

LAOS: TOPONYMY AND THE QUEST FOR NATIONAL IDENTITY

This paper concentrates on those aspects of modern Laos of interest to the toponymist: modern history, people, language, and geographical names. It is not otherwise a specialist text. The paper is drawn together from an assortment of material, from a wide variety of sources, principally the PCGN *Laos* country file and the sources listed at the end of this document.

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The Historical Context

1 Laos is an ethnically diverse country occupying part of the area in south-east Asia where four cultures coalesce: Tai, Austroasiatic, Miao-Yao and Tibeto-Burmese. The Tai element of this mixture can be subdivided into two groups, which have come to be known as Thai and Lao. But though these two groups have countries – Thailand and Laos – bearing their names today, the distinction between them is by no means as clear cut as modern international borders might suggest. Laos in particular is a relatively new creation; a country which very probably would not exist at all had it not been for the French colonial era, lasting for half a century from 1893 till the Second World War. Apart from the mediaeval kingdom of Lan Xang¹, which occupied similar territory between the 15th and 17th centuries, there is no precedent for a discrete state here. Rather, history has usually seen a constantly fluctuating succession of temporal and spiritual influences over what is now Laos, and it was not until the early 19th century that there began an awareness that perhaps the Tai whose perspective centred on Bangkok were developing slightly different characteristics from those in the north-eastern peripheries, the Tai in the Laos of today. The Mekong river, which for the most part forms the boundary between Laos and Thailand, has no particular significance as a line of cultural division. Thus without the French colonial presence, which established the Mekong as an international border and demarcated much of the present boundary alignment enclosing Laos, it is very possible that the Thai and Lao portions of the Tai space would mostly have coalesced into a single larger Thailand². Even with the existence of Laos, it is a fact that far more ethnic Lao live in *Thai Isan* (north-eastern Thailand, where there are perhaps 10,000,000) than in Laos itself (where there are some 2,500,000).

2 Thailand and Laos have a largely common cultural ancestry. But Thailand's greater size, and the incorporation within its borders of several million ethnic Lao, have engendered within Laos a sense of Thailand as a rival sibling against whom one's own separate identity needs constantly to be asserted. This was true as long ago as the 1930s, when Siam chose the name Thailand for itself (briefly in 1939, then definitively in 1949) and by implication considered its Lao population to be Thai. It was true through independence in 1954³, through the Royal Lao Government (RLG) rule from 1954 to 1975, and has remained true since the takeover of power by the Lao Patriotic Front (Pathét Lao/PL) in 1975. As we shall see, several of the mechanisms employed in the attempt to forge this separate identity are of direct interest to the toponymist.

The Peoples of Laos⁴

3 The population of Laos is presently calculated at 5,612,000. This population comprises four principal and distinct ethnolinguistic families: Tai, Austroasiatic, Miao-Yao and Tibeto-Burmese. These four families encompass almost 50 different groups. An outline ethnolinguistic summary is as follows:

¹ *Lan Xang* = "Land of a Million Elephants".

² With perhaps parts of north-eastern Laos being absorbed by Vietnam.

³ The period between the end of the Second World War and independence in 1954 was particularly complicated; it saw France seeking to re-assert its influence against the backdrop of increasingly strong pro-independence forces within Laos.

⁴ For a useful portrayal of the complexity of the ethnolinguistic situation within Laos, and the distribution of the principal ethnolinguistic families, see the map at: http://www.seasite.niu.edu/lao/Lao_maps/language_family_medium.htm.

(a) **Tai:** this family comprises just over 3,700,000 people, or 66% of the population of Laos. The Tai family forms the overwhelming majority of the population along the lowland strip bordering the Mekong river, and also forms the majority in other lowland areas. The principal groups in this family are the Lao, amounting to about 45% of the country's total (*ie* about 2,500,000 people), and the Phou-Thai group, numbering about 560,000.

(b) **Austroasiatic:** this family comprises about 1,300,000 people, or 24% of the population of Laos, and incorporates most (about 30) of the ethnic groups. It is particularly well represented in the north-central and south-eastern parts of Laos. The principal branch in this family is the Mon-Khmer, in particular the Khmuic group of north-central Laos, who number about 500,000.

(c) **Miao-Yao:** this family comprises just under 400,000 people, some 7% of the population of Laos, mostly located in the east-central areas. By far the principal group in this family is the Hmong, numbering about 320,000.

(d) **Tibeto-Burmese:** this family comprises just under 200,000 people, some 3% of the population of Laos, and is found in the extreme north of the country.

4 The attempt to forge a national identity for Laos has involved a struggle to resolve two separate forces. Firstly, there has been the need to separate the Tai of Laos from the Tai of Thailand, persuading the former that their identity is within a state set apart from the Thailand of their ethnic brethren. Secondly, there has been the need to persuade the non-Tai families within Laos that they share this national identity with the Tai of their country. Neither course of action has been easy. Separating Lao from Thai has been hindered by the presence of so many Lao just over the border in *Thai Isan* and the fact that two areas of Laos (Xaignabouli and western Champasak provinces) have passed between the two countries twice within the last century, most recently when they were briefly annexed by Thailand during the Second World War. And the settlement many centuries ago of non-Tai families in Laos in many cases pre-dated the arrival of the Tai; these earlier groups, especially the influential Hmong, can possess a fiercely distinctive persona of their own.

5 A few years after independence, the RLG undertook a significant initiative in the attempt to create a unified national identity, by re-designating the ethnolinguistic families of the country. Focusing on the rough equivalence of those families with reasonably definable geographical areas of Laos, the RLG introduced new categories as follows:

Tai: this term was abandoned in favour of **Lowland Lao (= Lao Loum)**

Austroasiatic: this term was abandoned in favour of **Midland Lao (= Lao Theung)**

Miao-Ya; Tibeto-Burmese: these terms were abandoned in favour of **Upland Lao (= Lao Soung)**.

This re-designation, endorsed and upheld by the communist PL government on its assumption of power in 1975, emphasises the national factor – that all inhabitants are citizens of Laos – at the expense of individual ethnolinguistic group names. It is inevitably resented as artificial by many of the major groups now under the *Lao Theung* and *Lao Soung* umbrellas; the Hmong in particular perceive their *Lao Soung* (“Upland Lao”) designation as an attempt at identity denial⁵. And for some younger members of smaller groupings the identity denial has perhaps taken place, since they are today ignorant of their ethnic heritage and genuinely believe themselves to be *Lao Theung* or *Lao Soung* only.

⁵ Compare the attempt in Turkey during the 1980s to deny the existence of a Kurdish population by re-designating them as “Mountain Turks”.

6 The relatively short history of Laos, the lack of ethnic homogeneity within the country, and the fact that the Lao themselves constitute fewer than half the total population, all posed difficulties on the road to achieving a single national identity. These factors were sufficient to dissuade the communist government from establishing autonomous regions for the major ethnic groupings, an initiative which would have been consistent with communist ideology. It was simply too dangerous to give *eg* the Hmong an autonomous region when the Lao themselves did not constitute an overall majority in Laos. The policies have worked in so far as today, despite some hostility to the ethnic re-designation, there is perhaps a stronger national identity in Laos than was the case hitherto. And this is replicated across the Mekong in *Thai Isan* too, where the ethnic Lao now largely speak and write a form of Thai and regard themselves as *khon Isan* (“north-eastern people”) rather than Lao.

Laos, Lao & Laotian

7 It is possible for us, at a distance, to establish terminology which distinguishes the principal ethnic group – the Lao – from the other ethnic groups of Laos. We can simply call citizens of Laos *Laotian*, and reserve the term *Lao* for the ethnic Lao only. But, importantly, this solution is not possible or acceptable within Laos itself. Unlike the Russian language, for example, which contains separate designatory words for “Russian”⁶, in the Lao language the word *Lao* is the only available candidate in the vocabulary. There is no word to convey *Laotian*. And even when in English the word *Laotian* is used, that word – derived as it is from the French *Laotien* – is redolent of the colonial era and is deemed unacceptable within Laos. In relations with Laos, therefore, it is difficult to avoid use of the word “Lao” in all circumstances, even though this is clearly confusing to us when the meaning encompasses more than the ethnic Lao⁷.

8 In the Lao language there is no single word which equates to the straightforward name *Laos*. Instead, the Lao language uses the word *Lao*, in a compound form together with an appropriate noun, to denote the specific concept intended, *eg*:

Muang Lao = Lao space; in which *muang* means “space”⁸

Pathét Lao = Lao state; in which *pathét* means “state”⁹

Xat Lao = Lao nation; in which *xat* means “nation”¹⁰.

This lack of a single-word noun for the country helps to explain why the word *Laos* is not usually encountered in European language material published within the country itself. It is not a word with which people in that country feel comfortable. Also, of course, it is a word originally made widespread by the colonial power, France; its origins are obscure but it may simply have derived from the French plural for the principal ethnic group – *les Laos*. What is certain is that the word *Laos* unquestionably carries connotations of colonialism within the country¹¹, and this may explain why Laos is one of the relatively few countries that prefers to be known within the United Nations only by its full state title – Lao People’s Democratic Republic¹².

⁶ *Russkiy* = “Russian” (ethnic); *Rossiyskiy* = “Russian” (citizen; may or may not be ethnically Russian).

⁷ It is for this reason that the UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office uses “Lao” both as an adjective and as the term for a citizen of Laos; *Laotian* is not used.

⁸ *Muang* can also simply mean “city” or “town”: see *Administrative Divisions of Laos* (pages 8-10).

⁹ Note that *Pathét Lao* was also the popular name from 1960 for the Lao Patriotic Front, the communist revolutionary party which gained power in Laos in 1975 and remains in government today.

¹⁰ *Xat Lao* is also the title of the national anthem of Laos.

¹¹ Compare the adjective *Laotian*; see paragraph 7.

¹² In Lao this is *Sathalanalat Paxathipatai Paxaxôn Lao*: ສາທາລະນະລັດປະຊາທິປະໄຕປະຊາຊົນລາວ where *Sathalanalat* = “republic”, *Paxathipatai* = “democracy”, and *Paxaxôn* = “people”.

The Lao Language¹³

9 Despite the ethnolinguistic variety of the country, Lao is the only official language in Laos. Article 75 of the current (1991) Constitution of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic states: “*The Lao language and Lao script are the language and script officially used*”. Again, this is an attempt to unify the national consciousness of the country; to make Lao the *lingua franca* of the nation. It does, however, beg the question of what precisely is meant by “Lao” as a language. In fact, Lao has several markedly distinct – albeit mutually intelligible – dialects. In a somewhat *de facto* manner, the dialect as found in and around the capital city Vientiane has become the basis for the standard written language, as used in education and in official written publications and newspapers. Spoken Lao, however, as encountered in the broadcasting media and in the towns and villages, continues to display the traditional regional dialect variations.

10 As with all Lao cultural phenomena, the Lao language is very closely related to Thai, particularly the variety spoken in *Thai Isan*. And, again as with other Lao cultural phenomena, so the connection of language with national identity has been a recurring theme. If the language were to remain too similar to Thai, the fear has been that full national identity would not be achieved. The Thai language, helped by Thailand’s longer modern history, had already by the early 20th century become standardised in its written form, deploying a sophisticated orthography and etymologically based spellings. The RLG began to make steps towards simplifying this orthography for the purposes of the Lao language and, at roughly the same time, a prominent PL official named Phoumi Vongvichit published in the rebel-controlled area of Laos a grammar of Lao (*Vayakaun Lao*, 1967) which, on the PL’s assumption of power in 1975, became the basis for the written Lao of today. The most visually obvious of the changes introduced by Phoumi¹⁴ was the abolition of the Lao character ຣ representing the letter “r”, mostly to be replaced by the Lao character າ representing “I”. This removal of “r” reduced the inventory of Lao consonant characters from 27 to 26, and was part of a calculated attempt to render Lao more accessible to the people of Laos; “r” reflects the etymology of a particular word but is misleading as regards pronunciation, which is almost always “I”. Toponymic examples of this phenomenon can be seen in the spelling changes from *Saravan* to *Salavan* and *Xaignabouri* to *Xaignabouli*.

11 Phoumi and his PL colleagues reckoned that a move away from an etymological basis for the spelling of Lao, in favour of a phonetic basis, would simplify spellings and markedly improve literacy rates. Moreover, such measures, coupled with certain vocabulary changes which took place at the same time, would also have the desired effect of enhancing the distinction between Lao and Thai, making Lao a more singular national language, less influenced from outside, and hopefully helping to affirm the separate national identity of Laos. These simplifications have, of course, left many younger Lao ignorant of the etymological basis of their language¹⁵. In the years following 1975, this was thought a price worth paying for the wider benefits of greater literacy among the population, although now, 30 years after the revolution, occasional questions as to the wisdom of this approach are beginning to be cautiously asked. Amongst other new factors today, not present in 1975, the impact of Thai satellite television and the Internet cannot be ignored.

¹³ For an excellent article on this topic, see *Lao as a National Language*, Enfield, N.J., forming chapter 12 of *Laos: Culture and Society*, ed. Evans, G., Silkworm Books, 1999, ISBN 9748709043.

¹⁴ In Laos it is customary for individuals to be known by the first of their names.

¹⁵ Compare paragraph 5, final sentence.

12 Phoumi's reforms were not the first. The most notable previous attempt had been that in 1935 by Sila Viravong, who also worked towards a standard form of Lao which was to be clearly differentiated from Thai. Unlike Phoumi, however, Sila chose an option which replicated the Thai model, involving a sophisticated orthography and an etymological basis for spellings, and his proposed reforms did not take hold. It perhaps needed the totalitarian capabilities of Phoumi's communist regime to ensure that reform did occur in 1975. All in all, the role of language and orthography in Laos's search for national identity can scarcely be overstated.

13 Note that the language and orthography developments since the Second World War have rendered as unreliable the traditional Lao language reference works such as *Dictionnaire Laotien-Français* (Guignard, 1912) and *Grammaire Laotienne* (Hospitalier, 1937). An authoritative post-1975 source, such as the Soviet-published dictionary *Laossko-Russkiy Slovar'* (= *Lao-Russian Dictionary*, Morev, Vasil'yeva & Plam, 1982) is needed to be sure of modern spellings.

Romanization of Lao

14 Romanization of Lao geographical names material is a difficult problem for two reasons. Firstly, as is the case with Thai, Khmer, and Burmese, the concept of word division is not present in the Lao language. Entire phrases or even whole sentences are strung together without any breaks¹⁶. Even in respect of toponyms, it can accordingly be difficult to be sure how – if at all – to introduce word division into the romanized form; hence one may equally “correctly” see for instance *Louangnamtha* and *Louang Namtha*. Secondly, the only official romanization system available is that of the *Commission Nationale de Toponymie* (CNT) of Laos, which was drawn up in 1965, fully a decade before the implementation of Phoumi's regulations. The National Geographic Department (NGD) of Laos has confirmed as recently as February 2005 that there is no official romanization system for current Lao orthography. PCGN is currently in contact with the NGD with an offer of encouragement and – if desired – assistance towards the compilation of an appropriate new system and the submission of that system for approval within the United Nations¹⁷. The CNT romanization system is not an approved United Nations system, though it has had wide application within the GEOnet¹⁸, which contains about 15,000 individual toponyms in Laos. Note that the romanized spelling of personal names does not always accord with any set of rules. For example, the Lao surname which is pronounced and (since 1975) written as *Vilavong* is usually seen in Roman-script form as *Viravong*¹⁹.

¹⁶ See for example the Lao script form for the state title of Laos, in footnote 12, where four “words” – as we would understand it – are written together as one.

¹⁷ Specifically, within the UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, a conference held every five years; this is the customary forum for the approval of toponymic romanization systems.

¹⁸ See *Principal Sources for this Document* (page 10); Source 5.

¹⁹ This is a common phenomenon worldwide. For example, after the orthographical reform in Indonesia in 1972 many surnames continued to be spelt in the former manner, since those who had acquired an identity with *eg* the surname Oemarijoto were reluctant to abandon this identity and start afresh as Umariyoto.

Some Major Toponyms of Laos

Bia, Phou

Phou Bia, situated at 1859N 10309E in Xaisômboun special region, is the highest elevation in Laos at 2819 metres. *Phou* is the Lao word for a peak, and also for a mountain or mountain range.

Bolavén, Phouphiang (Boloven Plateau)

The *Phouphiang Bolavén* is the principal upland area of southern Laos, centred at 1520N 10620E and forming the meeting place of the country's four southernmost provinces: Attapu, Champasak, Salavan, and Xékong. It is one of a small group of important features for which the "English" conventional name often seen is in fact French – *Plateau des Bolovens*. An alternative English conventional name – *Boloven Plateau* – is preferable. *Phouphiang* is the Lao word for a plateau.

Haihin, Thông (Plain of Jars)

This plain, centred at 1927N 10310E in Xiangkhoang province of east-central Laos, is famed for the historic stone jars strewn across its surface. The presence of these receptacles is reflected also in the Lao name *Thông Haihin*, where *hai* means a jar or pitcher and *hin* is a rock or stone. *Thông* is the Lao word for a plain.

Louang, Phou (Annamite Mountains)

The name *Phou Louang* (Great Mountain Range) is the principal Lao name for the chain of mountains which forms much of the country's eastern border with Vietnam. An alternative Lao toponym is *Phou Dènkèo*, which literally means "Mountains Bordering Vietnam". The Vietnamese name for the feature is believed to be *Núi Hoanh Sơn* or *Núi Truong Sơn*. This is one of a small group of important features for which the "English" conventional name often seen is in fact French – *Chaîne Annamitique*. An alternative English conventional name for this international feature – *Annamite Mountains* – is preferable. *Phou* is the Lao word for a mountain or mountain range, and also for a peak.

Louangphabang

Louangphabang (1953N 10208E), situated on the Mekong River some 200km north of the capital Vientiane, is the traditional royal capital of Laos, and although only fourth in terms of population can probably be considered as the country's second city. The name consists of two elements: *Louang*, which means "great" or "royal", and *Pha Bang*, which is the name of the sacred image of Buddha located in the city. The toponym in its entirety equates to "Great Pha Bang". The name of the Buddha image has varied in spelling over the years; at times either *Pra Bang* or *Phra Bang* has been seen, and one or other of these forms may still be found in western-language Lao material. But within Laos, the written name of this city seems to have settled as ຫລວງພະບາງ, which is romanised as *Louangphabang* and is in accordance with the current spoken form of the city name.

Nam Khong (Mekong River)

To the people of Laos, the Mekong is the "mother water full of goods", and some combination of these words is seen in the various toponyms used. The principal Lao toponym for the river, seen on source 1, is *Nam Khong* ("water of goods"), but *Mènam Khong* (favoured by source 4) is also seen, *Mènam* meaning literally "mother water", in the sense of "large river". A third toponym sometimes seen is *Mè Khong*, this being the origin of the English conventional name *Mekong*. As an international feature, with names which differ in adjacent countries, the English conventional should be regarded as the principal overall name.

Administrative Divisions of Laos

Laos is divided into 18 first-order administrative divisions. Of these, 16 are provinces, 1 is a municipality, and 1 is a special region. Permissible short forms of the administrative division names are given in bold type, as is the permissible conventional name for the capital city. Administrative division codes in the initial column of the list follow what appears to be standard practice for statistical usage within Laos itself. Spellings marked “variant” may be encountered but should not normally be used. Terms and symbols used in the list are as follows:

▣	=	Centre of first-order administrative division
Ban	=	village
Kamphèng Nakhon	=	municipality
Khétphisét	=	special region
Khouèng	=	province [pronounced <i>khweng</i>]
Muang	=	town, city
PPL	=	populated place

17 Attapu , Khouèng population = 103,000 ▣ = Attapu population = 4,300	1440N 10700E area = 10,320 sq km; divided into 5 districts variants = <i>Attapeu, Attopeu</i> 1448N 10650E variants = <i>Attapeu, Attopeu, Samakhixai, Muang Samakhixai</i>
05 Bokèo , Khouèng population = 150,000 ▣ = Houayxay population = 16,700	2030N 10030E area = 6,196 sq km; divided into 6 districts 2016N 10024E variants = <i>Ban Houayxay, Houei Sau</i>
11 Bolikhamxai , Khouèng population = 204,000 ▣ = Pakxan population = 22,000	1830N 10420E area = 14,863 sq km; divided into 6 districts variants = <i>Borikhamxai, Borikhamxay, Borikhane</i> 1822N 10339E variant = <i>Muang Pakxan</i>
16 Champasak , Khouèng population = 584,000 ▣ = Pakxé population = 88,300	1445N 10600E area = 15,415 sq km; divided into 10 districts variant = <i>Champassak</i> 1507N 10547E variant = <i>Pakse</i>
07 Houaphan , Khouèng population = 286,000 ▣ = Xam Nua population = 39,000	2030N 10400E area = 16,500 sq km; divided into 8 districts variant = <i>Huaphanh</i> 2025N 10402E variant = <i>Sam Neua</i>
12 Khammouan , Khouèng population = 319,000 ▣ = Thakhèk population = 26,200	1730N 10520E area = 16,315 sq km; divided into 9 districts variant = <i>Khammouane</i> 1724N 10448E variants = <i>Khammouane, Muang Khammouan</i>
03 Louangnamtha , Khouèng population = 118,000 ▣ = Louangnamtha population = 3,200	2055N 10120E area = 9,325 sq km; divided into 5 districts variants = <i>Louang Namtha, Luangnamtha, Luang Namtha</i> 2057N 10124E variants = <i>Louang Namtha, Luangnamtha, Luang Namtha, Nam Tha</i>

- 06 **Louangphabang**, Khouèng
population = 387,000
▣ = Louangphabang
population = 47,400
- 2015N 10240E area = 16,875 sq km; divided into 11 districts
variants = *Louangphrabang, Louangprabang, Luangprabang, Louang Phrabang, Louang Prabang, Luang Prabang*
1953N 10208E
variants = *Louangphrabang, Louangprabang, Luangprabang, Louang Phrabang, Louang Prabang, Luang Prabang*
- 04 **Oudômxai**, Khouèng
population = 284,000
▣ = Oudômxai²⁰
population not known
- 2010N 10130E area = 15,370 sq km; divided into 7 districts
variants = *Oudomxay, Oudomsai*
2042N 10159E
variants = *Xai, Muang Xai, Muong Sai*
- 02 **Phôngsali**, Khouèng
population = 163,000
▣ = Phôngsali
population = 14,300
- 2145N 10220E area = 16,270 sq km; divided into 7 districts
variant = *Phongsaly*
2141N 10206E
variant = *Phongsaly*
- 14 **Salavan**, Khouèng
population = 319,000
▣ = Salavan
population = 5,500
- 1545N 10615E area = 10,691 sq km; divided into 8 districts
variants = *Saravan, Saravane*
1543N 10625E
variants = *Saravan, Saravane*
- 13 **Savannakhét**, Khouèng
population = 769,000
▣ = Savannakhét
population = 66,600
- 1630N 10545E area = 21,774 sq km; divided into 15 districts
1633N 10445E
variants = *Savan, Khanthabouli, Muang Khanthabouli, Khanthabouri, Muang Khanthabouri*
- 01 **Viangchan**, Kamphèng Nakhon
population = 647,000
▣ = Viangchan
population = 196,700
- 1805N 10240E area = 3,920 sq km; divided into 9 districts
variant = *Vientiane*
1758N 10236E
conventional = **Vientiane**
- 10 **Viangchan**, Khouèng
population = 310,000
▣ = Ban Phôn-Hông
population = 10,100
- 1840N 10210E area = 15,927 sq km; divided into 12 districts
variant = *Vientiane*
1829N 10225E
variants = *Phônông, Muang Phôn-Hông*
- 08 **Xaignabouli**, Khouèng
population = 601,000
▣ = Xaignabouli
population = 31,100
- 1830N 10130E area = 16,389 sq km; divided into 10 districts
variants = *Xaignabouri, Xayabury, Sayaboury*
1915N 10145E
variants = *Xaignabouri, Muang Xaignabouri, Xayabury, Sayaboury*
- 18 **Xaisômboun**, Khétphisét
population = 62,000
▣ = Ban Mouang Cha
population not known
- 1850N 10305E area = 7,105 sq km; divided into 3 districts
variant = *Xaysomboun*
1854N 10305E
variants = *Xaisômboun, Muang Xaisômboun*

²⁰ The name was changed from Muang Xai to Oudômxai after the 1970s civil war (*Rough Guide to Laos*). The town may since have coalesced with its smaller neighbour Ban Nahin (2040N 10158E) for which a population figure (3,500) is known.

15 **Xékong**, Khouèng
population = 81,000
■ = Xékong²¹
population = 4,500
1530N 10700E area = 7,665 sq km; divided into 4 districts
variant = *Sekong*
1525N 10642E
variants = *Lamam, Muang Lamam, Sekong, Ban Phôn*

09 **Xiangkhoang**, Khouèng
population = 225,000
■ = Phônsavan²²
population = 5,200²³
1930N 10330E area = 15,880 sq km; divided into 7 districts
variants = *Xiengkhuang, Xieng Khouang*
c1927N 10312E
variants = *Pèk, Muang Pèk*

Population and Area of Laos

Population of Laos = 5,612,000

Area of Laos = 236,800 sq km

Principal Cities and Towns of Laos

Cities and towns with populations over 20,000:

Viangchan	196,700
Pakxé	88,300
Savannakhét	66,600
Louangphabang	47,400
Xam Nua	39,000
Xaignabouli	31,100
Thakhèk	26,200
Pakxan	22,000

Borders of Laos

Borders with neighbouring countries:	Burma	235km
	China	423km
	Vietnam	2,130km
	Cambodia	541km
	Thailand	1,754km

Total length of border = 5,083km

Principal Sources for this Document

- 1 *Administrative Map of Lao PDR*, 1:1,500,000, National Geographic Department, Laos, 2000 [bi-scriptual]
- 2 *Basic Statistics of the Lao PDR 2000*, National Statistical Centre, State Planning Committee, Laos, 2000 [bi-scriptual]
- 3 <http://www.gazetteer.de> website for 2005 population figures and area information
- 4 <http://www.seasite.niu.edu/lao/> Laos website of Northern Illinois University
- 5 <http://earth-info.nga.mil/gns/html/index.html> United States Board on Geographic Names GEOnet Names Server (GNS) website, principally for locations

²¹ Created in 1984 from virgin jungle (*Rough Guide to Laos*). Muang Lamam is a frequently used variant.

²² Confirmed by modern guidebooks and maps, including the 2004 United Nations Map № 3959 entitled *Lao People's Democratic Republic*. (see <http://www.un.org/Depts/Cartographic/english/htmain.htm>). Phônsavan is a name change from Muang Pek (*Laos: Lonely Planet*). It seems the province centre has moved here from the PPL Xiangkhoang at 1920N 10322E (*sic*: not the PPL Xiangkhoang at 1912N 10243E as suggested by GEOnet).

²³ This population figure seems to be a significant underestimate; other sources suggest 19,000 or more.

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