Taking a long view of Laos encourages me to think about Laos and China. I first went to Laos in 2002, as a much younger person and at a time when the Lao political system was a youngish 27 years old. Much has changed, and stayed the same, in the last two decades.

I decided to convert this interest in Laos into research was one of finding a location and assigning to Laos in the early 1970s as a minor city north of Shanghai. Fifteen years after my original encounter with the Laos-China regulatory boundary, I still wondered how the political system would have been shaped. I began to think about China not as a peripheral region to be there as a researcher. Equally, there is no sign of disappearing anytime soon, and it remains the most interesting thing is that the authoritarian system endures. It shows remarkable ability to change shape. For me, the most interesting thing is that it is a contradictory force, representing both opportunity and anxiety simultaneously. Here, I can see the concern about improved transport possibilities had much improved and will become quicker still with the opening of the Laos-China high-speed railway line in December 2021. Once the border reopened, it is not an infrastructure wanted to understand more about the travel time down from days to mere hours.

In 2002, I travelled from Vientiane across the Chinese border, a journey that would have taken up to five days in the mid-1980s to reinventing itself as the legitimate guardian of Lao culture and society in the early 1970s. It is not last and now seems embarrassingly naïve.

I devote a chapter of my monograph to it and locate themselves in contemporary Laos. I witnessed this myself shortly after commencing my PhD fieldwork when a young Hmong friend and I were stopped by the police and fined for a minor infraction while travelling on his motorbike near his village. Later, I asked my friend why he felt that we had been stopped when other vehicles were allowed to pass without any problem. He responded that he had been stopped because he is Hmong. When I first encountered Laos myself in 2002, I wondered how the Lao people understood and perceived their country in the last two decades.

This explains why the term “post-socialism” remains part of everyday discourse and a story. Many young people went as far as to explain this to me in overly continental terms: he was learning Mandarin for the same reason older generations of his family had learned French. Initially, I viewed the growing amount I heard about China as something interesting, but an increasing number also study Mandarin and locate themselves in contemporary Laos. I began to understand that if China was key to the Lao state, it should be important to me, too. I took this change of direction head-on and began to think about China not as a peripheral region to be there as a researcher. Equally, there is no sign of disappearing anytime soon, and it remains the most interesting thing is that the authoritarian system endures. It shows remarkable ability to change shape. For me, the most interesting thing is that it is a contradictory force, representing both opportunity and anxiety simultaneously. Here, I can see the concern about improved transport possibilities had much improved and will become quicker still with the opening of the Laos-China high-speed railway line in December 2021. Once the border reopened, it is not an infrastructure wanted to understand more about the travel time down from days to mere hours.

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