EXCERPTS FROM COMMUNIST TRIBAL BIOGRAPHIES

The following two profiles are extracted from Mekong Upstream by Wilfred Burchett (Red River Publishers, Hanoi, 1957) and are included because they represent the Communist viewpoint with regard to non-Lao ethnic groups. In an attempt to emphasize the unity of the diverse peoples of Laos, the Kha are referred to as the Lao Thenh (Lao Teng) or Upland Lao, and the Meo as the Lao Xung (Lao Som) or Lao of the Mountaintops. This terminology has been used by both Communist and non-Communist Lao.
In the parts of northern Lao which I visited, the Lao Thenh lived exclusively on the mountain flanks, but in the south they also occupy the summits. And those who lived on the summits were never conquered by the French. They lived in a state of perpetual revolt and never accepted the colonial-feudal regime imposed elsewhere. Like the Lao Xung, they are naturally wonderful mountaineers and hunters. Darker of colour than the Lao Lum, they are stockily built with the muscular legs of the mountain dwellers. At the time the French arrived, the Lao Thenh were organized in tribes, each with their elected chiefs. Inter-tribal conflicts, mainly over land boundaries and abduction of each other's women were fairly frequent.

Among the Lao Thenh, the chiefs have certain privileges but also responsibilities. On the mountain summits in the South where they resisted the colonialist-feudal regime, the chief owns all the cultivated land and forests within the village boundaries—the latter are usually negotiated with his neighbors. If there is too much land, he may rent part of it to a neighboring village. The chief has a patch of land about the same size as the other villagers but the latter clean it up and cultivate it for him. He has the right to all booty in case of victory in a tribal conflict. He usually has several wives for which however he has to pay the negotiated fees. But if the chief is unsuccessful in negotiating a peaceful settlement of a quarrel, he must put himself at the head of his men in any conflict which results. The Lao Thenh, as hunters, usually have flintlock rifles, but their favorite weapon is the crossbow and poisoned arrows.

The revolt which started in 1910 was led by a tribal chief, Ong Keo, of the Lavei, the largest single tribe of the Lao Thenh. Against the French with their breech-loading rifles, machine guns and modern artillery, the Lao Thenh used their flintlocks and crossbows and traps with poisoned spikes similar to those they set for tigers. Expedition after expedition was sent against Ong Keo and his people, but they failed.

(Ong Keo was later shot by the French in what was supposed to have been a peaceful negotiating session.)

Another tribal chief took up the fight. Komadome was a remarkable figure and developed into one of the great leaders of the Lao Thenh people. He began gathering the threads linking all the Lao Thenh tribes together, sending
his agents from mountain top to mountain top, in provinces not only in the Bolovens area but into the neighboring provinces of Saravane and Attopeu. It was a long and painful process. Contact could only be established by personal couriers on foot. Komadome with his wider contacts and network of allies however could keep changing his bases. He developed also something of a political programme, using the people to oppose the colonialists by all means; to refuse to pay taxes, refused to be conscripted into the army of labor service. In order better to propagate his ideas and coordinate activities of widely separated tribes, Komadome developed a written language for the Lao Thanh people and established study classes among his own and allied tribes. He made alliances with other racial groups and even succeeded in winning parts of the Lao Lum over to the struggle. At one period, the French mobilized the major portion of their forces in Indochina against Komadome, massing everything from elephants to fighter and bomber planes against him.

I had the good fortune to meet Komadome's son, Khampen, a sturdy mountaineer with a fine open face, alert and intelligent and who is said to resemble his father closely. He had fought side by side with his father during the latter stages of the revolt.

"My father hated the colonialists from the start," he said. He was only 13 when they invaded our country. Because he never concealed his hatred, he was later arrested by the French and tortured. He learned to read and write while he was in prison. By the time he was released, his friend, Ong Keo, had already started to fight the French. He went straight from the Muong May prison to Ong Keo's headquarters. He had great prestige among our people, and soon everyone from our village went to join him. After Ong Keo was murdered, father was asked to take his place.

"The French thought that after they had wiped out Ong Keo, resistance would cease. They sent a strong force to 'mop up', but my father had prepared an ambush. The enemy were all wiped out. News of this victory spread throughout the mountains and across into neighboring provinces. As the struggle continued, whole villages left their bases to come into Komadome's territory. Others from Lao Thanh villages all over Central and South Laos sent representatives to find out what was going on and what they could do to help. They were so numerous the French could not stop them. Sometimes they arrested people and asked where they were going:
'To see the great chief Komadome,' they would reply. The French would shoot them on the spot.

"When they blockaded our central bases, my father launched a movement to increase production. He started education classes and invented the Khon script for our people. He told our people to resist the feudal regime the French were imposing on us. But the weakness of our struggle was that although we had some alliances with other groups, the French were able to concentrate everything on crushing the Lao Thenh."

Thus ended the Ong Keo-Komadome revolt which started in 1910 and continued without a break until 1937. Komadome was sixty years old when he was killed. Si Thon and the other two brothers were horribly tortured and later taken as far as possible away from the Lao Thenh bases to be imprisoned in the extreme northern province of Phong Saly. Si Thon was sentenced to life imprisonment and the others to 20 years each. When the Japanese took over and the French fled, they took the third brother from the prison to act as coolie and carry their baggage. He has never been seen since. Si Thon and Khampan were liberated during the popular uprising against the Japanese and French in August 1945. They both immediately joined the revolutionary forces and carried on the magnificent traditions of their father by setting up resistance bases in Phong Saly and neighboring provinces. Si Thon became one of the leaders of the Pathet Lao forces and in the administration. Khampan was also a leading cadre when I met him.

Still another member of the family who has carried on the tradition is Xang Kham, eldest son of Si Thon. His story really belongs to another generation's struggle against French imperialism, but it has its roots also in Komadone's revolt.

"After the Japanese took over, my father escaped. But he was rearrested. He was freed again during the August uprising. He set up resistance bases in Phong Saly and then in 1947 came further south and liberated the whole of Xieng Khouang province. The French knew about him and were frightened I might try to join him. I was arrested and beaten up. They kept asking me about my father, but I pretended I was too young when he was taken away to remember anything about him. They set me free but under constant guard. I was forbidden to move further than five kilometres from the village--just enough to work
my 'ray' (hai). It was not until 1950 that I was able to slip away and join my father. By that time he was setting up resistance bases at Muong May, in our native province."

There are an estimated 100,000 Lao Xung in Upper Laos and a few scattered tribes in the centre and south. They have no written language but are regarded as very intelligent and energetic. They have a strong sense of race and a wandering fellow-tribesman can find hospitality in a Lao Xung village far from his own for as long as he wishes to stay. Like most of the mountain people, they are very superstitious and have complicated customs and taboos which are easily violated by the uninitiated. Their women descend to the markets—often a two or three days' journey by foot—to exchange opium, mountain fruits and a fiercely strong alcohol, for textiles, salt and iron for their guns. But they feel uncomfortable in the heat of the valleys and plains and get back as quickly as possible to their mountain tops.

From all points of view, the Lao Xung are excellent allies in wartime, firstly, because of their steadfast, unwavering character. Once a thing is decided, it is for a long time. Secondly, because they occupy the strategic mountain tops. Thirdly, because they are excellent marksmen and natural hunters. Fourthly, because they make their own highly accurate flintlock guns, their own black powder and balls.

Cultivation on the mountain tops is difficult business. Fresh jungle patches must be cut and cleared every year. There is a constant battle between weeds and crops. As the men almost exclusively devote themselves to hunting—and unfortunately also to opium smoking—the main burden of the work falls on the women. The men help with felling the timber but after that the women are the producers. They cultivate the ricefields, the maize and opium patches. They look after cattle breeding and marketing of produce and of course the cooking. Because of the very hard work and long hours, a Lao Xung wife is said to encourage her husband to take a second, third, or even more wives so that the work may be shared out.

The most important Lao Xung chieftain today is undoubtedly Fuydang. His role in starting a private war against the
French and how it developed will be presented in due course.

He told me of the revolt started by Chao Pha Pachay in 1918. "It was against the opium tax and the corvee system," he said, "and it started in Sam Neua, in the village of Luong Son where Chao Pha Pachay was the chief. The French had named another chief, but Pachay was chief as far as our people were concerned. The French wanted to collect two kilograms of opium from everyone whether they grew it or not, whether they smoked or not. Pachay refused and the people supported him. Then they sent agents from town to round up villagers for labour service. Pachay refused and again the people supported him. Next time the agents came with French troops but Pachay was ready. He ambushed the French and sent messengers to other tribes telling them to resist also. Everywhere our tribespeople led by Pachay rose up against the French. It was a real war.

Pachay was a great chief. All of his plans were kept very secret and he was able to take the French by surprise many times. Once when the French were looking for him in the mountains of Xieng Khouang province, he swept down to attack and capture the provincial capital, seizing many arms.

"The French mobilized great forces against him, but Pachay also mobilized our people not only in his own province of Sam Neua but in Luang Prabang and Xieng Khouang provinces. They could never defeat Pachay," Faydang said proudly, "but in 1922 they sent an agent to assassinate him. After that the people were disheartened. We were no longer united. The French massacred our people by the thousands.

"We didn't know how to organize in those days," he said. "We had no programme. We hated the enemy and wanted to wipe him out. That was all. We had no idea of national unity. We fought alone and thought the Lao Xung alone could defeat the enemy. We never even thought of combining with others, because we always believed in the past in directly settling our quarrels, without help from others."

Faydang was chief of a village atop a thousand metre high peak near Nong Et in Xieng Khouang province, not far from the Vietnamese border. And he was a chief in the truest sense of the word. He was elected to lead his people in war and peace. On one occasion he had left his mountain peak to go to far distant Luang Prabang to demand of the king that he protect the interests of the Lao Xung people and punish the agents who ravaged the region.
"It was in our region where the repression was the most severe," Faydang told me when I asked how he had come to join the resistance movement. "When the Japanese came we had hopes of something better, but they were just the same. Villages were destroyed, crops burned on the ground, our people massacred. The French came back and they carried on in the same way. They set up a post only about seven kilometres from our village," he continued. "Soldiers were sent all the time to pillage our people. They took everything from rice and alcohol even to our buffaloes. Our people were very poor, but even the little they had was taken by the troops. Once they robbed us of our last grain of rice. I had to go down to the plains to buy rice for our own people to eat. On my way back, I was arrested and even the rice I had bought was taken away. It was To Bi and To Jeu (Two Lao Xung chiefs who had collaborated with the French) who caused my arrest. They knew I hated the French. I escaped and went back to the village. The French sent troops to encircle us. With four of my friends and two boys, I slipped through the encirclement at night, into the jungle.

"I visited village after village throughout our mountains and talked with the chiefs and the people. Everyone hated the French and were glad to know our plans to fight. Every village appointed organizers and formed scouts and defense corps."

In August 1950 something quite unique in all Laotian history took place. It was possible only by the patient, difficult work of leaders and patriots like Souphanouvong, Faydang, Si Thon (who had been organizing the Lao Thanh as Faydang had been the Lao Xung), Nou Hac, Thao Seum, Chau Suk Vong Sak—-who had been organizing the Lao Iam under the very noses of the French in Vientiane province and others. A congress was held attended by delegates from all the nationalities and all sections of the population. Nothing of the sort had ever been dreamed of before. Souphanouvong traced the history of previous insurrections and of the 1945 uprising. He presented his ideas for a united movement of all the peoples. Faydang had been chosen by the Lao Xung people as their delegate, Si Thon by the Lao Thanh. All the other leading minorities were represented. It was unanimously agreed to create the Neo Lao Itsala, or National United front, and to set up a new government of National resistance. Souphanouvong was unanimously chosen as president of the Front and prime minister of the new government. Si Thon and Faydang also became ministers. From that moment, the struggle of the Laotian people entered a new phase.
Town and countryside were as one, the Lao Thanh "slaves" and the Lao Lum were allies and comrades on a basis of complete equality, "minority" and "majority" peoples were forged into a single, real national entity. The provisional government elected was one which really represented the varied national interests and was of a very different quality to that set up in August 1945.

"When the programme of the Front was distributed among our Lao Xung people," Faydang continued, "they saw it answered their deepest wishes. Equality for all races. Nobody had ever spoken of this before. A united fight against the French. We had never thought it possible. Abolition of unjust taxes. The French had burned and plundered our villages, massacred our people, taken our women in collecting taxes in the past. Of course there were difficulties. We could not immediately improve the lives of the people. But it was not long before the people could see the benefits of our alliance with the Lao Lum and others. They felt the efforts made by the Front and government to improve their lives. In place of our poisoned arrows and flintlocks we began to get some modern arms, some automatics and light machine-guns. Great efforts were made to get salt to our villages. The opium tax was abolished and other taxes lightened. We formed women's associations and a youth movement. At first membership was slow. Each village is on an isolated mountaintop and it was difficult to get people together. But after a few months people saw this was a very good thing and they joined up with great enthusiasm. From the self-defense corps we set up guerilla bases, first of all in our own province of Xieng Khouang and then in the neighboring ones. We have 40,000 Lao Xung in our province alone and later on we were able to form whole Lao Xung companies from our guerilla bases and attach them to the regular Pathet Lao forces formed by Souphanouvong.

"The political level of our people was raised as they got together and talked things over. They could clearly see who were our enemies and who were our friends." And as it was with the Lao Xung, so it was with all the minority peoples. Relations between themselves and with the Lao Lum were as between members of one family. Consolidation of forces within the country had its counterpart the following year when Neo Itsa Front delegates, headed by Souphanouvong took part with delegates of the Vietminh and Khmer Issarak to form the alliance between the peoples of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos and coordinate their fight till final victory.
Lao Women
Like her husband, Madame Sananikone knows some English but prefers to use French. She visited the United States under a State Department grant. As President of the Lao Women's Association, she made the following comments:

"Among the Lao women there is no fight for political equality. They do not feel that they have been oppressed by their husbands. In fact, many people say that it is the other way around. We have no desire to limit the size of our families. Only those who have been abroad and had constant contact with the West have gotten this idea. Lao women do not plan ahead the way Western women do."

We discussed the present status of polygamy in Laos. "There are very few second wives today. If this is the case, the husband keeps each wife in a separate house. Also, the second wife does not have much status for when she goes to market other women look down on her. You can see that this custom is no longer popular when you look at the (late) King and the Crown Prince. The King has many wives, while the Crown Prince has only one. This is also true of the fathers of many government officials; they have had several wives, but their sons have only one. (An example of the current trend is the case of one of the government Ministers who has taken a second wife in a village near Vientiane and maintains a separate home there. This situation is very much resented by the villagers, but they feel they are powerless to act because of his prestige.)"

"The Lao Women's Association is now in the process of setting up an office. Our main work is social service. In the villages, for instance, almost fifty percent of the babies die. At present I am in charge of a home economics school, and I want to give women training in health and other matters. The Pathet Lao use women for propaganda, and we must counter their work. Some of the monks have become very interested in our work, and we have had to explain to them that this is not only a religious program, but one for economic development. The pagoda is the center of Lao life, and when the pagoda is aided, everyone is satisfied."
GIRL GRADUATE OF COLLEGE

The following biography was written in 1957 by a seventeen year old girl in the graduating class at the college in Luang Prabang. The author is a daughter of a Lao mother and a Chinese merchant father, and is particularly interesting because it illustrates the way in which it is possible for an individual to move from the Chinese subculture into the dominant Lao culture. One of her sisters has married a high Lao official, while a brother has followed their father's occupation and has remained within the Chinese community. Written in Lao, this account uses many Thai idioms.

MY LIFE

My parents have told me that when I was born I was a nice, fat healthy baby, but a naughty one. As a child I always wanted to be the leader and to take things from other children. When I reached the age of four I developed a love for music. When I heard my brother or sister sing I attempted to follow their tunes. When I was five my parents sent me to the Chinese school. They wanted to do this because my father said that I am half Chinese, and it was necessary for me to know the Chinese language. I studied in the beginning class and was friendly with Chinese children of the same age. In my class there were thirty-four pupils.

I worked hard and was interested in my lessons. My parents' interest strengthened my purpose. I was never lower than tenth in the examinations. It was difficult to do better than the boys, but let them be better. Sometimes, however, I did beat them. All the teachers liked me because I was a good pupil, and so my parents said nice things about me. This increased my determination.

At the age of eight I had already studied Chinese for three years. The war stopped my schooling.\(^1\) The French entered Laos and came to Luang Prabang. Since there was trouble the Chinese school was closed and I had to stay home for many months. I waited for the Chinese school to open so that I would be able to study again, but the school was closed permanently because the French would not allow it to re-open.

\(^1\)The Indochina War, during 1948
When I was nine years old my mother sent me to the Lao school, the groupe scolaire. I had a strong desire to learn. In addition to going to school, I helped my parents at home, but it was not hard work. After studying in the Lao school for some time I received a special award from the principal. I tried to work hard so that my parents would think well of me. My best subject was French. I liked mathematics too, but I did not do too well in it.

When I was twelve years old I had smallpox and so wasted a year. I was very seriously ill, and everybody thought I would die. Then, because of my great merit, I recovered, and my mind was not affected.

As I went on in school, I began to help my mother more at home and to take my younger brothers and sisters to school. After graduating from the groupe scolaire I entered the college. In the first year I received top honors in the examination. I have never repeated a class.

During my third year in the college I never dreamed I would have the good fortune that came my way: the head of the Womens' Association of Thailand invited some Lao people to visit and study first aid and practical nursing. The government sent a letter to the Minister of Education in Vientiane, saying that ten girls from the college were to be selected from all Laos. From Luang Prabang another girl and I were chosen.

The ten of us received a fine welcome from the Thai, and I saw evidence of the bonds of friendship between Lao and Thai students. I stayed in Thailand for three weeks. I was very pleased when I saw the beautiful green sea. The Director of the Association took us to see many memorial statues, and the USOM photographer in Bangkok took pictures.\(^1\)

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1. In the Buddhist sense
2. Repeating grades is a frequent occurrence for Lao pupils
3. This visit was paid for by the Educational Division of the American aid program, and each girl was later presented with a photograph album of the trip
During the last week of the visit I had some practice in nursing. I was able to broaden my outlook and advance friendship between Thailand and Laos. So I pray with all my heart to be able to go back there again and promote this friendship.

After graduating from the college I went to Vientiane for several months. While there I tried to find someone to study with so that I would not forget my lessons. Then I went to Xieng Khouang with my sister and stayed there a week. There is fresh air there and normal living, and it is a good place. I liked it very much because it is quiet and the scenery is beautiful. I can say of my former life that it is like a dream that goes on continuously.

In the Future

I think I am a girl who has merit and is able to learn well. I was born into a good family, my father treats me well, I have always been happy and have been able to continue my studies.1

Now I am over seventeen and have finished the college. My parents want me to work. They say it is not necessary for a girl to study any more, but I do not like this idea and I try to persuade them. In my opinion it is important for a girl to have an education. I told my parents that I have made up my mind to study in the Lycee Pavie in Vientiane and they have finally agreed with me. I will try my best, because in Laos there are no girls who have finished the Lycee.2 I promise that I will be patient until I am enlightened and will try to make my country more civilized. I know that my country has a lack of advantages. Civilization and its advantages do not only depend on men. I think I will be one of the women who will be able to do some good for our country, and I will also advance my status for my own personal and family happiness.

1Unlike a number of other students, this girl does not appear to have had any financial difficulties

2This is not strictly true, but there are very few Lao girls who have more than the equivalent of a high school education
If I finish at the Lycee I would like to study in a foreign country because foreign countries are more civilized than Laos. My objective, about which I dream every day, is France and America. I would like to go to America because I have learned that it is the most civilized country and the whole world regards America as superior. It is a beautiful country, has a nice climate and the people are cultured. I am most interested in studying law and diplomacy. I am sorry that in my country there are no women in political life and I hope that after I have finished my studies in Vientiane I will be allowed to study law in a foreign country. I want my country to be civilized and develop like other countries such as America, Japan and Thailand where there are women members of parliament.¹

I think that medicine is important too, because there is a lack of doctors in Laos. It is good to be a doctor. The people love them, and no one is jealous. A doctor is satisfied with himself, because he is able to help others.

¹There is one woman in the National Assembly of Laos
MY BIOGRAPHY

by

Pinkham Uparavarn

I was born in Luang Prabang, the royal city of Laos, daughter of Thit Leek and Sao Paieng Uparavarn. We had a small bamboo house in Luang Prabang. In that house I was born and lived for all my childhood. We lived a very simple life. My father earned a living making bamboo roof shingles. My parents worked hard in order to support our family of four: my parents, my older brother and myself.

I began school. The first day of September, 1942, was my first day of school. I started in the first grade because at that time we had no kindergarten. After three days I could write the alphabet. I felt that I learned very fast. The school at which I studied was the "Groupe Scolaire de Luang Prabang." This was the only elementary school in the city. I did well during my six years in this school.

My parents were proud of me because I was always a good student. I respected them because they wanted me to have a good education, even though they had not had any themselves. However, my father could read and write a little. During my mother's generation girls did not go to school. If you did, you were talked about. I remember that my father used to help me read the primer after dinner. When I finished school in the afternoon, I helped my mother cook and bring water from the pump in the neighborhood. Every morning I used to get up to cook rice for my mother. She offered it to the monks who passed by our house every day. While the rice was cooking I swept the house, washed the dishes and brought water. When my mother came back into the house I had

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1This biography and the one following were written in English at the author's request
my breakfast and went to school. My parents had a low income. I tried to help them but I was so young. When vacation came I used to go to the market and buy fruit to re-sell in the neighborhood. During the two and a half months vacation I earned enough money to pay for my school materials and clothing. Sometimes I could give some to my mother. All the time I went to school I had to work housework for we never had a servant.

At the end of the school year 1947-1948 I took my final examination in primary school. I passed it with good grades. In the fall of that year I enrolled in the first year of the "College de Luang Prabang" which is similar to junior high school. In this school I studied more French than Lao. I was good in French. In the ninth grade I studied English with a French teacher. I made good grades in English too. Since then I have been interested in English. However, I had only three months of English because the teacher left.

Upon graduation from junior high school in 1952, I applied for work in the elementary school in Luang Prabang. I could not go to the Lycee in Vientiane because my parents could not afford it. I had to stop school. For two years I was a practice teacher in the sixth grade, as institutrice stagiaire. At the end of two years I took a professional oral examination, passed it, and became a teacher. I taught in the school for three years.

I have always liked music and sports. When I was in college I played badminton and basketball. I played many basketball games when I was in school and also when I taught in the elementary school. As a musician I played the mandolin and guitar. I could not read notes but played by ear.

In 1955 my father passed away. My mother and I went to live in Vientiane, my mother's home town. I taught the sixth grade in the Chao Anon School for one year, and a half year in the Taffarin School; both of these schools are in Vientiane. I began to study English again. I had several teachers who

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1 Almost all the courses in the college are taught in French by French instructors.
were American, English and Australian. In Vientiane I had more opportunity to study English. I also audited classes at the Lycee Pavie when I had time.

I studied English for over a year before going to the United States. I had never dreamed of going there, for I do not have much education. How happy I was when I heard that teachers who knew English might have a chance to do. In February of 1957 I left Vientiane with some other teachers for the United States. We were selected by our Minister of Education and the United States Information Service to study in the United States for one year.

My trip to the United States was the first time I had been out of Laos. We went via Bangkok, Hong Kong, Manila, Wake, Guam, Honolulu, San Francisco and arrived in Washington, D.C. First I studied English at the American University Language Center for four months, and then at the English Language Institute in Ann Arbor, Michigan, for two months. This first year program was an extensive experience. I met and mingled with students and teachers from all over the world. For the rest of my program, I observed methods of teaching in the elementary schools in different parts of the United States: In Denver, Colorado; in Taos and Santa Fe, New Mexico; and Sparta, Tennessee. I traveled in a number of states.

At the end of one year, I felt that my English was very much improved, and I had much experience in observing family and social life. However, I felt that one year of study was not enough if I was going to carry out the work in Laos. Another year was granted me by ICA. In Washington, D.C. I participated in the workshop of the development of educational materials, a project at George Washington University sponsored by the United States Office of Education. At the workshop, I learned techniques of writing and education. I wrote one project "Festival in the Royal City" which was completed at the end of the workshop. During the workshop I took field trips to Blair County School and Penn State University.

In August, 1958, I took the English summer course at American University. In September, I attended the