao nobles and officials, who are gaining merit by carrying new robes to donate to monks.
Ceremonies and Processions

Many of these pictures were taken during the New Year’s festivities, the biggest annual celebration in Laos. Lao New Year is celebrated in the middle of April, the hottest time of the year.

Everyone celebrates Lao New Year by throwing water on each other. The water brings relief from the heat, and is closely connected to the purification rites that are also part of the celebrations. In more recent years, however, this ritual has come in danger of losing its spiritual aspect, particularly in the larger cities.
These monks and novices have received the same dowsing with water that lay people receive during the New Year celebrations. Here, they approach the gates of Wat Vixoun.

Boys practice for their part in the Royal Palace’s New Year party, the event that will close the New Year celebrations. They are dancing with candle holders, which will be lit during their nighttime procession. The photo was taken on the grounds of the Royal Palace, with Phu Si in the background.
Townspeople carry a monk on a palanquin for the New Year celebrations. Processions such as this are often quite informal affairs in Laos, as can be seen from the children following along and playing on the fringes of the parade.

There was a large Chinese merchant community in Vientiane in 1957, and the Chinese New Year, earlier than the Lao New Year, was the focus of a festive celebration.
Khao Phansa, known as Buddhist Lent, begins in July and lasts for three months, through the most intense period of the rainy season. During this period monks may not travel, and Buddhists do not get married. The afternoon before, a giant candle is carried to the wat as part of a procession.
Laos has had its own culture and traditions for a long time. We speak gently and act with generosity to each other, and we have our own styles of dress.

A mother and her son walk to the wat. Although only men can serve as monks, Lao women are the most active in Buddhism on a day-to-day basis. The cloth on her shoulder is called “pha bieng”; both men and women wear one when going to the wat. Parents reinforce the foundations of Lao society by introducing their children to Buddhist rituals at an early age.
The conical ornament that this woman is carrying to the wat is made from flowers, banana leaves, and other decorations. It is called a “mak beng.” It is a symbolic representation of a “tat”, or reliquary for Buddhist artifacts. The silver dish is used to carry offerings, and to receive holy water as the monks chant.

Ramaayana dancers practice in front of the Royal Palace. They performed for the royal family at the 1957 New Year celebrations.
Rituals and Religion

Buddhism is usually thought of as the religion of Laos, but many people, including many Buddhists, worship and honor the same spirits that their ancestors have worshipped for thousands of years.

Men, women, and children all bring gifts, such as those shown here, to the wat. It is one task that both women and men do, often in separate groups.

These decorated bamboo poles were used in leading the neighborhood’s procession to the temple.
These young men, in white robes instead of the more familiar orange, are called “naks”; they are between the stage of being novices and monks. Nak, or naga, is a mythical water dragon; in Lao tradition it helped integrate Buddhism into the existing social fabric.
In 1957, like today, most people in Laos were farmers. But daily life also requires many other types of activity, as well as time to relax.

A Hmong girl carries water in long bamboo tubes. Water is scarce in mountainous regions of Laos; it must be transported from streams and rivers. Transporting water is a common household chore for young girls and women. Her clothing is typical of the White Hmong, while her turban, topped off with red pom poms, or flowers, is distinct from other types of Hmong headdresses. Her silver jewelry indicates her family’s wealth.
Boys in Vientiane gather at That Luang to play spinning tops. The tops are hand-carved and are popular with many ethnic groups.

Fish accounts for a large percentage of the protein in the Lao diet. These fishing platforms, built by Khmu, allowed a person to sit inside and monitor either nets or a variety of fishing poles.

Then, as now, making charcoal was a common village industry among people in the foothills of Laos. The power plant in Luang Prabang was powered by charcoal. Some was also sold to customers in Luang Prabang town.
A White Hmong man takes aim with his crossbow; if he misses with that, he’s got a Hmong-made rifle slung over his shoulder. The Hmong are known throughout Asia and Southeast Asia for their well-honed hunting skills.

Traditional Hmong belief holds that if someone cuts your hair in the dark of night, you will lose your luck and wealth. This boy, standing in bright daylight, is in no danger.
The khaen, a musical instrument made from bamboo tubes, is popular among several ethnic groups, including the Khmu and Hmong.

Hand-made umbrellas protect sellers from the sun rather than from the rain, as children rove the market in search of their favorite snacks.

Khmu women sell forest products at the New Year’s market in Luang Prabang. These women appear a bit intimidated by the market atmosphere; coming to Luang Prabang town was not a common experience for them. Khmu sell and trade woven baskets which the Lao use for steaming rice, as well as sesame seed, ginger, dried peppers, cotton, firewood and charcoal.
After their wedding ceremony, Princess Savivanh and Prince Manivong walk through main street of town, shaded by white silk royal umbrellas held by royal honor guards.

Luang Prabang’s nobility proceed to the princess’s wedding celebration. They carry silver bowls of flowers as their offerings.

Prince Manivong, shown here on his wedding day, was the youngest son of King Sisavang Vong, who was ailing and in bed at this point in his long reign.
A procession of the royal court arrives at the palace. Also present are the diplomatic corps from Vientiane, with each ambassador in formal dress or appropriate uniform. Welcoming them on the left are local school boys and the Lao army.

Prince Phetsarath, on left, led the Free Lao movement after World War II, but he left the country 1946 to build support for full independence. Phetsarath returned to Laos in 1957, when Mr. Halpern accompanied him on a trip; but he died two years later. He remains a highly respected figure, and many Lao homes have his picture hanging on the wall to provide protection and scare away evil spirits.
Clothing

Each ethnic group in Laos has its own special clothing style. Today you can see these traditional clothes at village festivals, and also in religious ceremonies.

Sashes are primarily for ceremonial use, but sometimes turn up in everyday life as well. These women are in Kasy, south of Luang Prabang. In the mid-1950s the population of this regional center was estimated to be a bit over 1,000.
Northern Lao and Thai people used to be called “black bellied Lao” due to the tradition of tattooing protective amulets onto the skin. The tattoos often consist of magic words called “kata”, frequently in Khmer, Sanskrit, or Pali scripts. This man is in Udom Xai, five hours north of Luang Prabang on modern roads, but a much further trip in 1957.

These women, in Luang Prabang province, are dressed in their finest silk clothes.

Luang Prabang’s Wat Hosiang is not a famous temple; thus, these shots give insight into the life of a more everyday religious site. Elderly Lao such as these men often become more involved in religious life as their working years pass.
The Mekong River

The Mekong is an important river in Laos. It is used extensively for transportation, as well as providing fish. Farmers and gardeners use the water to grow crops.

Work is often performed in a social setting. Here in the Luang Prabang port area on the Mekong, women bathe in the water, do their laundry, and care for their children while an unrelated man goes about the chore of checking his barge.
The rivers of Laos rise and fall dramatically during the year. When the water is low, from late October to about June, farmers take advantage of the rich soils deposited on the banks to grow a variety of crops.
A long-tail boat prepares to carry visitors to a neighboring village.

A barge is loaded with watermelon, sugar cane, and passengers, before crossing the Mekong in Vientiane. This photo was taken in the dry season, when the river is still navigable.

The thatched buildings shown here along the Mekong may have been temporarily erected for the dry season.
A Khmu village 150 kilometers south of Luang Prabang. In the past, Khmu were often called “Kha”, which means slaves or servants, which often they were. More recently they have been called “Lao Theung”, referring to the fact that they lived at elevations between lowland and highland groups.

Khmu men with rifles, in Xieng Ngeun district. At the time, many ethnic minorities in Laos hunted with homemade rifles.
A Lanten man demonstrates how a water pipe is used. The Lanten are one of the smaller ethnic groups in Laos. This photo was taken in the northern town of Luang Namtha, which has a high concentration of various ethnic minorities.

The items carried by the women suggest that these Khmu have come into Udom Xay to trade. As in so many other cultures, the women carry the burdens while the men walk free.
Villages of Mon-Khmer groups, built at slightly higher elevations than the Lao, feature houses built on the ground or only slightly raised on stilts. These Khmu homes are in Xieng Ngeun, the district south of Luang Prabang.

Many Khmu were heavily tattooed, both for prestige, and as protection from spirits who might “devour” a person.

Khmu villagers all dressed up for visitors. The Khmu themselves do not weave, so the “dressing up” involved the use of Lao clothing.
White Hmong men in Khu Kajam rings around their necks as a sign of wealth. The cloth used to make their clothing is purchased.

The women's clothing is characterized by intricate details. The women wear silver earrings, and the men wear silver rings on their fingers. The cloth used to make their clothing is purchased.

Striped Hmong women in Udom Xay show a variety of styles. The women wear detailed clothing. The women wear silver earrings, and the men wear silver rings on their fingers. The cloth used to make their clothing is purchased.
A Hmong bridegroom is dressed for the occasion in his best black trousers and shirt, as well as a number of sashes. His companion is wearing Western clothes. The bridegroom’s relative wealth can be measured by the number and size of silver and copper neck rings that he wears. A Khmu house is in the background.

"Ach" means "silver" in the H'mong language. These white H'mong women are characteristic of the H'mong and serve to display a family’s relative wealth. The photographer’s jeep is visible in the background.

These girls from the Akha ethnic group have come to a village in northern Laos near the Chinese border to trade. The Akha originally settled in China, then spread to Myanmar and Vietnam, and later into Thailand and Laos. (1959)
A Hmong man weighs opium. Scales such as this one were used solely for weighing valuable items such as opium, silver, or gold. Opium growing was encouraged and even required by colonial rulers. Since 2000, however, the government has worked with local farmers to nearly eliminate it.
Daily Life

A White Hmong villager poses with her horse, which transports goods to and from the local market.

Two Hmong men stand with rifles, and flasks of gunpowder around their necks, in the village of Kiu Kajam. The beret worn by the man on the left shows the vestigial French influence. In the background is a wind tower, another sign of the French presence.
A White Hmong boy holds bird traps. Behind him, pigs feed on corn or rice that has dropped out of the storage hut behind him.

Many Hmong were interested in building schools in their villages. The Lao Inspector of Education from Luang Prabang Province shows Kiu Kajam villagers a school map.

Three White Hmong men pose with a pony, which carries their heavier items in baskets. The man on the right is wearing expensive silk clothing, suggesting that the day was a special occasion for him.
A White Hmong man carries a load of grass on his back, a rifle and knife in his hands.

From an early age, children look after younger brothers and sisters. They generally handle the responsibility cheerfully and with great care.

Two young women in Luang Prabang, in Yunnanese dress.
Phikelawp
The Cow Spirit Ritual

These four photographs depict the “Nyuý Dab” (Cow Spirit ritual), as it was performed by White Hmong in Kiu Kajam. The shaman has already built the altar for the ceremony. (1) Villagers examine the calf that will be sacrificed to appease the ancestors. (2) Three men circle the altar. The man in the foreground plays a khaen (qeej), a Hmong wind instrument. (3) The calf is prepared, and a thread is tied to it to ensure that the ancestor spirits know that it is an offering for them. (4) Two men hold the calf while another slices down the center line of the animal.
King Saiseththathirat built some of Vientiane’s most famous temples and repelled a Burmese invasion in the sixteenth century. Today this statue of him is mounted on a different, taller pedestal in front of the That Luang.

Several smaller shrines, such as this one, were built within the That Luang compound in Vientiane.
A temporary room was built onto the front of the ordination hall at Wat Xieng Thong in Luang Prabang. It is no longer there. This was the main temple of the Lao royalty.

Royal guards flank the path into the gate at Wat Visoun for a New Year ceremony.

The women in these statues assume the posture used when making offerings in Buddhist ceremonies. In the background is Vientiane’s Wat Sisaket.
Buddhism has long accommodated Lao beliefs in spirits of the land. This spirit house is at Wat Xieng Thong. Offerings of rice and other items for the spirits (pii) are left here.

Auguste Pavie was the Frenchman responsible for the colonization of Laos and making it a part of French Indochina in the 19th century. In 1961 the Lane Xang Hotel was built on the site of this statue, which was moved to the French embassy.

A small icon, with a light bulb clasped in its hands, sits at a temple entrance gate in Luang Prabang, wearing the costume of dancers in traditional Lao performances of the Ramayana.
At Wat Aham in Luang Prabang, a statue poses like a demon in the Lao version of the Ramayana.

This temple is named “Southern Buddha Footprint Temple.”

This structure was made to hold the ashes of someone important. People made offerings to the spirit here, just as they do at spirit houses.
แนะนำที่ประเทศลาว
Map of Laos

สาขาวิทยาศาสตร์ ประวัติศาสตร์ ภาษา

Map of Laos

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Map of Laos
Joel Martin Halpern first came to Laos in 1957, as an anthropologist, and again in 1959 and 1969. Today, his extensive photographs and careful notes provide some of the best documentation available anywhere about this period in Lao history. He is now Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, USA.