

# Roles of Pathet Lao's Photographs During Laos Revolution War in 1954-1975

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This article aims to discuss the roles of photographs, which were taken by the 'Pathet Lao Movement (Popular name for Lao Patriotic Front's (Lao Hak Xat))' who upholds socialism as their ideology in the civil war against 'Royal Lao Government in Lao PDR during 1954 -1975. This article presents the roles of photography used in media, flyers, and newspapers in relaying important information of the present situation and showcasing the story of the fight of the Pathet Lao Movement. It was used to arouse the mass of people who were sided with them and induce people who are against them by using propaganda. Under Soviet Media Theory as resulted from a set of photographs that appeared between 1955 – 1975, it was found that photographs were used as propaganda which is an attempt to steal the mass full on.

**Keyword:** *Laos, Photography, Photos of Laos s' Revolution, Pathet Lao*

## 1. Introduction

Laos People Democracy Republic (LPDR) is in the southeast Asia Region. The upper part of the country is surrounded by mountains and the Kong River in the lower part. To the north, it is bordered with the People's Republic of China (PRC); to the South with the Kingdom of Cambodia; to the East with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam; and to the West with Thailand and the Republic of the Union of Myanmar. Lao PDR is a country governed by a socialist system. Before it became a socialist nation, it was declared independence from France, which prolonged civil wars between the socialist movements and the government. The socialist group refers to 'Pathet Lao (popular name for Lao Patriotic Front's (Lao Hak Xat))'(Evans 2012) under the lead of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party backed up by the Soviet Union and North Vietnam. The government refers to the Royal Lao Government supported by the governments of France and the United States of America. In 1975, Pathet Lao Movement successfully seized the power. The Lao People's Revolutionary Party then declared the nation

as ‘Laos People Democracy Republic’ in December 1975. During the fight since the country gained independence from France, the group resisting the Royal Government had written numbers of newspapers produced in the liberated zone (Kantala, 2009). The newspaper that was highly popular at the time was ‘Lao Patriotic Front’ (Lao Hak Xat) since the way it was written was able to grab attention with concise content. And the fact that it was cheap made it fairly popular among the people who had lower incomes. The newspaper served as the army’s voice by propagated the triumph of the Pathet Lao Movement as well as instill a sense of patriotism in fighters and Lao people in partaking in the fight to liberate the country. Such messages were conveyed through photos and articles telling about the fight and its victory.

The stealing of masses, stirring of the desire to fight, the media which serves as a witness and presents the story closets to the fact are photos. Photos can relay information, present a situation such as the images of the fight, the victory, or important figures of the movement with the captured moment recorded in the photos that have a clear goal. The definite goal of these photos is to propagate according to the socialist ideal. They are pictures that were created during the wars and a number of them are staged. Yet, they were staged in the area where the fight took place (Niven, D & Page, T. 2002). The photos are determined to take on the role in persuading the mass in accordance with the way of the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party with different tactics—it was an influential weapon used in the fight.

## **2. Roles of photos and the fight to win over masses**

### 2.1 Photos of Leaders, royal Institute and how photos of leaders were used:

Photos directly communicate to the audience are often photos presenting leaders participating in different activities. For example, pictures of Pathet Lao Movement leaders jointing the first meeting hosted by Prince Souphanouvong. Pathet Lao Movement used the picture of Souphanouvong as the main leader of the movement since Laos society then still revered the royal institute. Thus, the story of Prince Souphanouvong was able to draw attention from Laos citizens (Chanboutdy 2020). The appeared picture of him represented him as a leader who regards and understands the people, participated with the people as well as someone who builds a relationship with the nation’s allies—Vietnam and China. Photo, in the beginning, were pictures of activities that leaders approaching the mass, events in appointing leaders, and general meetings of the Indochinese Communist Party. These images were all pointed to the formality of Pathet Lao Movement and unified relations among the allies of Indochina, namely Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia. Leaders often portrayed in the photos are Prince Souphanouvong who appeared in the pictures more frequently than other leaders at the time due to his popularity among the people. Besides, in the initial stage, the operations of Pathet Lao were confidential. Military leaders who are in close relations with Vietnam, Kaysone Phomvihane for example, could not present themselves to the public. Not until after they were able to seize the North part of the country and designate the liberated area were they able to appear in the photos from time to time. The pictures that were distributed across the liberated



area were pictures portraying the half-body shot of Prince Souphanouvong. The photo was often hanged side by side with Ho Chi Minh, Lenin, and Karl Marx in important places, such as conference halls, political schools, or schools in the liberated area.

Photos showcasing the roles of the Pathet Lao Movement on the world stage would be the picture of Prince Souphanouvong meeting with leaders or representatives from socialist countries that were allied with the Movement. There are pictures of Prince Souphanouvong with Ho Chi Minh and/or Mao Zedong, the leader of China's Communist Party, including a welcoming ceremony receiving allied countries from Eastern European countries and Vietnam who visited the liberated area. These images were published in the newspaper 'Sieng Prasason' in 1975 when a coalition government between the Pathet Lao Movement and Royal Laos Government was formed. There are also pictures of the Pathet Lao Movement's leaders or representatives attending meetings in different countries. For example, Geneva Conference in 1955 or Indochinese Communist Party General Assembly. These pictures were published as photo news with descriptions. Its aim was to inform Lao people of activities joined by the leaders portrayed as the strong head of the State, and yet friendly to peoples of all groups, as well as accepted and supported internationally. It is apparent that the use of leaders' pictures was to create faith in the individual leaders. The expectations of the outcomes consisting of two major reasons. One is to let the people who had not sided with Pathet Lao Movement know who the leaders of the movement were--reinforcing the image of the leaders as ones who are ready to work with the public with uncompromising ideology to free the country from the domineering power of the western imperialism; to eventually bring forth peace to the country. Two, in light of the mass resided in the liberated zone, the photos of the leaders would reinforce socialist ideology and with the lead of the party's leader, the determination of the revolution would be glorified.

## 2.2 Monks photos of Pathet Lao Movement

Monk in Laos is a respected institute of its people since the past. The reason is that monks are given opportunities to study and, therefore, can teach people in society. Thus, monks are considered thought leaders of Lao society. Consequently, in the fight to win over the mass, gaining supports from monks are what the polarized oppositions desired. The Pathed Lao Movement is a socialist group that had a close relation with Viet Minh Movement—later established as North Vietnam after it gained independence—and other socialists countries. With such an image, the movement was attacked by the Royal Government that by having Pathet Lao Movement in the country, religion would be destroyed since all communist countries that successfully overthrew the government had destroyed religions and prohibited people from having religions. Yet, Pathet Lao Movement was backed up by both groups of senior and young monks. For example, a close relationship between Pathet Lao top rank leader Phoumee Vongsijit and Pra-ajan Khoon, who was a high-ranked monk of Lao (Vongvichit 2016) was used as a persuasion. Apart from this, Pathet Lao Movement also used photos to convey the message that Buddhist belief would be maintained in the liberated zone. Sets of

photo shots of Buddhist religious ceremonies in the liberated are during 1974-75 was sent to the head of the Sangha (Buddhist monastic order) in Luang Prabang. There are 30 photoshoots in the photo set. A description was written in each of the photos. The pictures consist of a Buddhist religious ceremony, a study session of Marxist guide for monks, and the damages of temples and injuries of people inflicted by the opposite side. The role of these photos aims to present the idea that the Pathed Lao Movement still maintained religion in the country—prominent leaders of the Pathet Lao Movement participated in the religious activities and monks still supported the revolution and interested in learning about socialism to free the country from the invaders. And lastly, the photos were used to present the brutality that westerners had inflicted on the people and religious premises (Boonlajit 2019).

The fact that Pathet Lao Movement sent these photos to the high-ranked monks was to give assurance to the monks that the movement's regulations did not, in any way, resist religion, but in turn, helped to maintain it. A high-ranked monk, for instance, Pra-ajan Khoon, also learned about the principle of socialism as illustrated in the photo, that monks and revolution support each other (Figure 4) (Boonlajit 2019). By sending photos to the high-ranked monks, besides the fact that it was able to persuade the monks, the monks were also informed with the information or words that can be spread through monks, since monks were still an institute which was still accepted by Lao people.

### 2.3 Photos of ethnic groups taken by Pathet Lao Movement:

Laos is a country consisting of varied ethnic groups. The power of support gain from the ethnics would definitely equip the movement with manpower, resources, and larger areas of land than do the opposition. For this reason, both oppositions tried every way they can to persuade the ethnics to side with them. Pathet Lao Movement used pictures of the ethnics who join in their fight and support them in the liberated zone as well as the photos of high-ranked leaders of the Pathet Lao Movement, whose ancestors used to fight against French colonists since before the war of independence during 1950. The role of the appeared pictures of the ethnics was to persuade the mass to agree with the revolution of the Pathet Lao Movement by showing them that all classes of ethnics, from the leaders to the woman fighters in the remote villages, support the revolution. Most of the photos of the tribes would be presented through print media that were distributed to different groups. Just like the photos of prominent leaders, the photos presenting tribal activities where high-ranked leaders participated would be published in the international mass media.

### **3. Persuading public mass with photos in printed media**

In building the credibility of the Pathed Lao Movement through printed media, the newspaper 'Sieng Prasaxon' in 1975 mostly used photos to persuade the public mass to offer their support in the fight. Activities and gained the victory of Pathet Lao Movement also published in the



photos. In the beginning, printed media such as newspapers or flyers were produced at Vieng Xai Caves in the liberated zone. In flyers, most of the photos were used to exhibit the victory gained in the battle lines; leaders, Prince Souphanouvong for example, who were congratulating the soldiers; soldiers who were deviated from the Royal Government and received a welcoming reception by Prated Lao Movement (Figure5). Images of the flyers were often distributed to soldier responsible for propagation to distribute it to the public mass across villages as well as sent to the Royal Government soldiers in person or placed in the places where the government soldiers were expected to walk by. The approach was different from that of the government who distributed the flyers in the liberated zone by plane. In regard to the newspaper, Pathet Lao Movement published a newspaper 'Lao Patriotic Front' (Lao Hak Xat) in 1956 and sold it in the north of the liberated zone. Newspapers were used as an important strategic tool in informing people with news and data. After the mix-government was established in 1975, 'Siang Pasaxon Newspaper' was published and produced in Vientiane and sold across the nation to serve as the voice for Pathet Lao Movement.

Lao Hak Xat Newspaper, at the time, was to provoke and arouse peoples, ethnic groups, religious groups of all sexes and ages to join the fight to liberate the country from the western colony. In 1975, when the Geneva Conference was set and the mix-government was established, Pathed Lao Movement resumed its mission and started to publish Lao Hak Xat Newspaper again in the capital of Vientiane. The newspaper was renamed 'Siang Pasaxon Newspaper' on August 11, 1975. The newspaper was directly under the Lao Patriotic Front (Lao Hak Xat) and was printed with an off-set publishing system. On some occasions, the number of newspapers being published reached more than 30,000 copies per day. (Somphavong 1999) Siang Pasaxon Newspaper was an eminent part that invokes the mass to support the fight of the Pathet Lao Movement and Lao Patriotic Front (Lao Hak Xat) until the movement gained its victory and the country was declared 'Lao People's Democratic Republic on December 2, 1975. Siang Pasaxon Newspaper was directly under the Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> general assembly of Lao People's Revolutionary Party in 1983, the name of the newspaper was changed from 'Siang Pasaxon' to 'Pasaxon Newspaper'. It was declared the official media of Lao People's Revolution Party Center. The newspaper continues to offer versatile services to the revolutionary party in building credibility and build relationships between the party and its people until the present day.

#### **4. Photo Presentation Model in Newspaper**

Generally speaking, photos in the newspaper serve to relay information and present situations that occurred at that particular time. Whereas another set of photos were the photos which were taken before that certain period and purposely made to accompany with articles about the revolution during 1955-1975. Both sets of the photos contain the following details.

4.1 Photos presenting different situation serves to relay information. It consists of the following:

1) Photos of leaders in important events are photos presenting meetings with foreign leaders, party meetings, meetings with the royal government, meeting with or giving of speech to the public. These kinds of pictures mean to express the leader's mission, leadership, and acceptance from the society and international. The pictures aim to create a good image of the Pathet Lao Movement. Most of the pictures were the photos of Prince Souphanouvong since he was then the greatest leader and gained consistent popularity since the second establishment of the mix-government in 1975. Apart from Prince Souphanouvong's photos, there were also images of other leaders, such as Faydang Lobliayao, Phoumi Vongvichit, etc. At the time, the photos of Kaysone Phomvihane had not appeared in 'Siang Pasaxon Newspaper' yet since the missions of the Pathet Lao Movement and Lao People's Revolutionary Party were still confidential. That was true until the establishment of mix-government in 1975 when the Pathet Lao Movement took over the area along with Royal armies in accord with the agreement in the mix-government establishment. The same year in December, the movement seized absolute power. Images of important events concerning the fact that the people supported activities undertaken by the Pathet Lao Movement were pictures showing political activities and the movement of the mass. The pictures can be categorized into the following. Images of political rallies and other gatherings present the enthusiasm and support that the people had towards Pathet Lao Movement. Towards the end of 1975, pictures of people upholding the victory of the Pathet Lao Movement within the city started to appear. One example is the picture of a crowd of people congratulating the soldiers moving through the city. This picture directly expresses to the people the level of acceptance the public had towards Pathet Lao Movement and how strong the movement was.

2) Pictures of the opposition are photos, namely the images of the Royal Lao Government's leaders and the international forces. What often appear in the images of the oppositions are the pictures of the opposition's leaders and the photos of foreign enemies or foreign military activities.

4.2 Images used in accompanying articles:

Most of the pictures showing past events would be used to accompany the newspaper's regular article on the third page. They were the pictures of the fight that happened before 1975. It showcases activities during the fight, the support of the fight, and lives in general within the liberated zone. Most of them tell of the battles and sacrificial acts of the fighters of the Pathet Lao Movement. These photographs illustrate and retaliate the audience of the past victories in the combats. Aside from that, on special occasions, photo sets would be presented. For instance, on National Women's Day, photographs of women fighters would be published on page three in the newspaper. Other important events of which photoshoots would be printed on

full-page are, for example, the visit to the China of Kaysone Phomvihane or a rally to commemorate the Independence Day of October 12<sup>th</sup> in Vientiane. (Figure 2)

## **5. Roles of a photograph based on Totalitarian Theory or Soviet Theory**

Images in Siang Pasaxon Newspaper's main role is to propagate by the model of Lao People's Revolutionary Party. When analyzing the roles of the photographs used based on Totalitarian Theory or Soviet Theory which used in media in Laos during the war (Sawasi 2003), it was found that the pictures were exploited according to the following principles:

### **5.1 Mass media must respond to the interests of proletarian:**

In the case of the fight in Laos of which society was still largely based on agriculture, the social class as in the Western society was barely seen. For this reason, the pictures shown were mostly farmers rather than the general laborers or working class.

5.2 The media must hold a positive role in society applying socialization according to the desired norms. Such can be done through giving education and information to provoke, give warning, and mobilize forces.

Within the initial phase when the newspaper was established, the images of the activities to support Pathet Lao and Lao People's Revolutionary Party's missions were published regularly. Snapshots of various groups' movements were on the front page of the newspaper to remind and muster up supports to persuade people to have a sense of reverence towards the activities organized by the Pathet Lao Movement.

5.3 Media must present the perfect and just view of society and the world according to the principles of Marxism and Leninism.

Photos that appeared in the newspaper at the beginning of 1975 were images of activities that focused on the equality of opportunities through the education the party was trying to allocate to its people. Nevertheless, the media placed much of its focus on the movement of the armed forces and the roles of the leaders during that particular time.

5.4. The media must serve as the government's and the party's tools in revealing the hidden truth of the social class's struggle to prepare the public mass for the revolution.

The images of the fights during the revolution in 1955 until 1975 were printed in Siang Pasaxon Newspaper, which was the media owned by the Pathet Lao Movement. The newspaper used the pictures to accompany the articles telling of the fight in its regular articles. All these images resonated with the truth about the long battles endured by Pathet Lao Movement and the Lao People's Revolutionary Party. It was the presentation of the stories that happened behind the scenes in order to build up a base of the public mass that would be ready for the change that was about to happen.



5.5. Media must serve as a tool in propagation and mustering of forces:

Provoking and propagation are the key principles in winning over the public mass to offer support. All photographs, whether in the news report or pictures in the articles in Sing Paxason Newspaper were all served based on this particular purpose.

5.6. Media must support the movement of the liberalists both domestically and internationally: In the newspaper, there was the presentation of various Pathet Lao activities which emphasized the rally in calling for peace of male and female youths in the capital of Vientiane or strikes of workers. Some of the stories being consistently reported were about its allied countries—the triumphant battle of North Vietnam by defeating its enemy or South Vietnam Army.

5.7. Media must respond to the desires and needs of the people who are recipients of information within the social framework:

In a political battle, media is the tool of an organization or a party in persuading and relaying information based on the regulations. The expressing of opinions must be filtered by responsible officials. Its publication must comply with the regulations set by the party, especially the 12 political ideology was the consensus from the second assembly of Lao People's Revolutionary Party in 1965. The images to be published were meticulously selected. Its ultimate goal was to persuade the public mass to take their side rather than reporting the truth.

To summarize, when the roles of the media are limited within the designated and definite political regulations, media became the tools of individuals and social institutions—transforming into a perfect political device in presenting events and assurance of truth which happened according to the party's ploy.

## **6. Conclusion**

When analyzing the roles of photographs, it was discovered that images play an important part in the fight and winning over public mass based on the Soviet Theory. The key principles are that the media must present perfect and just views of society and the world according to the Marxism and Leninism principles. Media must be an instrument of the government and the party in revealing the truth and the fight that happened behind the scenes. The purpose was to prepare the public mass to be ready for the revolution. The images of the fight from 1955 until 1975 were presented in Siang Pasaxon Newspaper, which was the newspaper of the Pathed Lao Movement. The pictures that were used with the articles all reflected the true condition of the prolonged fight endured by the Pathed Lao Movement and Lao People's Revolutionary Party. The presented stories aim to form the base of the public mass by raising issues on the fight against the oppression inflicted by French Colony followed by the suppression from the US as they supported the Royal. This was different from the fight that happened in the Soviet Union, which was the struggles between social classes. Nevertheless, photographs are

important media in mustering forces and prepare the public mass to be ready in offering support to the revolution.

In light of roles of the photographs when considered through the lens of structural-functional Theory, the social structure of Laos about winning over the public mass for the revolution, images serve to relay information and create idealism that would be in line with the regulations of the People Revolution's Party as in the following.

1. Present the images of prominent individuals, which include the following.
  - 1.1 Photos of individuals
  - 1.2 Photos of activities attended by prominent figures
2. Present images of the fight during 1955-1975.
3. Present images of the present situations in news reporting
  - 3.1 Photos activities the supporting activities organized by the public mass and political activities
4. Photographs of ethnic or tribal groups and women who took part in the fight and support
5. Present images in maintaining religion and culture.
  - 5.1 Photographs showing political participation of monks
6. Images of the oppositions and damages caused by the oppositions

The photographs were published on flyers, pamphlets, newspapers, and photograph exhibitions. The aim was for the photos to serve as a unified purpose that is to persuade the public mass to back up the revolution, win the war, and bring peace and order to the country.

Based on the sets of photos that appeared during 1955-1975, it can be seen that the pictures were in propaganda to fully fight to win over the crowds. In other words, the roles of the images are:

1. To ensure the public in Laos know more about the movement called 'Pathet Lao' and accepts it as an organization aiming to free Laos from the western invasion, especially the US as well as acknowledge the movement as one who hopes to create order and peace in the country.
2. Present to the public mass that Pathet Lao Movement is equipped with armed forces which are ready to fight and determined to win the battles.
3. Present that all groups and tribes in Laos are all offering support to the movement and fight for the country's independence under the lead of the Pathet Lao Movement.
4. Present that Pathet Lao Movement upholds Socialist ideology as its key principle and regulations. And in the fight, the movement shall not destroy Buddhism but promote religious activities that should be held freely. Also

portray that monks are the main force in developing the nation according to Socialist ideology.

The presentation of the photographs in the fight for the public mass during the revolution under the leadership of the Pathet Lao Movement was carried out with a clear purpose. That is to present information of the movement to free the country from the foreign invasion and do everything in its power to gain victory.

### Images



Figure 1: Sieng Prasason Newspaper of Prince Souphanyvong showcasing the photos of joining the activities in Vientiane and the visits of foreign countries leaders (Source: Collection of Laos National Library, Vientiane. Photographed by the author.)



Figure 2 : The visit of Lao Government leaders visiting People's Republic of China (PRC) found in Sieng Prasason Newspaper. (Source: Collection of Laos National Library, Vientiane. Photographed by the author.)

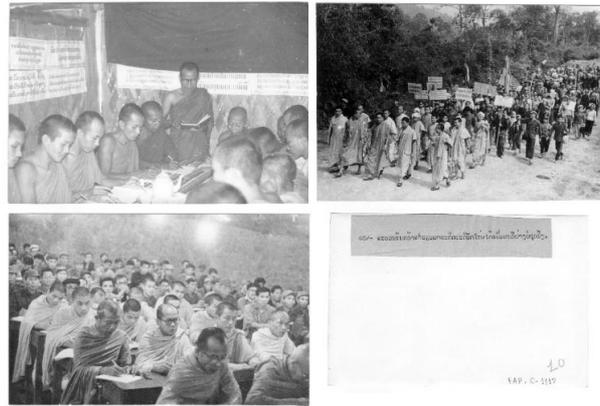


Figure 3: Pictures of monks studying the regulations and theory of Marxism and Leninism, joining in the march calling for freedom alongside with the Pathet Lao Movement in the North of the liberated area. The descriptions were written on the back of each photo, telling the Buddhist religious support of the Pathet Lao Movement (Lower right) (The Buddhist Archive of Photography Collection , Luang Prabang).



Figure 4: Prince Souphanouvong with Hmong soldiers

(Source: Collection of Laos National Museum, Vientiane. Photographed by the author)

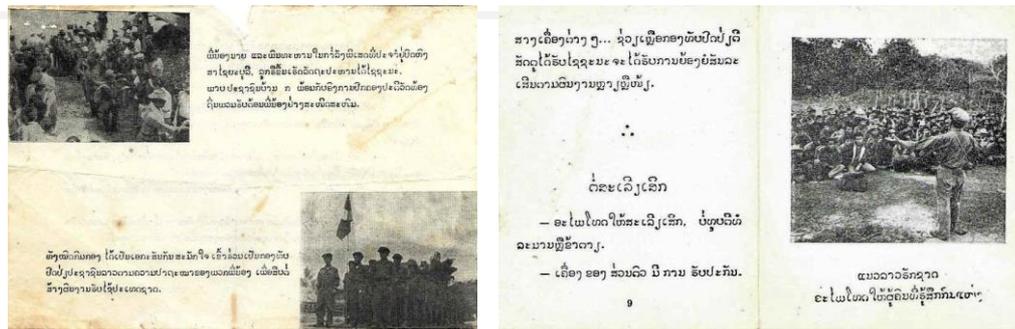


Figure 5: Pathet Lao Movement’s pamphlets, which were produced and distributed to the opposition soldiers. Its contents talk about the former Royal Government’s soldiers who decided to side with the movement (Collection of Herb Friedman).



Figure 6: Photographs of the battles of women fighters published on page 3 of Siang Prasaxon on the National Women’s Day (Source: Collection of Laos National Library, Vientiane. Photographed by the author.)

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