REBELLION IN NORTHERN LAOS:
THE REVOLTS OF THE LU AND
THE CHINESE REPUBLICANS (1914-1916)

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While conventional scholarship has portrayed the colonial era as "peaceful," in reality, rebellion stirred all the major ethnic groups in Laos at various points between 1893 and 1954.1 Pathet Lao historiography dates the nationalist movement in Laos from a popular armed insurrection led by the Lao "patriot," Pho Ka Douat, in 1901, eight years after the French conquest. Other ethnic rebels deemed sufficiently important and "patriotic" to rate mention are Ong Keo and Ong Kommadan, the leaders of armed insurrection on the Bolovens plateau which lasted from 1901 to 1936, the armed resistance of the Lu minority under the leadership of the Chao Fa of Muong Sing (1914-1918), the resistance of the Tai in Sam Neua (1916) and the Hmong rebellion of 1918-1922 led by Tiao Fa Patchay. 3

Resistance to central power in Laos did not of course commence in colonial times and not all rebellions in Laos during colonial times were purely anti-French. For instance, in 1875 the Kha chief, Nhi, at the head of his fellow tribesmen rose in revolt in Houa Phan (Sam Neua), burning and killing all in his path and inflicting a complete defeat upon a Lao army dispatched from Luang Prabang to capture him. Only with Nhi's death did peace return to the mountain province.4 The Khamu of northern Laos were themselves victims of the Hmong at the time of the migration of the latter from Vietnam in the early nineteenth century. Khamu crossbows were no match for Hmong blunderbusses.5 Among the Thai-Lao, otherwise religiously oriented rebellions have a recorded history that goes back to the seventeenth century.6

Neither was all anti-authority activity recorded by colonial observers construed as "rebellion." In many cases the activities of bandits, labelled pirates, existed in the grey area between social banditry and anti-authority rebellion. In common with the more notorious rebel groups, the favoured "bandit" terrain included inaccessible mountain redoubts and the more remote regions of the trans-Mekhong boundary with Thailand as well as the borders between Laos and Yunnan, Laos and Vietnam and Laos and Cambodia.

The presence of these rebel-bandits was revealed during the opening years of the colonial administration. Among the first recorded were Sene Louang Anakete, the rebel Lao chief of Muong Phou Kha, arrested in 1895. In the same year, an uprising by the "pirate" chief Bang Thuoc was suppressed by the Lao population as he was leading a march upon Muong Het. Various other acts under the general rubric of "piracy" were reported in Cammon and Tran Ninh in 1896, certain of them committed by Vietnamese on Lao territory. Isolated acts of "banditry" were also recorded in Khone in 1918 (the assassination of a French family) and at Muong in 1924.7 Again in June 1933, the arrests in Siam of two infamous bandit leaders, Nai Sai and Nai Chau, were recorded. Having eluded the Siamese and French authorities for years, their incarceration was seen as a major defeat and loss of prestige for bandit emulators.8 To be sure, the phenomenon of social banditry was not confined to Laos but was prevalent in Siam, Cambodia, Vietnam and in other colonies or semi-colonies, and indeed in other epochs, preceding and succeeding the era of European colonial intervention.9

Typically, incorporation of the colonial periphery into a metropolitan-ordered state system involved the recasting of local political arrangements and power hierarchies. Such disruption often met with local resistance. Indeed, this was encountered by the French in Laos in the early years of conquest. But additionally, political instability increased in northern Indochina with the end of dynastic rule in China in 1911. Inside Laos, as discussed below, instability took two forms, "feudal," as in the case of the Lu, and "republican" or war-lord as in the case of Chinese elements.9

Revolt of the Lu (1914-1916)

The colonial administrator Boulanger observed that the montagnards of upper Laos were more or less "violently agitated" during the entire period from 1914 to 1921. Up until 1914, he contends, the various races of Muong Sing, Lu as well as montagnard, had accepted French tutelage, the only major dissenter being the Lu chief and "vulgar bandit," Van Na Poum, until his death at the hands of the military in 1910.10 To be sure, as Adas has written, given the colonial rapporteur's habit of indiscriminate labeling of anyone who resisted colonial rule as a bandit, it is very difficult to determine which bandit groups were exponents of popular resistance and which were
merely common bandits. There is, however, no mistaking the anti-French and popular character of the revolt of the Lu of 1914-1916. Led by a Lu prince and centred on Muong Sing, one of the former constituent muong of the ancient Tai-Lu political federation of Sip Song Panna, the rebellion took on the character of a movement for the secession of the muong from French rule.

Muong Sing had only been fully incorporated into French Laos in April 1904 following preliminary negotiations between Scott for the British in Burma and Pavie for the French side. Pavie had originally secured the Lu country for France by winning over the Chao Fa (prince) of Muong Sing. In 1907, however, the old Chao Fa was succeeded in that position by his son Phra Ong Kham, who did not share his father's pro-French sentiment and, indeed, developed an implacable contempt for the French. Following his initial flight to Sip Song Panna in December 1914, the Chao Fa led the Lu people in rebellion against the French for the next two years. It took the French three military expeditions before they could restore order and reestablish their administration. This they achieved by stripping the principality of its vice-regal prerogatives and converting it into a simple muong. Although the Chao Fa's family was authorised to return to Muong Sing, the Chao Fa himself eventually died in exile in China in 1923.

Up until this time the principality was in theory governed by the Chao Fa, considered by the population as an emanation of Buddha. He was seconded by a Ho Senam or Assembly of "mandarins." Each was of the Lu race and in theory was responsible for a special service such as finance, public works, police and so on, although, to be sure, they may have been concerned with anything but their allotted duties. Under the colonial order, appointments to the Senam were made by the Chao Fa but subject to the approval of the French administration. Before the French occupation, the Senam comprised 150 members, but the numbers had been progressively reduced, to seventy-five in 1899 and twenty-five in 1905.

In tandem with the French-imposed corvées and taxes, the Chao Fa upheld his traditional seigneurial rights. The population could be called upon to exercise a variety of servile duties, e.g. as tahoi (partisans), malalec (sword-bearers), timoi (parasol bearers), kouan (intendants for the preparation of fêtes), watchmen for the Chao Fa's cattle, labourers for his rice-fields, huskers for his padi, watchmen and so on. According to colonial accounts, the Chao Fa subjected his people to "a reign of terror." As in other muong, the montagnards were the major victims of domination at the hands of the Lu "mandarins." Not surprisingly, the Kha and the Tai Neua desired to be rid of the yoke of the Chao Fa.

Even before his defection in 1914, the Chao Fa was seen to be turning his not inconsiderable talents to "evil." This became most apparent between 1905-1908, during the period when extensive public works projects were carried out in northern Laos. Village chiefs acting on the orders of the Senam refused to supply corvée labour for the French while requisitions required for the Chao Fa or the mandarins were met. According to the French rapporteur, the only possible explanation for this act of duplicity was the "natural" proclivity of the Lu to surrender themselves to pomp and pageantry as long as it gave them the "illusion of being a great people" or at least being at the top of an ethnic hierarchy which placed the montagnards at the bottom.

One French observer states that the rebellion of the Lu probably commenced as an attempt by relatives of the Chao Fa to usurp power. In any case the Phya Kham Lu fled to Sip Song Panna in 1909 and from there mounted opposition to both the French and the Chao Fa. With the flight of the Chao Fa to Muong La in Sip Song Panna, clan rivalry and court intrigue at Muong Sing became subordinated to the war of resistance mounted by the Lu peoples against the French. While the Chao Fa awaited a propitious time to stage his return from Sip Song Panna, his armed bands engaged in running guerilla actions against the French forces in Luang Nam Tha and Muong Sing. The advice tendered by the Resident Superieur to his beleaguered deputies in the Lu country was to hold "blow by blow" the posts already occupied until reinforcements could arrive. The strategy was to guard the valleys of the affluents of the Nam Tha, the most likely "invasion" route of the Lu "pirates" towards Muong Sing. A major fear of the French was that the rebellion would be consummated as a true war of secession, especially if the Chao Fa was contacted by enemies of France in China.

The Chinese Revolt of 1914

In November 1914, what the French saw as a band of "Chinese pirates and opium smugglers" entered Laos from Yunnan and attacked the administrative centre at Sam Neua, killed the French administrator, Lambert, and made off with between 100,000-200,000 piastres from the local treasury along with 49 kilograms of opium and a supply of weapons. Fortified in the post, the rebels repelled attempts by the military to dislodge them. Reinforced by "turbulent elements" drawn from the local population, the band withdrew in the face of the tirailleurs (infantry) summoned from Hanoi. From Sam Neua, the rebels marched on Son La, successfully destroying French posts in the Black River region. Before storming Son La and occupying the office of the Resident, the rebels staged a procession and fête in the Black River region celebrating the coup de main at Sam Neua. On this occasion they brandished flags of the Chinese Republic and their own revolutionary standard, featuring a black triangle on a red background. Pursued by the military the rebels retreated to Sip Song Panna—whence they had come—via Dien Bien Phu.

If the ringleaders of the rebellion were Chinese from Sip Song Panna, the rest were drawn from local Chinese residents in northern Laos, Son La and Hoa Binh. At the time of the attack on Son La the rebel forces had been swollen from the original group of thirty Chinese and forty Kha and Phuthai to include 200 Chinese and 600-700 Lao and Kha mine coolies. These were joined by Black Tai elements from Muong Het in the Black River region, otherwise referred to by the French as...
the “dregs of the population.” Other Tai supporting the rebel cause were from the clientele of local functionaries whose positions had been revoked by the French for misdemeanours.23

The chief of the rebel band went by the name of Leang San or Liang Tou Tou, in emulation of the Chinese military “governor” of the region during the Ho (Black Flag) invasion in the late nineteenth century.24 Indeed, by assuming the name of special commander he attempted to pass himself off as King of the Ho. Allowing no allusions as to the intent or permanency of the rebellion, the rebels posted the following proclamation at the occupied post at Sam Neua:

We Leang Tou Tou,

In execution of the orders of the chief superior, Li Yuen Hong, we have seized the post of Sam Neua to render good will to all. Everyone continue to cultivate your land and remain peaceful. It will be necessary to unite and obey orders received.25

Neither was the anti-French dimension of the rebellion ignored:

The French army which is at Muong Boun Nua is encircled, it seeks to rescue itself but is unable.

1. If this army requests any provisions, porters or coolies, refuse to offer any services.
2. Any infraction of this order will lead to the death penalty for the guilty.
3. The French army in Muong Boun Nua will be destroyed blow by blow.
4. All the soothsayers have predicted the annihilation of the French people. Even Paris has been crushed by the German army. It is no use counting on France. Drive out the French and the country will commence a happy and prosperous era and will enjoy entire religious freedom.

Authorities receiving this proclamation, make it known to all inhabitants.

Enigmatically dated the twenty-eighth day of the second month of the Chinese era, 2615,” the proclamation was signed by the military chiefs, Xing Tchai and Xing Liani in the name of the newly proclaimed country of “Phu Nan Khui.”26

Having eliminated the French from Sam Neua, the Chinese rebels sought to restructure the local administration. All in all, eight chaomuong were to be nominated from among those Lao tasseng who had joined the rebel cause. The Chinese chief pledged double salaries for all, and a generous pia (measure) of opium a day for the coolies. Twenty coolies conscripted from each tasseng were to be employed to construct a redoubt headquarters for the rebel administration at Sam Neua. In an evident departure from past administrative practice in the province, the Chinese chief paid for everything he requisitioned.27 While in fact several new chaomuong were nominated and installed in office on double salary, the majority of the Lao tasseng remained pro-French, as did the Hmong of the province.28

Following suppression of this short-lived rebellion, a War Council was convoked with a view to the restoration of the status quo ante. Six of the guilty (or at least six scapegoats) were summarily executed. These included Ba Phom, the former chaomuong of Xing Kho, Khamphan Ken, a Lao guilty of assassinating a French missionary, and the Chinese rebels Hy Vo Ky and Ba La. Witnessed by the mandarins and the local population, the executions were reported by the local French observer to have had a very “salutary” effect upon the population, especially the execution of Ba Phom, who had held very high office for eighteen years and who was well known locally.29

The major repercussion, however, was the reorganisation of the territory between the Black River and the Upper Mekong bordering Yunnan as military regions (Military Region Five in Laos and Military Region Four in Tonkin). Simultaneously, a state of siege was proclaimed in the regions. According to the Governor General this drastic measure was justified by the continued threat posed to the French order by the Chinese rebels. In June 1915, between 1,000 and 3,000 rebels, 500 of whom were well armed, were still holding out at Muong Hou in north Laos, where they were being resupplied from China, but only the Yao population of the region was reported as susceptible to rebel influence.30 On the diplomatic level, although various approaches were made to the Chinese government in Yunnan, the Governor General did not consider intercession with Peking to be warranted.31

Should, then, this rebellion be viewed as a political movement? According to the Governor General, not at all. In his view it was simply the work of opium smugglers out for “vengeance and death.” According to this reasoning, Lambert had brought vengeance down upon his own head because he went about the suppression of opium smuggling with a degree of zealousness unmatched by his predecessors. That he made enemies among the local Chinese, the leading smugglers in northern Laos, was undeniable, but why did other ethnic groups and strata join in the revolt? The entire Muong population of the hill country of Than Hoa and Hoa Binh were seen as inveterate opium smokers—women included—and averse to paying an inflated price for opium sold by the Régie. The opium heisted by the rebels at Sam Neua included opium confiscated from smugglers. Indeed the post was attacked the night before the collection of taxes was to have been effectively accomplished. This manifest act of “banditry,” according to the Governor General, was largely a result of retribution sought by Ba Phom, the Lao functionary whose position was revoked in June 1913 and who had been fined 800 piastres by the Douanes et Régie. It was then that he made common cause with the Chinese and was himself responsible for rallying the Tai, the “wretched auxiliaries of the bandits.” Following this argument, all the proclamations, discourses, letters and demonstrations of Leang San, the Chinese rebel chief, were just “boasting and parody.”32
Still, there is evidence of a far more careful preparation for the revolt than is suggested by a single-minded action of bandits. Although ignored by the unfortunate Lambert, a rebellion by the Chinese in northern Laos had already been brewing for some four or five months. This involved rudimentary military training of rebel units. Unlike the Lao, most Chinese in Laos were literate and were ardent readers of newspapers from their homeland. Au courant with events surrounding the 1911 revolution, the resident Chinese in Laos were able to influence the local population in many ways. Leang San reportedly even told the chaomuong of Sam Neua that he was sent by the President of the Chinese Republic to conquer Annam. Indeed, after the initial coup de force at Sam Neua, the rebels were sufficiently well organised to sound out the entire Chinese population residing in the territory between Sam Neua and the Black River as to joining in a general uprising against the French administration.33

Nor should we overlook the historical antecedents of the revolt, which might also be described as a localised manifestation of Chinese republicanism fueled by a lingering memory on the part of the Chinese population of the Black Flag revolts, which swept northern Indochina in the late nineteenth century.34 By the Treaty of T’ien Tsin of June 1884, Peking had abrogated to France all rights of suzerainty in Tonkin. Local Yunnanese mandarins, Chinese troops and bandits living semi-permanently in the Black River region had never recognised this treaty, however, nor was the government in Peking—Imperial or Republican—inclined to discipline them. They lived off the local population like locusts and on the occasion of the sacking of Luang Prabang, the Ho joined forces with troops of Deo Van Tri. Larteguy and Yang Dao observe that while certain Hmong joined the Black Flags on this occasion, the majority fought against them to secure their independence.35 On the other hand, by withholding support for Leang San’s movement, the Hmong probably ensured its ephemeral existence.36

In general, Chinese residents in Vietnam rallied to Sun Yat Sen’s Tung Meng Hui society and welcomed the republican leader during his visits to Vietnam in the early 1900’s. Sun saw in Tonkin a safe-base from which to launch anti-Ch’ing rebellion into Kwangsi and Yunnan. But with the failure of one such rebellion in 1908, Sun was deported from Indochina by the French either at the request of or in complicity with the Chinese government. One official Ch’ing memo of the time described Sun Yat Sen as “a head of a band of robbers which had been committing depredation and disturbing the public peace in Kwangsi on the borders of Annam...”37 While we have no evidence that the Tung Meng Hui took root in Laos, it would not be too fanciful to draw the inference that bolder elements among his former subordinates took matters in hand to strike a blow for local northern Lao and Vietnamese independence, albeit on Chinese terms.

A probable sequel to the rebellion occurred in April 1932, when a band of 300 Yunnanese “pirates” armed with 150 weapons rallied in the Taland region with the intention of attacking Muong Le. The colonial authorities surmised that this band was in league with elements of the Garde indigène who had turned their guns against the French during December of the previous year. Not usually given to cooperation, the Chinese authorities in tandem with the French suppressed the rebellion. Its origins were believed to lie in the failure of the crop, more particularly because young plants were destroyed by the rains.38

As seen, the revolt of the Lu under the Chao Fa illustrated the phenomenon of the rebel aristocrat. The Chao Fa provided not only leadership but was simply the most prestigious personage in the Lu world. “Feudal” in the way he treated his subjects, he was, nevertheless the symbol of Lu separateness and identity.39 The impulse on the part of the Lu peasantry to rid themselves of the corvée and the colonial tax burden was undoubtedly a major factor in facilitating popular support for the Chao Fa’s rebellion. For the man himself, his rebellion may have been as much a war of secession for the restoration of traditional boundaries and traditional prerogatives. The revolt therefore has a dual anti-colonial and “feudal” quality. Above all, however, the revolt illustrates the particularly Lao-Lu quality of the importance of a clientele to a rebel leader as much as the importance of a meritocratic leader to a clientele.

Distinguished by its political program and its foreign element, the revolt of the Chinese in 1914 is a more complex phenomenon. Although anti-fiscal and anti-French and while attracting a limited participation of the local population, it would be hard to conceive that had the rebels established their republic, they would have removed all local abuses. Clearly, however, the Opium Régie had alienated not only the local merchants cum opium smugglers cum Black Flags but had driven a number of the lesser Lao nobility into social banditry. The Kha, as was usually the case, had nothing to lose by joining the rebels. Singing the praise of Chinese Republicanism, while acting out the role of opium warlords, the rebel leadership appeared to be responding less to crisis than a sense of relative political deprivation. By attempting to replace one protectorate with another, the Chinese rebels have emphatically not won a place for themselves in patriotic Lao history. Conventional histories of the Black Flags have tended to emphasise the destructiveness of their military campaigns and their ideology of “anarchy.” Accordingly, their pioneering struggles against French colonialism in Indochina have scarcely merited serious consideration from Lao or Vietnamese historians. Yet, the attempt of Leang San and his army to liquidate the French Opium Régie and the colonial tax system in northern Laos stands as a major prelude to the outbreak of major mass revolutionary insurrection in northern Indochina some decades later, albeit under vastly different circumstances.
ENDNOTES


2. This rebellion occurred in the area along RC 9 in southern Laos close to the Laos-Vietnam border. See Ky Son, "The Special Vietnam-Laos Relationship Under Various Monarchies and During the Anti-French Resistance," *Vietnam Courier*, no. 7, 1980, p. 11.


7. The following reflection by a Cambodian on why people become "pirates" is instructive:

"Why do people become pirates? Cambodians are very gentle and very often submit to authority because of ignorance and religion. Buddhism teaches them to be resigned and wise. If they become pirates it is because they are at the end of their means and because they have no alternative, it is because they have nothing to eat or to wear and pay and because personal and property tax is too heavy for them. Moreover, the Douane is insupportable for them. Customs officers threaten them severely, make them pay dues, carry off the products of their cultivation, wagons, buffalos. These activities discourage them, reduce them to nothing, prevent them from devoting themselves to cultivation and incite them to become pirates..." ("Réflexions d'un Cambodgien au sujet des actes de piraterie au Cambodge." *La Presse Indochinoise*, 11 July, 1936).


9. AOM Paris Indochine A50 NF (28) 3 "Governor General of Indochina to the Minister of Colonies," 5 February 1915.

10. AOM Paris Indochine A50 NF (28) 3 "Governor General of Indochina to the Minister of Colonies," 5 February 1915.


12. AOM Aix Laos Q1 "Extract from the report of the Résident Supérieur." 15 January 1915.


15. AOM Aix Laos Ell, "Situation Géographique et Ethnographique de la Principauté de Muong Sing," n. d.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. AOM Paris Indochine A 50 NF (28) 3 "Note pour la presse" n. d.


33. "Governor General of Indochina to the Minister of Colonies," 5 February 1915, op. cit.


36. For an eyewitness account of the brutal operation mounted by the Garde Indigène to crush the rebels, still led by Leang (Luong) Tou Tou and holding out in northern Laos, see Guillemet, Sur les Sentiers Laotiens, Hanoi-Haiphong, Imprimerie d'Extrême Orient, 1924. While the rebels were found to be in possession of tax documents and while they had constructed sophisticated military defense systems, they were treated by the military as common criminals and shown little mercy during the course of the military operations leading to their liquidation.


