

The Lao Inter-generational Contract

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Since the 1990s, social and cultural change in Laos has accelerated. Almost everyone in Laos says that they want 'development,' but are confused when development brings with it unanticipated changes. These changes are most apparent among young people, and this is because they grow up in conditions that are increasingly different from their parents. It causes gaps in understanding between the younger generation and the older generation.

This essay focuses on what was learnt about perceptions of generational change in families, from a research project that had a larger brief, including issues of dress, sexuality, mass media, and migration.¹ We interviewed hundreds of people, both young and old in the main cities of Pakse, Vientiane and Luang Prabang. We chose these major urban centres because we surmised that social and cultural changes in the Lao population were likely to be greatest in these urban centres. The Lao population in 2010 was estimated at 6.5 million, which is approximately half a million more than at the last census in March, 2005. In the Capital Vientiane, in 2010, it was estimated at over 768,000, Pakse's population should be approaching 90,000+ in 2012, while Luang Prabang's in 2012 should also be around 90,000+. Urbanisation in all of these cities has been rapid and on-going.

The Family Generational Contract Re-negotiated

The term generation applies most strictly within families, marking the natural gap between parents and children. In families in the past, the differences in age between siblings was unproblematic in that their future was already mapped out for them, in the sense proposed by Margaret Mead for traditional societies. She argued that generational differences formed part of a well-known social pattern that was embedded in kinship relations. In such societies, older people appeared to know all the cultural information that was necessary for a person to be a successful member of that society (Mead 1970,1). Adults are respected because they have acquired socially valued knowledge and younger people continually defer to their wisdom.² The young simply had to wait as the escalator of age carried them into roles already prepared for them by society. However in contemporary Laos, individuals from families in rural areas have seen significant differences in the levels of education between older and younger siblings. The latter are more likely to engage in temporary or permanent migration for education and/or work. This produces important experiential differences between them, with older siblings being more traditional and closer to their parents in attitude than the younger ones.

Larger families are still found, mostly in the countryside in Laos. The average household size in Laos, according to the Bureau of Statistics, is 5.9 persons, but in cities like Vientiane it is lower at 5.5. In some ethnic groups, such as among Hmong, several wives are tolerated officially and large families are found. But overall, this is a rare family form in Laos today, and families of 10 or more people make up 4% of the total, according to the 2005 census. Households, of course, may be made up of wider kin, or indeed, non-kin. In cities such as Vientiane, Pakse and Luang Prabang which absorb large numbers of migrants, household size is in fact inflated by their incorporation.

Actual families in Lao cities tend to be smaller than in the countryside, and they will get smaller. The main reason for this is economic. Firstly, in cities there are fewer opportunities for children to become economically active and contribute to the family's income. Secondly, they stay at school longer and therefore remain dependant on family support longer than rural children. In general, higher education is the main avenue of upward mobility for people and hence families begin to allocate resources to higher education for their children. The expense associated with this is a main motivation for smaller families. Furthermore, education for girls is strongly correlated with greater individual control of fertility, and so the feedback effect of education also favours smaller families.

Most Lao live in nuclear family households, i.e. those simply containing parents and their children. Among lowland Lao, the care of the aged has usually fallen to the youngest daughter,



Khwan Chai (Idol) calls itself the 'magazine of the new generation.'

though this is less so in cities, and here we see the major sub-form of the Lao family which is a stem family, i.e. one where the parents (usually the wife's side) live together with a married daughter (or more rarely, son). Joint families or extended families, i.e. ones where brothers or sisters and their wives or husbands share a household, are uncommon. Among ethnic groups who are patri-local, such as Hmong or Khmu, one may find extended families of brothers and their parents, but more often we find stem families where the older brother cares for his parents and younger brothers forming separate households.

The workings of the nuclear family in Laos, however, are modified by the wider kin network which still plays an important role in individual family decision making, in the provision of economic support, and various forms of mutual assistance, especially with rituals. As the social anthropologist Elisabeth Croll observed, across East, South and Southeast Asia, "within a variety of kinship systems, a high value is uniformly placed on familial obligation and harmony, the centre or core of which is filial piety or duty" (Croll 2006,473).³ In the past this meant obedience and respect for older generations and the subordination of the needs of the younger generations to those of the parents. The nature of this subordination varied, of course, from society to society. As Croll points out, a cultural ideal was to have a prosperous old age surrounded and supported by one's children. However, "a contemporary Asia-wide concern is the common fear that modernization or urbanization, migration, new consumer aspirations and the introduction of new Western values have emphasised individual rather than collective familial interests and thus eroded filial obligations" (ibid., 474). The feared collapse of support for the older generation, however, has not come. But, as Croll and others have pointed out, the 'inter-generational contract' has been re-negotiated, or in the case of Laos, is in the early stages of re-negotiation.

In the traditional structure, resources flowed towards the senior generations, but in the modern context and primarily because of the costs incurred by many years of education, resources have been redirected towards the young. However, there is anxiety across the region that the young will not provide support or adequate support to the parents in their old age because of the changing values of the younger generation (ibid., 476).

In our survey, we asked people if they were worried whether their children would care for them when they were old. Their replies reflected some of the anxiety identified by Croll for Asia in general. One might argue that those who said that they have no worries are surprisingly low, and the category 'worry sometimes' probably conceals considerable variation in anxiety. The replies to, 'no resources no support' entailed a recognition by poorer people that if they did not provide important support

TABLE 1: Concern about child support

	Frequency	Percent
No worries	184	32.9
No resources no support	76	13.6
Worry sometimes	237	42.3
No response	63	11.2
Total	560	100

to their children then they could expect little from them in the future. Those who gave no response often reacted simply with a shrug of their shoulders, a whatever will be, will be, attitude.

We also asked about residential preferences, i.e. if it were possible for married children to live separately, would they do so, and an overwhelming number of them replied that children would prefer to do so. Of course, this preference conforms to the logic of the nuclear family, makes lines of authority with individual households clearer (this is especially true for men who live with their in-laws), and one might also add that living separately suggests that you are rich enough to do so. Many, of course, are not yet in this position. One also needs to qualify a desire to live separately with the often stated preference of people to live not far away from their parents who they are therefore able to visit as often as they like, and most importantly, call on for child-minding. Yet, it is also true that separate residences clearly mark-off allegiances and reinforce tendencies for the retention of money inside the nuclear family.

TABLE 2: Prefer to live apart from parents

	Frequency	Percent
Prefer to live apart	419	74.8
Prefer to live with parents	70	12.5
No response	71	12
Total	560	100

There has never been any serious sociological research into urban families in Laos, but one can be certain that fear concerning support in old age varies radically from social class to social class. Inheritance of the parental home by the caregiver has been considered their 'payment' for providing care, while those who have established separate families are more-or-less reluctant to contribute to elderly up-keep. Among ordinary or poor families there may be bad treatment of the elderly, and it is not unusual to hear statements like, 'you didn't look after me well, so why should I look after you?' The neglect or even mistreatment of elders in societies which have stressed 'filial' duties is under-researched, partly because it is such an embarrassment.⁴

Children are socialised to fear authority, and to not upset or dispute with elders. Within the family men embody this authority and it was apparent from our focus groups that fathers were generally seen as more emotionally distant than mothers. Of course, there are always individual exceptions. Almost all of our young informants felt that they could approach their mothers about any problems in their lives, and look to her to act as a mediator with their father. A surprising number of young women said they could talk with their mothers about boyfriends. But the issues of having relationships, love and sexuality are primarily discussed among friends, or maybe with older sisters or brothers. In rural Laos, the guiding hand of parents and relatives plays an important role in mate choice, but in the cities where parents are unlikely to know most of their children's friends and acquaintances, this guiding hand falls away and is replaced by the peer group. The role and influence of peer groups have, naturally, been enhanced by young people's use of mobile

telephones, and increasingly, the internet.

Violence in families is an important index of social relationships, but it is notoriously difficult to research. Nevertheless, we attempted to enquire about this. For example, the use of force by males on their wives (who are still considered socially subordinate to their husbands, despite political proclamations about equality), is seen as illegitimate by 80.4% of our respondents, 6.6% saying it is sometimes okay, while 9.8% thought it was legitimate. Again, the nature and extent of domestic violence in Laos remains under-researched,⁵ but our findings certainly suggest that it is not condoned. As for the use of force to discipline children, 61.8% thought it was unnecessary, while 35.5% thought it was necessary sometimes for ‘reasonable discipline.’ It appears to be an ethos that favours discussion over force. Our student focus groups also saw a need for reasonable discipline for children, but at the same time they rejected serious violence that led to injury of children. As one group agreed: “It is not necessary to use violence with youngsters because they are really like blank sheets of paper, they don’t know the difference between good and bad at all. If they do something wrong we should explain to them. If we use violence it will only make them react against us.” Another student recounted how, after her father beat her badly, she felt like retaliating in kind. Use of violence against wives was also rejected in general by young informants, and many thought it would be a source of embarrassment for all concerned, though some said wives who were chronic gamblers, who played cards constantly and neglected their housework, deserved to be disciplined.

We also asked a set of questions that often caused some unease; they were questions about how parents expressed their love towards their children and how the children reciprocated (and in table 4 it should be remembered that these are the perceptions of parents).

TABLE 3: Parental expressions of love

	Frequency	Percent
Support education	102	18.2
Give them whatever they wish	71	12.7
Teach them and be a good example	265	47.3
Provide encouragement	47	8.4
Listen to their reasoning	20	3.6
No response	55	9.8
Total	560	100

TABLE 4: Children’s expression of love to parents

	Frequency	Percent
Listen to parents	199	35.5
Monetary support	33	5.9
Gifts on appropriate occasions	53	9.5
Help with family work	80	14.3
Look after when ill and/or old	98	17.5
No response	65	11.4
Buy food	32	5.7
Total	560	100

We asked the Lao youth in our focus groups the same questions and their replies mirrored their elder’s expectations. They said that the best way they could show their love towards their parents was to listen to them and obey them. Of course, once again this is a statement of ideal practice, and is probably by-and-large true given that the students in our focus groups were generally from among the best students (try as we might to get a greater spread, the schools would only select good students for us to interview). But, there are very real differences of experience between urban-based students and those who come from rural areas where parent-child relations remain more strictly hierarchical. Some of the interesting variations and innovations in practice mentioned by the students were celebrating, for example, the birthdays of their parents. The celebration of children’s birthdays, although recent, is already a well-established innovation in Lao urban culture, where a cake is bought for the child and ‘happy birthday’ is sung. This is one reflection of society’s re-orientation towards the younger generation. That parents in some families are now incorporated into this celebration, is one of the signs of Lao adopting new forms to signal the creation of ‘modern’ families. Such ideas about ‘modern families’ are found in advertising in all its forms. In foreign family programmes or films, and even in discussions about family matters that one finds in women’s programmes on TV. The open expressions of affection between parents and older children, or husbands and wives, that is often shown in these mediums, is still fairly rare in Laos. Our informants were often quick to point out that this was not a practice in their families. But there were some who spoke of just these sorts of practices inside their own families. One suspects these families are among the vanguard of ‘modernist’ cultural change in urban Laos.

All of our student respondents proclaimed their indebtedness to their parents for their opportunities to study to a high level, which as they are aware, is still a privilege in Laos. This was especially true of rural students. Despite these deep feelings of affection and indebtedness felt by the student groups towards their parents, they also stressed that that the way they and their parents “think” is different. Some complained that their parents were just too old fashioned. Many said this was because the younger generation knew more about technology, used the internet, maybe knew other languages like English, and knew little about rural affairs.

Conclusion

Most people in Laos continue to live in the countryside (over 70%) practicing largely traditional farming. A ‘generation gap’ has not really touched rural Laos and that is because people in these villages still live traditional lives in the sense proposed by Margaret Mead, and parents still provide the model for their children’s future. But many people now travel beyond the village for education or to engage in migrant labor in the cities of Laos, or in Thailand, and many do not return to live there.

One of the main issues of contention among the generations was youth sexuality, although it seems that parents have reluctantly conceded that they have lost this battle. Sexuality and the apparent modern obsession with ‘love’ arises from



Wedding. Parents and relatives tie cotton strings on the newlyweds wrists as a way of offering blessings. Photo by author.

young people's autonomy in partner choice, the emphasis on compatibility, and the role of emotion and sexuality in the creation of what social scientists refer to as a 'companionate marriage.' That is where the interpersonal connection between the couple eclipses the demands of the broader kin group.

Many Lao parents today did not have the same expectations when they married and therefore can provide little guidance for their children, and so this is taken over by the peer group. In societies where the transition to 'companionate marriage' has taken place, both parents and peers can provide guidance. But for the foreseeable future, this will not be the case for most young Lao and they will rely on their peers and friends.

References

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Notes

- ¹ This project was conducted by the Lao National Institute for the Social Sciences, and they employed me as their research adviser. Briefly, two methods were employed: a mainly qualitative survey of 560 households, and 32 focus groups conducted among high school and university students (320 persons overall). This survey work entailed 185 villages in 59 districts of the three cities.
- ² An abridged version of her book was translated into Lao to provide some theoretical framework for the research.
- ³ Her article was also translated into Lao to provide a theoretical reference point for the research project.
- ⁴ Charlotte Ikels (2004) provides many examples of this kind of marginalisation and mistreatment of the elderly in so-called 'Confucian' East Asia.
- ⁵ See the CUSO/GDG 'Report on Rural Domestic Violence in the Lao PDR.' <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/vaw/ngocontribute/CUSO.pdf> (accessed 10 Jan, 2013)