The Relationship of Laos - China 1949 – 1986 C.E.

1. Sriwilas Moonlhao, nobunaka_boma@hotmail.com
2. Dararat Mattariganond, darmat@kku.com
   Center for Research on Plurality in the Mekong Region (CERP), Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Khon Kaen University, Thailand

Abstract

The main objectives of this article were to study the Laos - China relationship from 1949 to 1986 C.E. and to find the reasons it occurred by using the historical approach. The concept of tributary states and two against one was used to explain Laos’s perspective with China. The study focused on documents mainly in Lao, Thai and English.

The study found that the relationship between Laos and China can be divided into three periods. First, before 1949 in the period of traditional states, the relationship was in the form of the tribute system in which Laos responded as a tributary state of China for its national interests as a small state dealing with a big state.

In the period when it was a colony of France, the relationship became that of two states under the rules of treaties. Second, during the period when China established a socialist state (1949 – 1975 C.E.), Laos in 1954 was separated into two factions: the Pathet Lao and the Kingdom of Laos. The relationship became that of three relationships under the concept of two against one. The Pathet Lao aimed to build a relationship with China, both directly and indirectly against the Kingdom of Laos, while the Kingdom of Laos tried to compromise with China in order to reduce pressure from inside and outside the country. Finally, in the period when Laos became a socialist state (1975 – 1986) the relationship between Lao and China became threefold, with Vietnam leaning toward the Soviets as counterbalance with China in Laos. The conflict between Vietnam and China in the period 1979 - 1982 affected the relationship between Laos and China, whereby Laos had a conflict with China. However, after the conflict ended, the Laos – China relationship evolved again. A threefold relationship with two against one demonstrated the flow of power that affected the creation of foreign relations of Laos.

Keywords: Relationships, Laos, China, tributary states, three-way relationships
Introduction

Since its inception of the formally established adjacent border, China and Laos have undergone highs and lows in their relations. The revolution in China to socialism in 1949 sent a thorough impact to its neighboring countries. Being a world superpower, China’s position directly affects smaller states like Laos. These smaller states need to establish good diplomatic relations in order to seek shelter in times of conflict when there is a threat or potential for threat. However, after 1975 when Laos turned to embrace Socialism, the relations between Laos and China became awkward. (1949-1986). This article aims to study the relations of Laos and China (1949-1986) with the research question as to what kind of relations existed between Laos-China from 1949-1986 and why. The research employs a historical approach drawing on the theoretical approach of Fai Fah (tributary system) and the “two against one” approach of Theodore Caplow to demonstrate the relations and perception of Laos towards China. The research draws evidence from secondary documents from the Laos, Thai and English languages. The article structures were divided into three parts; 1) Lao traditional state (before 1949); 2) China transitional period to socialist state (1949-1975), 3) Laos from socialist republic to ‘new thinking’ economic policy (1975-1986).

1. Lao traditional state (pre nation-state - 1949)
   This part demonstrates the context of the Laos traditional state as a vassal state under Chinese imperialism where Lao had to send tribute for protection. However the country also experienced external threats and later slipped into the control and protection of the French. While Laos was faced with external threats of resource plundering from the colonists, the modern nation-state of Lao was crafted and invented. This signifies the cornerstone of international relation studies of Laos.

   1.1 Traditional State. The early civilization and administration of the traditional state was centered on Muang Swa (Luang Prabang). Though the city was recorded to have rulers long before, the Laos historians still date the period when the name of the city was changed from Muang Swa to Xieng Dong Xieng Thong and the Kingdom of Lao Lanxang was established here at Muang Swa (Mahasila Weerawongs, 2001: 26).

   The Lanxang Chronicles acknowledged the rising relations between the Kingdom of Lanxang and the Chinese Imperialists. The Kingdom of Lanxang, with Luang Prabang
as its center, began to send tribute to Beijing every five year (Fine Arts Department, 2002: 57).

Based on the researcher’s hypothesis, the first dynasty to contact Laos was Yuan Dynasty – one of the first dynasties which settled in Beijing and was known to expand its territory to Yunnan. As a result of this expansion, the borders of these two states have been connected ever since. Regarding the routing to and from Laos to China, Auguste Pavie and his French expedition team explored and surveyed various routes and proposed that the trail should go via Dien Bien Phu, Lai-Chau (north of Viet Nam) and arrive at Man-Hao which is located by the Red River. (1999 quoted in Yoshiyuki Masuhara, 2003: 18). Another trail was recorded in the memoir of Jame F McCarthy (2533: 68). The tribute was first prepared and setoff from Luang Prabang, the major city before it was sent to Muang Xai – Muang Lai located in Xisuanpanna, Yunnan province before it reached the Chinese High Commissioners.

Having moved to Vientiane and was ruled sporadically by Hongsawadee in 1571 and Siam in 1779, Lanxang Kingdom maintained good relations with China as it appeared that Lanxang still followed the same tradition - sending tribute to China. (Fine Arts Department: 2002: 64). However, there was no record of Luang Prabang or Vientiane during the reign of Suriyawongse (1771-1791 who was the main organizer who prepared the tribute to China.) Aware that the route from Luang Prabang to Beijing would take three years to complete a round trip, because of the long distance, the ruler of Luang Prabang proposed to change the five year term of tribute to ten years on the condition that the amount of tribute was to be increased in half (Fine Arts Department: 2002: 70). While tributes from Laos were practiced for two times in 1852 and 1864, the Chinese Imperialists were busy putting down the Tai Ping rebellion – Farmers Rebellion (1851-1864). Rebellions began to thrive during the Qing dynasty and the tribute from Laos to China subsided and came to an end.

1.2 French Ruling Period: The emergence of the French superpower in Indochina had an effect on the relationship between Laos and China. Administratively speaking, Laos became part of French Indochina, conveniently controlled and manipulated by the French. As a client state, Laos seemed to maintain its legal jurisdiction but the French would intervene in the internal administration and foreign affairs as the agreement signed by the two countries. (Phra Pahidhanukorn, 1935: 31). Though given a status of ’Client State’, Laos in reality was a colony where the French
reaped the resources, and imposed a severe and harsh governing system which used a ‘Divide and Rule’ policy over Laos. The French eventually needed to exert full direct control over Laos as it appeared that Laos was becoming strategically and geopolitically a buffer state to deter the political and military power of the British and Siam (Kampao Ponkaew 2012: 120). Politically speaking, the French applied suppression with heavy weapons, established special economic zones, and brought in western education for local citizens.

As Laos was part of French Indochina, the relationship between Laos and China was not always direct but through the French intermediary. The French picked up the roles of policy maker for Laos - politically, culturally, socially and in foreign affairs all of the Indochina countries (Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia). Based on this structure, Laos’s international relations changed dramatically. For example, the tribute system relationship of Laos was replaced with the state-to-state relationships. Any international affairs had to be dealt with through the international pact or treaty. The land exchange between China and Laos is a case in point. Generally speaking, the system of international relations had to provide maximum benefits to the French and French colony. The relations between Laos – China were based on these unfair treaty or pacts imposed by the French colonists.

When crafting the maps of colonies, imposing legal framework, immigration, custom and excise tax, the French colonists always make sure the Chinese and Laos citizens were controllable. The French viewed the Chinese citizens, who had Bolshevik political ideology, as a threat to the French governance. Strict checkpoints were setup as an important measure for the French to prevent the Chinese entering the country. It was felt that their entry would trigger political rebellions as well as provide cooperation with and assistance to the neighboring states to suppress communism. (National Archives., m7.7/29: 5).

During WWII, French power in Laos declined. After the Siamese-Franco treaty on 9 May, 1941 the French worried that Laos would lean on Siam so the French decided to implement a policy that would please and favor Laotians. First, the French shifted the administration of Vientiane and Xiengkhuang from being directly under French control to be under Luang Prabang administration to compensate for the land lost to Siam previously and transform the administration to apply the traditional monarchical system. Culturally the French also promoted sports for the youth, language studies, arts,
plays, handicraft, advertisement, and newspapers (Mahasila Weerawong, 2001: 263). As a result of these promotions and support implemented by the colonists, Laos began developing the sense of nation or statehood and nationalistic awareness. During this French ruling period, it was very difficult to pinpoint the dynamic movement of nationalism and the effect it had on the relations between Laos-China. After the French regained control over Laos on 24 April, 1946, Laos split into two factions. The first was led by Prince Boon Oum Na Champassak and Prince Souvannaphouma who wished to compromise with the French and the second led by Prince Supanuwong who resisted French rule.

In conclusion, relations between Laos-China within the traditional state to French rule was dynamically resilient. Neither being totally affected by the Chinese tribute system nor the French ruling policy. The Chinese tribute system was similar to the Mueang Fai Fah relations where China was given a status of Mueng Fai Fah having superiority over the state under mandate. The tribute system or Mueng Fai Fah relations was derived from the source of Confucianism where the center of the tribute system was given to the more superior state. The tribute sent to the center was made for political interests of the smaller state instead of the economic relations. This traditional tribute system gradually subsided and was replaced by modern nation-state relations. The French however, used the traditional tribute system to legitimize their occupying the territory of Indochina as part of the French administration. The arrival of the European imperialists created a significant impact for many Asian countries. Laos-China relations turned from a tribute system to a state-to-state relationship using the treaty system to determine roles and responsibilities. Laos, though maintained some degree of autonomy for both internal and foreign affair. They also developed its modern state-to-state relations after the Second World War.

2. Socialist China (1949-1975)

The revolution on 1st October, 1949 changed the image of China from the elementary democratic country into the powerful socialist country. The impact was not restricted to only within China but also reverberating in the neighboring countries. The United States of America began to realize its mistakes to allow socialist communism to spread in Asia. To detain this expansion, the US had to implement foreign policy to encircle and control the socialist countries not to spread to other Southeast Asian countries.
China foreign policy in 1949-1975 – the first phase of China foreign policy remain the same strategy to ensure security internally and prevent the invasion from the outside liberal world. The clash between two political ideology made neighboring Laos awkward being the buffer state for two superpower. After 25th, April 1961, Laos and China established relationship and began to have more diplomatic relations. China implemented the foreign policy that support the state parallel guerilla groups as well as call the revolutionary factions to employ guerilla warfare tactics together with the effective propaganda to mobilize mass and the communist revolution around the world to resist to the US imperialist and Soviet Russia. (Naruemitr Sodsuk, 1994: 11). Though classifying its policy into the state policy and party policy, China integrated both levels successfully. As a result of China integrative policy, the two factions of Laos resume their relations. Based on this scenario of Laos-China relations, the researcher aims to employ the concept of ‘Two against One’ to demonstrate the context and condition that affect international relations of the two countries.

2.1. 1st Model of Triangular Relations

Based on the approach ‘Two against One’ C = China, Pathet Lao = P and the Kingdom of Laos = K

Reflecting on the economic power, military, and sovereignty, the relations of factions in Laos can be illustrated the triangular relations as in the 1st figure. In 1949, China was a great country with superior power, while the Kingdom of Laos was inferior to China and the revolutionary faction holds the least power without sovereignty. The revolutionary faction is inferior to China and the Kingdom of Laos as illustrated C > K > P and C > (K+P). If such a model was formulated and continued to play a role amid the rising political structure of Pathet Lao the contexts which would allow cooperation or conflict could be complicated and dynamic. The relations taking place based on this model could be behind the scene with potential to become a long lasting relationship or be terminated immediately.

Based on this triangular relationship, P develops hostility towards K. therefore P and C develop a closer relationship which in fact had been established before 1949. The relationship at the political party level had been happening behind the scenes. Based on this scenario, China had already deployed troops to Nanning as this was the only border
area to provide military assistance to Indochina. Military aid to Pathet Lao has been carried out through intermediaries such as Vietnam. After the seizure of Sam Nue, Laos managed to open its northern border to receive aid from China directly. (National Archive: (2) MTF 3, 6, 3)

After the borders of the two countries were connected, the relations between the two became closer and stronger. China supplied more supporting troops and military aids to Nanning which was declared the military strategic center before China expanded to Guangxi. (National Archive: (2)MTF3.6.2/1-2: 72 - 326) The roles of China towards Indochina are mainly to provide military strategic support (training spies and intelligence officers) while the role of the Soviet Union was restricted to giving military advice. It is clear that military aid from China, including advisors, workers and military technicians significantly supported the revolution in Indochina.

The secret relationship between Pathet Lao and China was not to be disclosed. Pressured by many factors, the two countries had to keep their foreign affairs policy towards each other secret. In brief, both P and C aimed at the same political goal, which was to fight against western imperialism. Because of the secret relationship, China did not have a diplomatic relationship with the Kingdom of Laos. The support for Pathet Lao to rebel against the Kingdom of Laos seemed more appropriate. However after the Geneva Convention in 1954, the triangular relations changed dramatically, as did the revolutionary group's access to power and maintain full sovereignty.
2.2. Triangular Relations on Figure 2

After 1954, Pathet Lao became increasingly powerful and became equivalent to the Kingdom of Laos. China had continued to increase their military capacity, its ratio of growth far exceeded the two factions in Laos. The power structure can be illustrated as below C > K, K = P. China addressed its foreign policy as always open for peace. Zhou En Lai mentioned that ‘eventually China will continue to support Asia, African, and Latin America to fight against the western imperialists and colonialism.

Conditions leading to cooperation materialized as the two factions in Laos both aimed to establish good relations with China. While the two factions were at odds as illustrated in figure 2, the first government combined of two factions had been formed and started to move on while the country experienced increasingly serious conflict. The factors causing conflict between P and K was deniably the role of the United States who continuously signaled that they would intervene and interfere in the internal affairs of the Kingdom of Laos. Laos then became the center of an ideological clash. This expanded into a civil war which sent an impact to the reconciliation effort. It also reduced the conflict by the Kingdom of Laos who had the governing responsibility. The political discrepancy between the two superpowers put pressure on the smaller proxy state. Finally, in 1956, Prince Souvannaphouma decided to pay a visit to Hanoi and Beijing to establish a rapport and understanding of the neighboring countries (John F. Cady, 1977: 57). Prince Souvannaphouma explained that the visit was made to convince and persuade China to acknowledge and recognize the non-alignment policy of Laos as well as to establish a good relationship with neighboring countries. According to Prince Suwanna Phouma, China and Vietnam both recognized this policy and would not intervene in any internal affairs of Laos. (Souvannaphouma, 1961: 1825).

The members of Pathet Lao and the Kingdom of Laos seemed to have a split idea towards each other – some preferred to cooperate yet some wanted to remain irreconcilable. There was yet another faction which was supported by the United States, who went against the influences of China over the Kingdom of Laos. Regarding this matter, Prince Boon Oum of Champassak attacked Souvannaphouma's government alleging that the government had secretly been in contact with the Pathet Lao for a long time and had been playing a very supportive role to the socialist faction.
While Pathet Lao promoting the rapport of Kingdom of Laos and China, Prince Supanuwong addressed to Souvannaphouma that to establish good relationship with other three socialist countries was an urgent need which would gain support from the public. Regarding the diplomatic protocol, the exchange of diplomats from both socialist countries needed to be settled and the diplomats should represent Pathet Lao so that the negotiation and dialogue for exchange the commodities and other necessary items can be implemented in Laos. (National Archives, (2) MTF 16.3.5)

Based on the triangular relations during this period, China, the great superpower country played an important role in supporting both sides. Initially Pathet Lao seemed to have a closer relationship with Kingdom of Laos while the Kingdom of Laos became more powerful when Prince Souvannaphouma became the prime minister. The triangular relations at that point seemed to be quite smooth and a good and cooperative relationship was established. China needed to play both covert and public roles to confuse the western imperialists. Clearly speaking, China needed to create the illusion to western imperialists so it could provide secret support to the revolutionary peoples in Indochina. This would ensure a safe and secure sovereignty for the newly created socialist country. China definitely needed to build up its internal security as well as provide support to the third developing worlds to go through the revolutionary period together. The relationship of Pathet Lao and the Chinese government may be secure and long lasting, while the relationship with Kingdom of Laos is a different matter as the power behind the royalists kept changing and fluctuating.

The model of triangular relations after the diplomatic relations on 25th, april, 1961 brought Pathet Lao and China closer with more diplomatic interaction. Similar to the the relations model in figure 2, the two polarities of Pathet Lao and China (P and C) began to applear on the scene. The U.S. intervention in Laos prompted China to aggressively respond and prevent the U.S intervention. It appeared that Pathet Lao and China moved closer in terms of their diplomatic relationship and Pathet Lao was given a more committed roles in this military alliance. Moreover, an increasing number of Chinese troops were deployed to patrol in northern Laos, some were also helping Viet Minh in Vietnam and southern Laos. (National Archives., (2) na 3.10/74)

As for other general aid from China, Pathet Lao was promised for military and political cooperation. Its political leaders received strategic training for political revolution. In the meantime, the relations of K and C also continued to grow especially
after the establishment of diplomatic relations with China. It was discovered that the Kingdom of Laos government was also a recipient of aid from China to fight to liberate from the rising threats of the U.S. imperialist and its alliance. (National Archives, (2) 16.3.5/120-123)

The economic aid from China helped to keep the Kingdom of Laos relieved as the government worried that China would impose a direct military intervention over Laos (National Archives, (2) 3.10/75 - 86). However, the Laos foreign policy after the second coalition government reflected that they were open to embrace the new power to play a role in Southeast Asia with reference to SEATO (Southeast Asian Treaty Organization), Bandung and China (Bernard B. Fall, 1959: 478). The diplomatic direction pursued by Kingdom of Laos government brought a huge relief in international relations with China. (Souvannaphoumm, 1961: 1825)

The model of triangular relations 1945-1975 experienced both war and peace. During such period, the relations were affected by the China foreign policy as it supported the revolutionary mission in the third world. However, the scenario in Laos involved two political factions so Laos developed two different approaches of international relations to China. Pathet Lao continuously interacted with China, while the Kingdom of Laos government established diplomatic relationship after it has appointed the prime minister who was not under the control of the U.S.

Therefore Pathet Lao seemed to have an advantage in the model of triangular relations simply because Pathet Lao could determine the interaction with Kingdom of Laos government and predict their next step. Moreover Pathet Lao received direct and indirect aid from the nearest superpower – China who could remain behind the scene of diplomacy or play a reserved roles to negotiate with the other superpower who would come to intervene in the region.


After Lao People’s Democratic Republic was created on December 2, 1975, the country pursued the path of socialism, the principle of peace, and non-alignment in order to heal itself from their war wounds. While facing serious conflict with the Soviet Union and eventually leading to border clashes, China took this opportunity to isolate itself from the socialist block led by the Soviet Union and began to claim leadership on another socialist block in Asia. The conflict by these superpowers caused unrest and an
insecure perception of the neighboring countries (National Institute of Politics and Government: 2004: 51)

Mao Zedong tried to expand his political doctrine around the world and claimed leadership of the third world which caused many communist countries to have a skeptical perception towards China’s movement. With their foreign policy going against the soviet influence, China was left with no other option but to ally with the United States. Because of this, Laos considered China a serious threat that needed to be monitored. Because of their shared history in revolution and struggle against western imperialism, Vietnam was invited to play an important role in Laos as an alliance that supported the Soviet Union political ideology, Vietnam significantly influenced Laos’s foreign policy. The researcher has employed the concept of ‘two against one’ to demonstrate the path and its condition to establish relations with China.

Triangular Relations: Laos-Vietnam-China (figure 3)

The triangular relations as illustrated in figure 3 appear to place China as the number one superpower while Vietnam and Laos were on the same rank of capacity. The power structure can be illustrated as $C > V > P$ and $C > (V+P)$. (China dominates Vietnam and Vietnam dominates Laos, and China dominates both Vietnam and Laos combined. The factor affecting the power is the Soviet Union. While geopolitics plays an important role in international relations, both Laos and Vietnam offer unique geopolitical proximity. Vietnam therefore became an important actor in this triangular relationship, matching with Laos to go against China ($P$ matches with $V$ versus $C$). During the early stages of Laos-China relations, Laos saw itself as the buffer state of socialist countries in Southeast Asia. After 1975 Laos and China signed the treaty to launch national cooperative development but it had never been implemented due largely to skeptical attitudes and lack of mutual trust. Laos and China relations began to deteriorate. The two countries later reduced their diplomatic relationship from ambassador to charge d’affair for several years.

The existing tension signaled the potential for serious conflict when China decided to deploy its troops to fight against Vietnam in 1979. China initiated this war to teach a lesson to Vietnam in response to Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge which had been supported by China. On the other hand, Vietnam claimed to
launch this war to counter the Chinese influences and expansion over the region. (Pichet Saipan and Suriya Khamwan, 2011: 19)

Clashes of Vietnam versus China and Vietnam versus Khmer Rouge have made China a threat to Laos’s political security. Laos was just granted independence and was building up internal security. The 3rd party report (1982: 21) reads "China has used its victory of these Indochina countries in exchange for the U.S allowing them to enter the United Nations. Laos’s foreign policy was carried out to resist the China strategic effort to control socialist Laos and Vietnam. Laos declared that the three Indochina countries would remain the front buffer states of the socialist block to resist against both China and the U.S... The matchmaking of Laos and Vietnam offers mutual benefit for the two countries. It provides balance of power to prevent China’s expansionism, as well as the political existence for Vietnam which had just gone through wars with China and Cambodia. While maintaining the passive policy to avoid a military clash with China, Laos strategically employed balance of power for its international relations.

Within the scope of the triangular relations, Laos became the intermediary able to mediate the regional conflict. Upon the settlement of conflict, Laos showed a strong will to see both China and Soviet Union to have a dialogue, as well as the support for both to normalize their relations. Having promoted this relations for socialist block, Laos and Vietnam also adjusted its foreign policy to support ‘one China’ (International Institute: 148). Laos’s foreign policy in the period reflected the approach for cooperation of the triangular relations together with Vietnam and China for unity and integration. (National Institute of Politics and Government: 2004: 108)

The models of international relations formulated in this time were influenced more or less by the conflict of political ideology of the great socialist countries; political problem in Cambodia; and the political adaptation of China to keep up with the liberal world and to balance the power of the Soviet Union. All these factors influenced Laos’s policy towards China regardless of the rising pressure through their geopolitics and historical background. On the other hand, Laos already developed guidelines to have a strong cooperation and commitment with Vietnam and Cambodia.

As China posed threat to its neighboring countries, their relations also changed. Laos was determined to create unity within the country. Amid the dynamic global scenario, each country is heading towards cooperation instead of competition on
political ideology. Laos’s national interests that focus on economic development growth became important factors as a guidelines for foreign policy.

Laos’ decision making in response to the conflict of the neighboring countries can be viewed as an effort to maintain balance of power. The real resistance against state will never take place as long as the state establish international relations with other states such as China. Though China has its higher capacity at war compared to Vietnam and Laos, the international relations model can be designed in Indochina whether the political polarity or the cooperation of smaller states while there’s always the factor await to reap the benefit of the failed relations.

4. Conclusion
Since the traditional period to 1986 progressed well, it appeared that Laos could manage complicated and dynamic relations successfully. Initiated by China to interact with other peripheral states, the tribute system in the traditional state period where Laos was only a small state to interact with the larger one, helped shape unique Laos foreign policy. After the arrival of the French, the total administration was carried out solely by them but this gave rise to the new model of international relations for Laos. Many important figures of Laos became the revolutionists who had to learn how to establish practical and efficient international relations with other states.

The entire triangular relationship seems to leave a legacy for the young political leaders to learn from and to apply. It is undeniable that Pathet Lao was able to execute the most efficient foreign policy relying on the interdependence and mutual benefits with their neighboring states. The establishment of Socialist Communism of Laos took place similarly to other socialist countries, however Laos seem to pay more attention to political sensitivity and being more skeptical towards larger countries with superior economic and military power. These are the principle guidelines for Lao international relations.

Based on existing foreign policy, Laos appears to be very careful and sensitive to foreign affairs, especially when it comes to deploying their military approach. The efficient and successful diplomatic settlement of Laos really makes the country unique and a model for international relations. In the future it is also of paramount importance to research China’s perspective of the larger state towards smaller states such as Laos.
However, triangular relations can be applied to study any group or faction relations to discover the conditions and rationalizations of the relationship.

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