Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, 42(2), pp 211–231 June 2011.
© The National University of Singapore, 2011 doi:10.1017/S0022463411000026

Bureaucratic migrants and the potential of prosperity in upland Laos

Sarinda Singh

This paper argues that Lao bureaucrats who migrate to the uplands offer possibilities for re-thinking the immutability of upland–lowland distinctions and the power of the modern state. The specific focus is on low-ranking government officials on the Nakai Plateau in central Laos who are positioned at the nexus of state authority, development schemes and the rural poor. Nakai is a site of nationally significant resource utilisation and practices that has provided a model for development across the country. Officials' experiences in Nakai suggest that the upland–lowland contrast can provide valuable understandings of power when combined with an awareness of social processes that reproduce and shift the meanings ascribed to these nominally distinct domains. Significantly, the experiences of mobile marginal officials highlight an idea of state power as the potential to grant prosperity.

Introduction

A key theme informing understandings of power across Southeast Asia is the contrast between lowland centres and upland frontiers. The lowlands are sites of productive irrigated agriculture, religious and cultural refinement, political integration and wealth, whereas the uplands signify the opposite. This upland–lowland contrast can be thought of as 'a structure of regional culture' that is based on 'tributary frameworks of pre-modern states'.[1] While associated with pre-modern states, many modern states and non-state actors (for example, non-government organisations, media, donors) also utilise and perpetuate such upland–lowland distinctions.[2] In recent

Sarinda Singh is a Postdoctoral Fellow in Anthropology in the School of Social Science at the University of Queensland. Correspondence in connection with this paper should be addressed to: s.singh2@uq.edu.au. This research was also supported by the Australian National University and, most especially, by the government officials in Nakai who allowed me to share in their lives. I appreciate helpful feedback on earlier versions from two anonymous reviewers, Michael Fabinyi, Sverre Molland as well as organisers and participants in the workshop 'Continuity and Change: (Re)conceptualising Power in Southeast Asia' at the University of Cambridge. All names in this paper are pseudonyms.

1 Hjorleifur Jonsson, 'Yao minority identity and the location of difference in the South China borderlands', *Ethnos*, 65, 1 (2000): 76. See also Charles F. Keyes, *The golden peninsula: Culture and adaptation in mainland Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1995); and Andrew Turton, *Civility and savagery: Social identity in Tai states* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000).

2 For example, Wolfram H. Dressler and Sarah Turner, 'The persistence of social differentiation in the Philippine uplands', *Journal of Development Studies*, 44, 10 (2008): 1450–73; and Tania M. Li, 'Engaging simplifications: Community-based resource management, market processes and state agendas in upland Southeast Asia', *World Development*, 30, 2 (2002): 265–83.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463411000026 Published online by Cambridge University Press

years, a considerable body of research has questioned the presumed divide between centres and peripheries across Southeast Asia.[3] This work has also usefully balanced a tendency to emphasise central authorities in the lowlands, even when 'looking "uphill" or "outward"'.[4] A view from the uplands can usefully enhance our understanding of the uplands and lowlands as interpenetrating social domains.[5]

Yet a significant lacuna persists in this upland-oriented literature — the modern state has primarily been conceptualised in terms of the policies, institutions and interventions that make an impact on upland people who are outside the state.[6] For instance, Christopher Duncan aptly describes typical Southeast Asian bureaucratic ambitions: '[v]iewing themselves as the pinnacle of social development, or at least as close to it as any of their countrymen have reached, government bureaucrats living in national capitals seek to impose programmes that will help, or force, the less developed to reach their point of socio-economic development – to turn the savage into the civilised, to turn the "other" into "us"'.[7] The state is commonly regarded as an external force that upland ethnic minorities must negotiate — what Deborah Tooker refers to as an 'expansionary bureaucratic state'.[8] While certainly not discounting the importance of such work, it does convey a particular, and partial, impression of how upland–lowland distinctions are negotiated in contemporary Southeast Asia. In addition, it reflects a tendency to conceptualise the state as an abstraction affecting the lives of those outside it. As some recent ethnographic studies demonstrate, awareness of bureaucrats as individuals, citizens and part of a broader society expands the view beyond characteristic assumptions that these people are only either honourable or dishonourable agents of the state.[9] A personalised approach to the state offers

3 For example, Jonsson, 'Yao minority identity'; Sarinda Singh, *Natural potency and political power: Forests and state authority in contemporary Laos* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, in press); Kenneth Sillander, 'Local integration and coastal connections in interior Kalimantan: The case of the *nalin taun* ritual among the Bentian', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* [hereafter, *JSEAS*], 37, 2 (2006): 315–34; Janet C. Sturgeon, 'Border practices, boundaries, and the control of resource access: A case from China, Thailand and Burma', *Development and Change*, 35, 3 (2004): 463–84; Deborah Tooker, 'Putting the *mandala* in its place: A practice-based approach to the spatialization of power on the Southeast Asian "periphery" – The case of the Akha', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 55, 2 (1996): 323–58; and Andrew Walker, *The legend of the golden boat: Regulation, trade and traders in the borderlands of Laos, Thailand, China and Burma* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1999).

4 Hjorleifur Jonsson, 'Review of "Civility and savagery: Social identity in Tai states"', *JSEAS*, 32, 3 (2001): 466.

5 Tooker, 'Putting the *mandala* in its place'; Edmund R. Leach, *Political systems of highland Burma: A study of Kachin social structure* (London: Athlone Press, 1970).

6 But see, Vatthana Pholsena, *Post-war Laos: The politics of culture, history and identity* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006).

7 *Civilizing the margins: Southeast Asian government policies for the development of minorities*, ed. Christopher R. Duncan (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), pp. 4–5.

8 Deborah Tooker, 'Modular modern: Shifting forms of collective identity among the Akha of northern Thailand', *Anthropological Quarterly*, 77, 2 (2004): 261. See also, Paul T. Cohen, 'Resettlement, opium and labour dependence: Akha-Tai relations in northern Laos', *Development and Change*, 31, 1 (2000): 179–200; Jean Michaud, 'Handling mountain minorities in China, Vietnam and Laos: From history to current concerns', *Asian Ethnicity*, 10, 1 (2009): 25–49; and James C. Scott, *The art of not being governed: An anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University, 2009).

9 Akhil Gupta, 'Blurred boundaries: The discourse of corruption, the culture of politics, and the imagined state', *American Ethnologist*, 22, 2 (1995): 375–402; Michael Herzfeld, *Cultural intimacy: Social poetics in the nation-state*, 2nd edn. (New York: Routledge, 2005); David Koh, 'Negotiating the socialist

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463411000026 Published online by Cambridge University Press

possibilities for a productive rethinking of relations between the uplands and lowlands. Notably, and in contrast to studies in political science that personalise by focusing on elite politicians and bureaucrats, this paper considers the experiences of marginalised officials who do not possess the assumed bureaucratic privileges of status, wealth and power.

My attention is on low-ranking government officials who move from the lowlands to the uplands of Laos as a requirement of their employment by the state. This shifts the emphasis of the recent literature on mobility in Southeast Asia, which highlights the effects of government resettlement policies, labour migration and trafficking. As in studies of upland–lowland relations, such work often conceives of the state as an external influence that has an impact on upland villagers and also, in the case of Laos, highlights the movement of villagers from the more remote uplands down to the accessible lowlands. Research across Southeast Asia has looked at the effects of large-scale state-sponsored and spontaneous migration to upland areas, but without specifically considering the mobility of officials.[10] Laos, with the lowest population densities in the region, is an exception to such large-scale movement to the uplands.[11]

While upland-focused work has noted the presence of bureaucratic migrants, they have yet to be considered a worthy topic of study in themselves. In addressing this issue, the mobility of government officials in Laos could be understood in a number of ways. First, nationalist discourses could explain officials' moving to the uplands in terms of commitment throughout the bureaucracy to advancing the nation out of least-developed country status by 2020, a theme that often emerges in conversation with Lao officials.[12] Second, their movement could be seen as 'bureaucratization',[13]

state in Vietnam through local administrators: The case of karaoke shops', *Sojourn*, 16, 2 (2001): 279–305; Pholsena, *Post-war Laos*.

10 For example, Andrew Hardy, 'Strategies of migration to upland areas in contemporary Vietnam', *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 41, 1 (2000): 23–34; Li, 'Engaging simplifications', p. 268; and Michaud, 'Handling mountain minorities', p. 27.

11 On mobility in Laos, see Asian Development Bank, *Broken lives: Trafficking in human beings in Lao People's Democratic Republic* (Mandaluyong City, Philippines: Asian Development Bank, 2009); Ian G. Baird and Bruce Shoemaker, 'Unsettling experiences: Internal resettlement and international aid agencies in Laos', *Development and Change*, 38, 5 (2007): 865–88; Cohen, 'Resettlement, opium and labour dependence'; Olivier Evrard and Yves Goudineau, 'Planned resettlement, unexpected migrations and cultural trauma in Laos', *Development and Change*, 35, 5 (2004): 937–62; Government of Lao PDR [hereafter GOL] and United Nations Children's Fund [hereafter UNICEF], *Broken promises, shattered dreams: A profile of child trafficking in the Lao PDR* (Vientiane: GOL and UNICEF, 2005); Sverre Molland, 'Human trafficking and poverty reduction: Two sides of the same coin?', *Juth Pakai (New Thought): Perspectives on Lao Development*, 4 (2005): 27–37; Jonathan Rigg, 'Moving lives: Migration and livelihoods in the Lao PDR', *Population, Space and Place*, 13, 3 (2007): 163–78; and Jonathan Rigg, *Living with transition in Laos: Living with change in Southeast Asia* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2005); and Walker, *The legend of the golden boat*.

12 See also, GOL, 'National growth and poverty eradication strategy (NGPES)' (Vientiane: GOL, 2003), pp. 4–5, http://www.undplao.org/newsroom/publication/Ngpes/Lao%20PDR%20-%20NGPES%20-%20Main%20Document.pdf (last accessed on 16 Mar. 2011); and GOL, 'Forestry strategy to the year 2020 (FS 2020) of the Lao PDR' (Vientiane: Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, GOL, 2005), foreword, http://dof.maf.gov.la/docs/FS2020.pdf (last accessed on 16 Mar. 2011).

13 Hans-Dieter Evers, 'The bureaucratization of Southeast Asia', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 29, 4 (1987): 666–85.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463411000026 Published online by Cambridge University Press

'internal colonisation'[14] or 'territorialisation'[15] on behalf of the state. A third globalisation perspective could also be advanced, especially as the area I consider is the site of the World Bank-supported Nam Theun 2 (NT2) hydropower scheme. Development could then be seen as reshaping local power relations in line with the worldwide growth of capitalist enterprise and the imposition of new subjectivities.[16]

Government officials do embody the extension of the Lao state and global capital into the rural periphery. Yet, attention to the experiences of marginal officials who are a vital part of the state's expansion suggests that the lowlands are not simply extending into and reshaping the uplands. Rather, social boundaries and values are continually reproduced and disrupted with regular movements between the lowlands and uplands. This attention to mobility draws on increasing awareness of implicit 'static' biases in social science research.[17] The need to consider the 'spatialities of social life' is especially apparent in studies of the state, which typically take the centre as definitive.[18] In addition, officials resident in upland areas are crucial in the localised construction of the state as they are the bureaucrats who most frequently interact with other upland residents.[19] Thus, the key aim of this paper is to demonstrate the significance of marginal officials in the uplands of Southeast Asia — for understanding upland–lowland relations and the power of the state. By offering insights into the lives of marginal officials who constitute the bureaucratic frontier, I question notions of the centralised, lowland state as well as the assumed characteristics and capabilities of this state as it extends into the uplands.

It is important to note that the Lao state is often described as 'secretive' and detailed information on its internal dynamics is scarce.[20] Thus, the experiences of officials were only accessible to me through ethnographic fieldwork that included shared living in a small government dormitory and accompanying women officials in their visits to family. State rhetoric dominates most official spaces, so it was only by joining the more informal space of the dormitory that I could learn about alternative perspectives and practices.[21] The following sections describe the experiences of

14 Peter Calvert, 'Internal colonisation, development and environment', *Third World Quarterly*, 22, 1 (2001): 51–63; see also Scott, *The art of not being governed*.

15 Peter Vandergeest and Nancy L. Peluso, 'Territorialization and state power in Thailand', *Theory and Society*, 24, 3 (1995): 385–426. Territorialisation conveys less negative connotations than notions of internal colonisation; Li, 'Engaging simplifications', p. 277.

16 Michael Goldman, *Imperial nature: The World Bank and struggles for social justice in the age of globalization* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); but also see Sarinda Singh, 'World Bank-directed development?: Negotiating participation in the Nam Theun 2 hydropower project in Laos', *Development and Change*, 40, 3 (2009): 487–507.

17 Mimi Sheller and John Urry, 'The new mobilities paradigm', *Environment and Planning A*, 38, 2 (2006): 208.

18 Ibid.

19 See Gupta, 'Blurred boundaries'.

20 For example, United Nations Public Administration Network [hereafter UNPAN], 'Lao People's Democratic Republic public administration country profile' (Vientiane: UNPAN, 2005), http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/un/unpan023237.pdf (last accessed on 16 Mar. 2011); Martin Stuart-Fox, *Politics and reform in the Lao People's Democratic Republic*, Political economy of development working paper no. 1, p. 11 (Williamsburg: The College of William and Mary, 2004).

21 Sarinda Singh, 'Living within the state: A dormitory community in central Laos', in *Tai lands and Thailand: Community and state in Southeast Asia*, ed. Andrew Walker (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), 2009), pp. 141–65. I was based in Laos from March 2003 until July

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463411000026 Published online by Cambridge University Press

some low-ranking forestry officials on the Nakai Plateau in Khammouane province, central Laos. Attention is paid to the recent history of Nakai, marginality in the bureaucracy, marginal officials' mobility and their negotiations with the state and their own families. In the final section, these elements are considered together to advance the idea that there is allure in the uplands. In particular, I argue that internal dynamics within the Lao state encourage an implicit valuation of uplands as sites of potential prosperity for marginalised officials from the lowlands. This assertion is particularly interesting in post-socialist Laos, which is governed by a one-party state that has regarded the nation's extensive upland areas and ethnically diverse populace as challenges to be managed by relocating upland villages closer to the lowlands.[22] At the same time, commonalities with accounts from across Southeast Asia suggest the broader pertinence of these findings.

Developing Nakai

In this section, I briefly describe the recent history of Nakai to highlight the national significance of this particular area as well as the links between lowland-to-upland migration and resource development projects. Around the time of my fieldwork, the Nakai district centre had a population of about 1,500.[23] Unlike villages in Nakai, where various ethnic minorities made up most of the population, about half of the residents in the district centre were ethnic Lao. The district centre conveyed the feeling of a project settlement, with a thin line of wooden houses and tin roofs strung alongside a couple of kilometres of red dirt road.[24] Most residents were migrants from neighbouring areas of Khammouane and Bolikhamxai provinces. Though some residents in the district centre were farmers, most households were reliant on paid work as government officials, service providers and labourers. This social situation was the result of relatively recent changes on the Nakai Plateau.

Pre-1975 royalist presence in Nakai was very limited, as it was throughout formerly remote areas of Laos.[25] Most notable in the accounts of residents in Nakai was the occasional visit by a prince from Luang Phabang, Prince Phetsarath, for hunting wildlife and raising livestock. During the Indochina wars, Nakai was part of the infamous Ho Chi Minh trail and bombing by American forces saw many villagers flee to the lowlands or abandon villages to hide in caves with Vietnamese comrades. A limited amount of in-migration occurred after the 1975 revolution when some Pathet Lao soldiers from the lowlands were granted farming land in villages on the Nakai Plateau. The socialist Lao state established its presence in the form of a 're-education camp' (*samina*) called Nikom Sam ('Settlement Three') near an existing

2005. In the latter 12 months, I travelled regularly between Vientiane and Nakai, spending a total of six months in Nakai. For most of this time I lived in the dormitory for forestry officials in the Nakai district centre, a shorter period was spent living in a nearby village. Subsequent visits to Nakai after the main period of my fieldwork indicated many changes because of NT2, which are not considered here.

22 Baird and Shoemaker, 'Unsettling experiences'; Cohen, 'Resettlement, opium and labour dependence'; Evrard and Goudineau, 'Planned resettlement, unexpected migrations and cultural trauma'.

23 Nam Theun 2 Power Company, 'Nam Theun 2 hydroelectric project, social development plan (SDP): Volume II' (Vientiane: Nam Theun 2 Power Company, 2004).

24 For clarity, I refer to the Nakai district centre in terms of its administrative position, though it has different official and common names.

25 Grant Evans, *A short history of Laos: The land in between* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2002).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463411000026 Published online by Cambridge University Press

village. According to officials and villagers, the district centre was founded in its current location at the edge of the Nakai Plateau in 1992 with the site selected for its easier road access to the lowlands. This was a year after Nakai district was formally split from existing districts. The official demarcation of Nakai as a separate district – and a significant influx of migrants – was due to its importance as a source of timber for a military-run, state-owned enterprise called *Bolisat Phathana Khet Phoudoi* (BPKP, meaning 'Mountainous Areas Development Corporation'), which emerged in the early 1980s and was based in neighbouring Lak Sao, the centre of Khamkeut district, Bolikhamxai province. The uplands – or 'mountainous areas' (*khet phoudoi*) – that were associated with backwardness and a lack of development were to be civilised, modernised and developed through state-driven programmes of resource extraction. By the mid-1990s, BPKP had become the most profitable business in Laos and provided the model for state-sanctioned timber extraction across the country. BPKP was seen to be leading the way in 'developing' the uplands in central Laos, while two other similar enterprises were established following the same model and given responsibility for northern and southern Laos.[26] However, the achievements of BPKP soon gave way to notoriety and considerable political sensitivity as it became an impediment to NT2, largely because of international concerns over uncontrolled logging. By the early 2000s, BPKP was declared bankrupt and became the largest loss-making state-owned enterprise and the epitome of corrupt institutions in Laos.[27]

My fieldwork in Nakai took place during a temporary lull in the development of the area, that is, after the bankruptcy of BPKP and before the formal commencement of NT2. At that time, there was an official moratorium on most activities – logging, construction, new businesses and so on – as part of World Bank pre-conditions for NT2. NT2 was very significant in national development plans, as Bertil Lintner summarises: '[it] is the largest ever foreign investment project in Laos, the world's largest private sector hydropower project, and one of the largest internationally-financed independent power producer projects in Southeast Asia'.[28] While NT2 is not the specific focus here, its public profile and national importance meant that it was a strong influence affecting the concerns of all residents in Nakai, including government officials who were eagerly awaiting new opportunities expected to accompany the project.

Marginal bureaucrats

Marginality in the bureaucracy is a complex personal experience and is also significant in shaping patterns of governance throughout Laos. Elsewhere I use the 'dormitory community' in Nakai as a focus for exploring marginal officials' experiences of the state as well as the importance of rural dormitories in constituting the state.[29] Here, I outline the contemporary and historical context that shapes bureaucratic marginality in Nakai. Some of the trends in remuneration and mobility will be broadly

26 Singh, *Natural potency and political power*. For northern Laos, see, for example, Walker, *The legend of the golden boat*.

27 Martin Stuart-Fox, 'The political culture of corruption in the Lao PDR', *Asian Studies Review*, 30, 1 (2006), 61.

28 Bertil Lintner, 'Laos: At the crossroads', *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 2008 (2008): 179.

29 Singh, 'Living within the state'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463411000026 Published online by Cambridge University Press

shared with other government officials who occupy more senior positions in the bureaucracy. I recognise marginality as a relational and contingent social experience. Yet, the lowest-ranking officials, like those considered here, are distinct in their limited connections, education and family resources, which mark them solely as clients within the bureaucracy and constrain their opportunities for employment outside the state.

My focus is on district forestry officials who I lived with in a small government dormitory in the Nakai district centre, all of whom worked at the district agriculture and forestry office (DAFO). In early 2005, there were just over 25 officials staying at the forestry dormitory. While the composition of the dormitory changes regularly, there was a core of older residents who had been in Nakai for at least five years. These officials were marginal in their location in the rural periphery and their position at the lowest level of the bureaucracy, which goes from the central to provincial and district levels. Most of my time was spent with 'promissory officials' (*saynacan*) and 'volunteers' (*asasamak*), who are lower ranked than 'full officials' (*phanakgnan*) and are not members of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (hereafter, 'the Party'). Also as a woman, I shared a room and spent much of my time with the two or three women officials in the Nakai forestry dormitory — the small number of women reflects their minority status in the Lao forestry sector.[30] Officials who were marginal in the Nakai forestry dormitory comprised about half the district forestry staff. Hence, marginal officials represent a significant proportion of the Lao bureaucracy. Divides within the bureaucracy – in terms of rank, Party membership, gender and age – were readily apparent when sharing life in the dormitory; however, they are often hidden as all are publicly referred to as 'officials' (*phanakgnan*) or 'members' (*samasik*) of the Lao state.

Official remuneration for service to the state is very low — full officials in Nakai received around 300,000 *Kip* per month, then worth about US$30, promissory officials received half of this salary and volunteers received no salary at all. Officials are very much reliant on salary supplements; the most important of the formally recognised supplements being '*per diems*' or 'daily allowances' (*attakin*) that development projects and private companies must pay officials. Hans-Dieter Evers describes this form of 'bureaucratic redistribution' as 'a most ingenious scheme, one that both satisfies the demands of the middle bureaucrats and at the same time exerts effective political control'.[31] *Per diems* are what officials need and desire; the common amount of US$6 per day for district officials provides a month's salary in one week; higher amounts and other benefits accrue if one progresses to higher levels in the bureaucracy. Significantly, high-ranking district officials control salaries, decide the allocation of *per diems* as well as promotion within the bureaucracy and admission to the Party. Within the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF), general activities are budgeted and financed separately for each administrative level, 'mean[ing] there is no subsidy and financial support from MAF or its line departments to Provincial or District forestry sections'.[32] So in Nakai, the possibility of *per diems* associated with

30 Ibid.

31 Evers, 'Bureaucratization of Southeast Asia', p. 682. See also, Koh, 'Negotiating the socialist state in Vietnam'.

32 GOL, 'Forestry strategy to the year 2020', p. 67.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463411000026 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a census of all villages in the district prompted excited discussion amongst marginal officials in the dormitory at night, while the absence of *per diems* prompted complaints of not having any money and being forgotten by their superiors. Likewise, my visits were appreciated since I made relatively large contributions to the money collected daily in the dormitory for buying meat and vegetables. As one young official said, 'we do not have much money when we go to the market, so it is good if you come!'.

This system of underpaid officials resonates with accounts from the pre-socialist period. Joel Halpern noted 'the lack of an effective traditional civil service since the Lao officials were expected to live off the areas they administered'.[33] He saw continuity from the French colonial period when most officials did not receive salaries and instead relied on a 10 per cent portion of any tax they collected.[34] Furthermore, he noted that '[t]his traditional lack of clear differentiation between personal and state resources may offer a possible explanation for the widespread "corruption" of Lao officials in the administration of American aid programs'.[35] The establishment of socialism in the 1975 revolution did little to change this system, aside from dramatically reducing the financial and human resources available for bureaucratic work. The administration was weakened by the exodus of many educated people and the pursuit of socialist-inspired policies: '[p]olitical cadres took charge of the few technically competent bureaucrats who remained behind, and politics was placed in command'.[36] The subsequent re-engagement with non-socialist development aid and global markets has relied on a system of bureaucratic remuneration that is quite similar to that of the royalist period. So, the major difference between different political regimes is that the pre- and post-socialist eras are associated with a stronger national economy and increased wealth disparities within Lao society. While historical differences between urban elites and rural villagers were comparatively minimal,[37] the current expansion of aid and market liberalisation has increased per capita incomes while also expanding the scope of bureaucratic patronage.[38] Thus, the '[d]evelopment of an honest and ethical civil service' is a priority for the Lao bureaucracy that is yet to be achieved.[39]

Despite such implicit acknowledgement of administrative weaknesses, public policy representations of the Lao state assert a united commitment to national development. District forestry officials are specifically positioned at the nexus of state authority, development schemes and the rural poor.[40] As in the past, government officials take pride in identifying themselves as part of the Lao state. Writing of the former royal government, Halpern noted the social value of a government position as a signifier of rank and also as a common aspiration that many Lao parents had for their

33 Joel M. Halpern, *Government, politics, and social structure in Laos: A study of tradition and innovation*, Monograph Series No. 4 (New Haven: Southeast Asia Studies, Yale University, 1964), p. 82.
34 Ibid., p. 69.
35 Ibid., p. 111.
36 Evans, *A short history of Laos*, p. 179.
37 Halpern, 'Government, politics, and social structure in Laos', p. 41.
38 Ronald B. St John, 'The political economy of Laos: Poor state or poor policy?', *Asian Affairs*, 37, 2 (2006): 175–90; Stuart-Fox, 'Politics and reform'; Stuart-Fox, 'The political culture of corruption'.
39 GOL, 'National growth and poverty eradication strategy', p. 47.
40 This is due to the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry's responsibility for rural development and the district's role as the point of policy implementation; ibid., pp. 34–5, 48.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463411000026 Published online by Cambridge University Press

children.[41] Similarly, one forestry official in Nakai, Nang, told me how her parents are praised in their village for raising nine children who 'have merit' (*mi boun*) and are nearly all officials. Nang said that her parents made sure that their children studied because they did not own much farmland and 'they did not want their children to be very poor'. Nang and other officials also promoted state rhetoric and a positive view of the Lao state as the leader of the nation. For instance, Nang compared Laos favourably with Thailand when watching Thai television one evening. Watching Thai soap operas was a shared nightly activity in the dormitory and reflects the similarities in language as well as a widespread preference in Laos for the more sophisticated programmes from Thailand. Despite this regular and much enjoyed consumption of Thai materiality, Nang told me that Laos is 'socialist' (*sangkhom ninyom*), whereas Thailand is 'capitalist' (*thun ninyom*). Another young official, Sombat, then explained that this difference in governance makes Thailand dangerous since it is easy to buy guns there: 'you can buy anything there, so then they fight all the time, like in southern Thailand. Laos is not like that, it is not the same as other countries.' Sombat then explained that in Laos the only people who have guns are soldiers, police and 'senior authorities' (*chao nyai*), such as district or provincial governors, so the country is peaceful.

Yet, at other times, the same officials may privately criticise the state and identify themselves as the forgotten but deserving poor rather than the already privileged — they are part of the state, make sacrifices by living in upland areas and away from home and receive little compensation when *per diems* are scarce.[42] So when visiting a friend's house near the dormitory, Nang and the wife of an agricultural official used the absence of other listeners to discuss local scandals and personal grievances. They were disparaging of the new head of the forestry section in the DAFO, making knowing asides that he was a former BPKP employee and only gave paid work to his friends, then talked of the district governor who just helps his relatives from his home district in the lowlands of Khammouane, and an angry wife who reported her husband's infidelity to the police who promptly demanded a US$200 fine. Nang protested about being unpaid for two months; she said: 'there are 250 officials in Savannakhet [her home province] and they have no problems. There are not that many officials in Khammouane but we do not get paid!' In an unusually direct complaint, she then said of the widely-disliked boss of the forestry section, 'the boss is crazy! Why is he the boss?!' It was notable that neither mentioned the head of the DAFO, who was well-respected and closer to the ideal of a benevolent patron, but still just as implicated in their complaints. Thus, the Lao state's internal dynamics perpetuate a system of patronage and inequity, which ensures that the bureaucracy is marked by ambivalent loyalties.

Mobile bureaucrats

As indicated above, marginality and mobility are usually seen in the literature on Laos as intersecting through the government's resettlement programmes, trafficking and labour migration to urban centres and to Thailand. Little attention is directed

41 Halpern, 'Government, politics, and social structure in Laos', pp. 36, 71.

42 Elsewhere, I consider poverty alleviation and social equality as 'myths of governance' that dominate official rhetoric, but are contradicted by daily life in the forestry dormitory; Singh, 'Living within the state', pp. 149–58.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463411000026 Published online by Cambridge University Press

towards government officials beyond noting their role in attempts to regulate, control or stop certain forms of movement of other Lao citizens. In addition, little if any attention is given to people moving from the lowlands to the uplands. Such a focus is understandable given the predominant patterns in current population movements. Still, in the interests of understanding the state and upland–lowland relations, there is a need to take a broader view of mobility. Hence, this account shifts the focus away from officials as attempting to direct or restrict the mobility of others to the idea that officials themselves may be mobile subjects.

While donor-sponsored reports on the Lao bureaucracy make no mention of bureaucratic migrants, anecdotal comments from officials and others working in Laos indicate that mobility is a common requirement for officials across the country. Officials in Nakai and Vientiane told me that new recruits or those who received government scholarships are required to serve a probationary period in more remote areas, which was a service emphasised during the socialist era.[43] The mobility of officials is especially relevant for upland–lowland relations in modern-day Laos since many officials have been required to move from the lowlands to the uplands. Thus from the Nakai Plateau, officials' lives are linked to the lowlands of Khammouane and neighbouring provinces, and, to a lesser extent, the capital city of Vientiane.

In Laos, mobility is a state concern. Sverre Molland notes the tendency in official discourses to a 'movement bias' that sees 'migration as "bad"', especially in the context of anti-trafficking projects.[44] There are various conditions that restrict movement between locales, such as requirements for 'household registration' (*samanokhua*) and the need for permission from village headmen and police to formally change residence. While migration is at times facilitated, as in attempts to provide cheap labour for garment factories, it can also be actively discouraged, as rural villagers may experience if they travel to urban centres to beg. Sites that are of national significance have particularly tight controls, and this was the case with Nakai during my fieldwork because of NT2. While there was intense interest in Nakai, in-migration was strictly limited in the lead-up to the World Bank's appraisal in March 2005. This control was for various reasons, including compliance with the Bank's conditions, ensuring that compensation packages did not encourage in-migration, and also political sensitivity. Thus, when a senior district forestry official took me to the district police to formally register my residence in Nakai he was severely reprimanded for not doing so during my previous shorter, informal visits. When the then World Bank president, James Wolfhensohn, visited Nakai in February 2005 as part of the Bank's appraisal of NT2, the district police conducted checks of household registration before his arrival. Similarly, when a Party meeting was held in Nakai in April 2005 with Party members attending from across the province, curfews and other rules were enforced. During these times, people who were not officially registered as residents – some even after a year or more living in Nakai – had to 'go home'.

Government officials were exempt from such controls since they were in Nakai in order to work for the state. Indeed, the number of district officials gradually increased

43 Rigg, 'Moving lives', p. 165. A couple of officials also noted that those with money and connections are able to avoid such requirements.

44 Molland, 'Human trafficking and poverty reduction', pp. 29, 36, 33.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463411000026 Published online by Cambridge University Press

over time as new members of staff were allocated to Nakai in anticipation of NT2 proceeding. So, the Lao state may facilitate the mobility of its representatives relative to other citizens, though this does not take the form of an official migration programme. Simply, as one official in Nakai said, 'you have to work where the government sends you'.

Of course, patterns of mobility will vary even amongst government officials. Since travel is constrained by money and time, officials of different status use different types of mobility. For instance, the most senior official in the forestry dormitory had a new Toyota Tiger 4WD four-wheel drive vehicle, while his immediate subordinates had motorbikes and the lowest-ranked officials had no vehicles and relied on public transport. Senior officials travelled regularly and widely for work and to their homes on weekends and holidays. In contrast, low-ranking officials travelled less frequently and to fewer locations because of their limited resources. For instance, a return fare on a passenger vehicle (*songthaeo*) to the provincial capital of Thakek cost about US$4.40, which was a large amount for marginal officials. Similarly, senior residents who lived in the dormitory rarely socialised there in the evenings, whereas the dormitory was central in the lives of their subordinates who rarely had the means to socialise anywhere else.

While noting these distinctions, it is possible to discern two main forms of movement that were common to all officials as well as being shared with other migrants in the district centre: the first is the initial move to the uplands while the second is regular, short visits to lowland homes. In Nakai, all forestry officials were domestic migrants and ethnic Lao from urban centres or paddy farming villages in the lowlands. Officials in Nakai had moved from more developed lowland areas to the uplands because of their employment, returning to their homes to visit family on weekends or holidays. Officials live and work together, most residing in the shared dormitory. The majority of forestry officials were married men, but their families continue to reside in the lowlands and they very rarely, if ever, came to Nakai. Thus, even for officials who had worked in Nakai for many years, Nakai did not become their home. A key reason for this attachment to homes in the lowlands is that officials see themselves as superior to the place where they live and work — Nakai is the backward countryside, with abundant natural resources, but lacking development and mainly populated by ethnic-minority, swidden–farming villagers. For instance, when sitting at the DAFO, an agricultural official remarked while watching a group of villagers walking uncertainly down the road and through the office grounds: 'they are not the same as us' (*bo khu hao*). The lack of recruitment of upland villagers into the bureaucracy – partly due to requirements for training in lowland colleges – further reinforces this social divide.[45] This is quite unlike other labour migrants who move from rural to urban areas in a quest for both economic improvement and modern identities.[46]

For officials, Nakai is a site of potential prosperity — a place where they could receive a government position and benefits from work with NT2. But it is also a

45 About 88 per cent of all government officials in Laos are ethnic Lao or related Tai ethnic minorities, though they only make up about 66 per cent of the total population; UNPAN, 'Lao People's Democratic Republic public administration country profile', p. 5.

46 Mary B. Mills, 'Migrant labor takes a holiday: Reworking modernity and marginality in contemporary Thailand', *Critique of Anthropology*, 19, 1 (1999): 31–51.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463411000026 Published online by Cambridge University Press

move backwards in cultural sophistication; in the words of a few officials, Nakai is 'not fun' or 'unpleasant' (*bo muan*), 'there is nowhere to visit for fun' (*bo mi pon pai lin*) and 'it is not prosperous' (*bo chaleun*). Out of all the men residing in the forestry dormitory, only one young official, Khamphan, later married locally and built his family home in the Nakai district centre. When I asked Khamphan about his choice he explained that he did not want to return to his parents' home near Paksan, the provincial capital of Bolikhamxai, because he likes to work in the forest. When I expressed surprise at his comments given the more commonly expressed desire to avoid forests, Khamphan laughingly agreed that his colleagues would probably prefer working in air-conditioned offices.[47] As the wife of the head of the DAFO said, 'people like to look for money here but they build their houses in other places'. Correspondingly, she and her husband lived in a small wooden hut at the front of the Nakai DAFO, but had a large brick home in Thakek — the lowland provincial capital of Khammouane.

Officials' strong affinity with places outside Nakai is expressed through the second form of mobility, short visits to lowland homes. Officials regularly return home for weekends and for longer visits on special occasions (for example, Lao New Year, weddings, funerals). These trips are facilitated by the practice of placing new officials relatively near their homes; officials in Nakai explained this in terms of the northern, central and southern regions of Laos, with placements usually being in the same region as one's home. Thus, most officials in Nakai were from lowland districts of Khammouane, especially Thakek, Nongbok, Gnommolat and Mahaxai, and neighbouring provinces of Bolikhamxai and Savannakhet (about 1–6 hours' drive away). The state requires individuals relocate to the uplands to receive employment, but officials actively maintain a sense of identity and belonging to their lowland homes. This could lead to the conclusion that the upland–lowland contrast is mirrored in the public and personal lives of district officials who move between these areas. The uplands become incorporated into the Lao state through the mobile practices of state representatives who maintain a separation between their workplace and their family homes. Such a demarcation of politicised social space could be suggested by Peter Jackson's account of 'Thai forms of power', which posits a divide between 'exterior' (public) and 'interior' (private) forms.[48] Upland–lowland distinctions could then be extended and reinforced via public–private distinctions. But can we distinguish the state and family as completely separate spheres, the former pertaining to economics and politics and the latter to authentic interpersonal relations? I argue that these social domains are more appropriately viewed as extremes along a continuum rather than absolutes, and thus highlight the intertwining rather than separation of state and family.

Between the state and family

As noted earlier, all Lao officials are highly reliant on *per diems* and other salary supplements. Nakai had the appealing prospect of plentiful *per diems* once NT2 commenced, but there were also years waiting through long periods of intermittent work,

47 See also, Singh, *Natural potency and political power*.
48 Peter A. Jackson, 'The Thai regime of images', *Sojourn*, 19, 2 (2004): 181.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463411000026 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and when sporadic work does come senior officials are always prioritised. For instance, there were private complaints in the forestry dormitory about provincial forestry officials coming to Nakai to do work on one occasion because the *per diem*, at US$15 per day, was too high to give to lower-ranking district officials. Significantly, when *per diems* are scarce, marginal officials become highly dependent on financial support from their families. They have to live in the uplands, but they often receive no *per diems* and even their pittance of a salary can be delayed for months at a time. The only sureties that the state offers are rice, accommodation and electricity — and in case of the Nakai forestry dormitory, this was actually built by an ineffective World Bank-funded project.[49]

Shared living in the dormitory reveals the severe resource constraints of the state and its unacknowledged financial reliance on Lao society. Families indirectly support the state by paying for marginal officials to join and continue to be a part of the bureaucracy. This is based on an expectation that the investment will be reciprocated at some time in the future. The interdependency of state and family creates significant challenges for marginal officials when salaries are delayed and *per diems* are scarce. To appreciate this, I describe the case of a marginal official mentioned earlier, Nang — an unmarried, 37-year-old woman who had been a forestry official in Nakai for seven years. Nang's experiences highlight the desires for prosperity, independence and status, and how her opportunities to fulfil these desires are shaped by her relations with her family and with other officials in Nakai with whom she spends most of her time. A key point to note is how Nang used mobility to negotiate with the state and with her family.

Nang was proud to call herself a 'forestry official' (*phanakngan pa mai*), but was also very frustrated by her lack of advancement compared with her peers and even new recruits. After we had known each other for some time, she explained that this was due to her lack of wealth and 'big connections' (*sen nyai*). When *per diems* were scarce, then Nang and other marginal officials would spend most of their time at the dormitory. There they would complain of having no money, being bored waiting for work and frustrated by their superiors' unfulfilled promises. When this frustration became too much, then officials could express this indirectly by leaving Nakai to visit their family. When there is no externally funded work, officials are still meant to show their commitment to their superiors and to the state by dutifully going to the office each weekday morning, even when there is nothing for them to do. Thus, the four main rules of the forestry dormitory, discussed in a meeting one evening with all residents, included a reminder that officials must tell the head of the dormitory if they will be away.

On one occasion, I came to the Nakai district centre from a nearby village and found that Nang was absent for the National Tree Planting Day celebrations. This was a relatively important event for district forestry and agricultural officials, as they were the audience who would listen to the exhortations of the district governor and notables from the DAFO in return for later entertainment, including a feast of a cow and a few crates of beer. An official at the public meeting told me how Nang had

49 See Anonymous, 'Lessons learned from the district upland development and conservation project, Lao PDR' (Vientiane: World Bank, 2003).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463411000026 Published online by Cambridge University Press

gone to her home in Savannakhet to visit her sick brother. Later in the relative privacy of the dormitory, another official told me how Nang had actually gone to Thakek; the sick brother was just to mention if people asked. Officials leaving Nakai under false pretences or without telling their superiors is one of the few indirect, but strong, comments that marginal officials can make against the Lao state.[50]

For some officials, going home can be a distinct relief. One young woman official, Daeng, travelled regularly between Nakai and her family home in Thakek. Her mother and younger sister lived in a small, old wooden house that proclaimed their poverty compared with their neighbours — Daeng explained that this was due to the death of her well-educated father at a young age. However, Daeng had wealthy and well-connected relatives and her outgoing personality enabled her to make the most of her contacts, which included a high-ranking uncle who worked for the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry in Vientiane. When I stayed with Daeng in Thakek, there were always lots of visiting friends, discos, beer and fun. After five months in Nakai as a recent graduate from a forestry training college, Daeng was transferred back to Thakek to take up a highly envied and lucrative position in the provincial forestry office that collects tax for timber exports. She told me her transfer to Thakek was the correction of an earlier mistake; others in Nakai mentioned her uncle and said 'she is the niece of an elite [*phu nyai*], she can choose where to go'.

But for Nang, and other marginal officials, going home is not so easy. During the week-long holidays for Lao New Year, I travelled with Nang to the place she always referred to as 'my home' (*ban khoi*) — a paddy-farming village in Savannakhet. Before we left Nakai, she explained that it is important to go home for Lao New Year: 'my mother and father are very happy when their children return home to tie their wrists [in a *baci* ceremony]'. However, as the trip progressed, various tensions emerged. Nang confided that she was actually only a promissory official. This admission was made privately, as the success of some of her siblings and expectations of her parents brought their own challenges. Even her sister-in-law thought she was a full official, a misperception that Nang heard but deliberately did not correct. Not all were deceived though. One villager poked fun of Nang being a 'forestry boss' (*hua na pa mai*) and she was continuously asked about her unmarried status and age, the latter of which she lied about when close relatives were out of hearing.

While Nang had often pointed out the deficiencies of Nakai compared with her home in Savannakhet, she was noticeably relieved when we left her parents' village after just two nights. Much more regular and enjoyable than Nang's annual visit to see her parents were trips to her younger sister's home in Thakek. Nang was particularly close to her sister Saeng, as they are only one year apart in terms of age and their high school years were spent away from their family in a school dormitory in Thakek. Their shared childhood diverged as Nang completed her college training while the fairer Saeng gave hers up when she married a policeman who, over time, provided a brick house, gold jewellery, mobile phones and a gold 4WD vehicle. Saeng's home offered a place of refuge when Nang's frustrations in Nakai became too much. Likewise, it was Saeng, not their parents, who provided financial support

50 James C. Scott, *Weapons of the weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463411000026 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that enabled Nang to be a district official — Nang, in turn, helped her sister with babysitting and household chores when in Thakek. Nang later let slip that she had not gone to visit her parents for Lao New Year the previous year because Saeng did not go and Nang did not want to travel without the comfort that her wealthier sibling could provide. She added, 'there is nothing to do at my parents' home, I do not leave the house at all. I just do the cooking.'

In a context of such difficult family relations, officials can become materially and socially dependent on the connections they form through the state. For instance, Nang borrowed the equivalent of about US$20 from a senior colleague in Nakai to fulfil her familial obligations of publicly giving money to her parents at Lao New Year. Nang later said she had no money at all and would not have even had enough for the bus fare back to Nakai if Saeng had not given her some. Likewise, in stark contrast to Nang's relief at leaving Savannakhet, when we returned to Nakai, there was a happy exuberance, an excited swapping of stories with other officials and enjoyment of being back in Nakai. On the day we returned to Nakai, Nang and a friend – the wife of a former forestry official – talked about their visits home and their increasing emotional distance from their mothers. Nang said, 'I used to talk to my mother all the time, but now it is different'.

Similarly, Nang appreciated Saeng's assistance in providing her with money, a second home and other gifts; after Lao New Year, Nang proudly displayed Saeng's old wristwatch that she had been given when Saeng received a new watch from her husband. At the same time, Nang resented her dependence and sense of inferiority. Nang saw the blatant differences between their lives as unfair and said it should be rectified either through her advancement in the state or sometimes even through the decline in her sister's fortunes. Significantly, these frustrations, like those with her parents and other siblings, could only find easy expression in Nakai. One afternoon soon after our Lao New Year trip, we prepared and ate a snack of spicy papaya salad with a number of women connected to the Nakai DAFO. Nang complained bitterly about her sister having everything while 'I have nothing, no house, no car, no family, no money'. It was in Nakai that Nang could express her frustration at being the only unmarried child in her family despite also being the eldest: 'it is only me who is already old!'.

While Nang, as an unmarried, poor and unconnected 'older' woman, was in many respects the most marginalised forestry official in Nakai, related concerns were expressed by others. For instance, when having lunch at the dormitory and talking about the Lao New Year holidays, one young man, Chan, was markedly unenthusiastic. His superior queried him about this chance to spend time with his wife in neighbouring Mahaxai district and Chan replied: 'it was not much fun, we do not have much money'. Likewise, the lowest-ranking young men helped women officials cook meals at the dormitory because they had little money to contribute. They were also excluded from boisterous groups of men who went out at night to drink beer, eat grilled dog and flirt with young women. In stark contrast, senior officials contributed their money rather than their time to the preparation of shared meals at the dormitory and also made significant public contributions to buying alcohol and meat at various celebrations in Nakai. Men who lack money to socialise with their families, friends, colleagues and girlfriends and cannot 'care for' or 'look after' (*liang*) any

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463411000026 Published online by Cambridge University Press

dependents are implicitly seen as lacking masculine potency.[51] These men, in a related manner to female marginal officials, can be caught in a bind between their expectations of and obligations to the state and their own family.

Importantly, marginality is not a static, permanent or inherent social characteristic. Thus, Nang and Daeng founded a friendship in Nakai based on their shared experiences as women officials from relatively poorer families as well as having family ties to Thakek. However, Daeng's connections offered her opportunities to move beyond her initial marginality that were not available to Nang. Unlike Daeng, who soon moved back to Thakek permanently, Nang continued to move regularly between Nakai and Thakek, expressing her dependence on the state and her sister. While Nang often idealised her parents' home in Savannakhet and her position as a government official in Nakai, moving between Nakai, Thakek and Savannakhet suggests a more complicated picture of hope and thwarted desires. In doing so, Nang also shows how Nakai is regarded as the backward uplands, but it can also be a social space that contributes in a positively valued way to marginal officials' lives — first, as a space away from family and second, by enabling their engagement with the state.

The allure of the uplands

In this final section, I consider lowland visions of the uplands in light of the experiences of marginal officials such as Nang. In common with trends across Southeast Asia, officials in Nakai generally regard the lowlands as sites of cultural sophistication, while the uplands are the opposite. What is less explicitly recognised is that moving to the uplands offers marginal officials improved chances of acquiring prosperity and independence. Importantly, this potential of the uplands is differentiated, but not determined, by family connections. The most marginal officials lack the connections to gain more desirable government positions in the lowlands, but their prospects are markedly improved if they make the sacrifice of moving to the uplands. This mirrors the tendency for marginal officials to have more possibilities where the state is relatively weak. The state is especially reliant on marginal officials for undesirable upland postings or when externally funded work is scarce. In such contexts, marginal officials realise their ambitions of being a part of the bureaucracy, rising above rural villagers and gaining some respect and independence from their families. In turn, since marginal officials comprise a large proportion of the bureaucracy in poorer districts, the state relies on them to embody it and assert its strengths. Thus, the uplands are backward, but offer the potential of prosperity, through engagement with the state, for people with few alternatives.

The potential of prosperity is an idea that deserves some attention. In a study of Buddhist notions of power, Craig Reynolds suggests that the related terms 'potentiality' or 'potency' provide useful alternatives to 'power' as they highlight the capacity to effectively exert influence without the latter's connotations of absolute dominance and inevitability.[52] He also argues against the dichotomisation of power. For instance, scholars of Southeast Asia have often used the term 'potency' to refer to sacred,

51 See Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella, 'Migration, money and masculinity in Kerala', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.)*, 6, 1 (2000): 117–33.

52 Craig J. Reynolds, 'Power', in *Critical terms for the study of Buddhism*, ed. Donald S. Lopez Jr. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 216–17.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463411000026 Published online by Cambridge University Press

natural or pre-modern sources of energy or power, which is contrasted with the political or coercive 'power' of modern authorities such as the state. In another work that cautions against assumptions of immutable dichotomies, Tooker highlights the similarities in the 'symbolics of power' across upland and lowland areas of Thailand.[53] She discusses the importance of ideas about potency and shows how they can be fundamentally understood in terms of fertility, such as the fertility of people, crops and livestock. I suggest that another related aspect of potency or potential, which similarly spans the upland–lowland divide, is prosperity. Prosperity is an idea that others have hinted at in discussing upland–lowland relations; however, this has not seen explicit discussion and not in relation to the state.[54]

In Laos, popular discourses of 'prosperity' and 'civilisation' (*chaleun*, *siwilai*) are commonly encountered and express widespread desires for personal and social improvement. Thongchai Winichakul discusses these terms in nineteenth- to twentieth-century Siam and their links to nationalist thought. He concludes that, '*[s]iwilai* and the new notion of *charoen* clearly indicated the sense of transformation into the new age or modernity, as opposed to the traditional, the ancient, or the bygone era'.[55] Today in Laos, ideas about prosperity are linked to official discourses about national development and the authority of the Lao state. The state's gradual retreat from socialist policies since the mid-1980s prompted a need to redefine the basis of its legitimacy. Development has now gained primacy as the ideological aspiration that supports the unity of the nation and the authority of the post-socialist state.[56] This brings together state discourses about nationwide 'development' (*phatthana*), in the form of poverty alleviation and rural development, and popular discourses about 'prosperity' (*chaleun*), in the form of personal wealth, status and social improvement. In common with other modern states, the Lao state gains legitimacy through the benefits it provides to its dependents.[57] Crucial here is the way in which state discourses shape people's expectations about the future. This focus on the future is highlighted by notions of potential, which can also be thought of as the capacity, as yet unrealised, to bring about socially desirable change. In Laos, as in many other countries, desirable change is movement towards the receipt of personal prosperity. Prosperity is an aspiration that promotes state potential through encouraging a sense of common endeavour and mutual benefit. By having the potential to bring prosperity, the Lao state gains social recognition and legitimacy as a rightful authority.

53 Tooker, 'Putting the *mandala* in its place', pp. 342–3. See also Andrew Walker, 'Matrilineal spirits, descent and territorial power in northern Thailand', in *Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 17, 2 (2006): 198.

54 For instance, Tooker occasionally uses 'prosperity' interchangeably with 'fertility', but she does not specifically discuss the former and she still distinguishes between natural or sacred potency that provides fertility and political power of the state; Tooker, 'Putting the *mandala* in its place', pp. 332, 327–8. See also, Keyes, *The golden peninsula*, pp. 41–2, 66.

55 Thongchai Winichakul, 'The quest for "*siwilai*": A geographical discourse of civilizational thinking in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Siam', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 59, 3 (2000): 531.

56 See, for example, Pholsena, *Post-war Laos*; and Stuart-Fox, 'Politics and reform'.

57 *Political legitimacy in Southeast Asia: The quest for moral authority*, ed. Muthiah Alagappa (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463411000026 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Importantly, the delivery of prosperity in Laos is seen as reliant on the transformation of natural resources into national wealth through development projects.[58] Thus, prosperity is lacking from upland areas such as Nakai, but abundant and 'under-utilised' natural resources mean that the uplands often have the potential for prosperity. Recent experiences with logging, hydropower, mining and other resource development projects are serving to reconfigure the social and political values ascribed by the state to the uplands. Thus, BPKP and NT2 highlighted the national significance of Nakai's natural resources as well as the value of upland resources in enabling a state-sponsored transformation of the nation. While the uplands, rural peripheries and wild forests were formerly regarded as spaces outside the domain of the pre-modern polities, these areas are gaining new meanings as 'resource frontiers' in modern-day Laos.[59] For instance during my fieldwork, Nakai was still seen as a backward upland area, but NT2 ensured that it was also strongly associated with people's desires for prosperity and state rhetoric about development of the nation. Likewise, Lao leaders now proclaim a national commitment to protecting upland watersheds for hydropower development. At a national forestry meeting, the then prime minister, Bouasone Bouphavanh, emphasised the importance of watershed protection for development: '[i]f we don't do it, in the future we will have only concrete dams with no water …. If we don't protect our forests, our objective of becoming Asia's battery might not come true.'[60] Similarly, the interior of the DAFO building in Nakai featured a large painted mural of a river running between mountains, with green forests enveloping the hill slopes. The painter, a senior agricultural official, had painted another bucolic scene of natural abundance on a wall inside his own home. Implicit was a suggestion that it is the work of their office and the state to tap into this natural potential of Nakai – through projects such as NT2 – and thus bring development to the nation.

Marginal officials in Nakai, as migrants from the lowlands, use and reproduce typical upland–lowland distinctions to depict themselves and their relations with others. But at the same time, they recognise the possibilities of the uplands through their work with the Lao state. In becoming a part of the bureaucracy, despite the sacrifices it entails, marginal officials are expressing a belief in the transformative potential of the state. Yet, the political economy of the bureaucracy also affects marginal officials' perceptions of and relations with the state. As mentioned earlier, it is district elites rather than central authorities that provide remuneration to marginal officials and determine their progression in the bureaucracy, so marginal officials often grant them pre-eminence over distant and unrewarding central authorities. This was made evident when the director general of the Department of Forestry came from Vientiane to Nakai. He met with senior officials at meetings during the day and then visited the forestry dormitory briefly in the early evening. Low-ranking forestry officials were very excited, deferent and pleased by his informal and friendly

58 GOL, 'National growth and poverty eradication strategy'; GOL, 'Forestry strategy to the year 2020'; Singh, *Natural potency and political power*.
59 For example, Keith Barney, 'Laos and the making of a "relational" resource frontier', *Geographical Journal*, 175, 2 (2009): 146–59; and Hjorleifur Jonsson, 'Forest products and peoples: Upland groups, Thai polities, and regional space', *Sojourn*, 13, 1 (1998): 1–37.
60 'PM rallies defence of protected forests', *Vientiane Times*, 2 Mar. 2007.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463411000026 Published online by Cambridge University Press

conversation while sitting on the front steps of the dormitory. I did not know who he was until later, but the courtesy and pleasure of the dormitory residents clearly showed that he was no ordinary visitor. But they also provided no information when he asked about logging of rosewood (*mai kha nyung*; scientific name *Dalbergia cochinensis*), which was a highly lucrative, illegal and hence a very sensitive activity.[61] Likewise, when subordinates request minor favours, such as asking for small amounts of wood to take to their families, this is framed as 'requesting the government' (*kho lat*); the 'government' (*lat* or *lataban*) becomes a euphemism for the local elites.[62]

This illustrates that marginal officials have multiple loyalties. The importance of localised patronage networks challenges ideas about the centralised, lowland state as a unified bureaucratic entity. It also highlights the strong, though implicit, expectations of marginal officials that life in the uplands will provide them with personal benefits. Significantly, however, these hopes are not solely based on local patrons; they are also encouraged through state plans and discourses about development that posit natural resources as a source of national prosperity. This entails a partial revaluation of upland spaces and ties this to the state's promises to transform the nation. For those with few opportunities in the lowlands, the uplands can render more accessible the state and its enticing appeal of potential prosperity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I consider how marginalised bureaucratic migrants may help extend our understanding of upland–lowland distinctions and state authority in Southeast Asia. In focusing on Nakai, this article by no means suggests the absence or insignificance of variability within and beyond Laos. At the same time, the trends outlined here are pertinent more generally given the lack of attention to bureaucratic migrants in the uplands across the region. Expansion of the bureaucracy is usually seen as a commitment to national development, extension of the lowland state, encroachment and subjugation of the uplands, or part of the development-sponsored spread of capitalist enterprise. Yet none of these interpretations fully accounts for the experiences of marginalised officials who ostensibly represent the vanguard of these changes in Laos.

This illustrates the need to move beyond the view of an expansive state or global capitalist system that inexorably encompasses the uplands. These are very important perspectives, and indeed resonate with prominent official discourses, but on their own they reinforce an externalisation of the state. This in turn has two significant consequences. First, it limits the conceptualisation of state power and makes it too easy to see only as a coherent and somewhat coercive force. Overlooked then, is the allure of the state and the times when it is more like a diffuse promise. I suggest that promises for prosperity – which encompasses aspirations for wealth and social improvement – are a significant means by which the Lao state justifies its political authority. This is shown in this paper for marginal bureaucrats who are crucial in the ongoing

61 Ibid.

62 This is usually a sack of pinewood since it is relatively common in Nakai; small pieces of the resinous wood are used for starting cooking fires. Less common were small pieces of more valued wood such as *mai dam* (scientific name *Aquilaria* spp.).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463411000026 Published online by Cambridge University Press

production of the state. Furthermore, I argue that there is some underlying commonality in ideas of political power and natural potency, in their suggestion of a possibility of future benefits.[63] My emphasis on the potential of prosperity highlights implicit perceptions of the state as well as of the uplands. For government officials, the Lao state is seen as having the capacity to harness the latent, untapped potential of the uplands and provide them with prosperity.

Second, the literature on the uplands brings valuable and necessary attention to the experiences of villagers. Yet, an upland-centred view should not exclude the possibilities of personalising the state. In addressing these concerns, there is an especial need to attend to the experiences of marginal officials who are largely overlooked in studies of the state. Marginal officials in Laos are particularly important as they comprise a significant proportion of the bureaucracy and are the vanguard of the expanding state. Also unacknowledged is the importance of mobility in the functioning of the Lao state and the personal lives of its representatives. This is not to 'privileg[e] a "mobile subjectivity", but rather … [to track] the power of discourses and practices of mobility'.[64] Most significantly, obligations and expectations arise from relations with the state and with family, and mobility can be used to negotiate with both. The state provides status and a possibility of prosperity, while family provides support with expectations of reciprocity. Nang's case shows how mobility is used to sustain and negotiate relationships with both the state and with family, and also how marginality in the state can be reflected in marginality in the family.

The intertwining of state and family is frequently noted in studies of authority in Laos and Southeast Asia more generally. Still, politicians and elite bureaucrats are typically the focus of attention. The experiences of marginal officials suggest equally close connections between state and family concerns, though for different reasons to elites. Marginal officials' aspirations and their sense of belonging and identity are shaped by ongoing processes of social negotiation that cut across dichotomies of family and the state. This undermines the state–society divide, which is implied when officials are taken solely as agents of the state. Lao government officials represent localised and personalised connections more than a unified bureaucracy or national ideology. The political economy of the Lao state also indicates that it is not an altruistic suite of institutions acting for the national good; rather, it is a vehicle for self-improvement that many non-elites aspire to. In the context of deep social divides and prioritisation of personal ambitions, the upland–lowland contrast can be seen as creating a sense of unity amongst marginal and senior officials, despite the blatant inequities that separate them. Marginal officials extend a system that in fact marginalises them. But, this is not unequivocal ideological domination. Through their experiences of working for the state, marginal officials discover the limits to its strength and promises. Thus, there is continual interaction between expectations of prosperity and frustration when these expectations are not met.

When salaries were delayed and *per diems* scarce in Nakai, marginal officials' perceptions of the state were characterised by discontent and private complaints. At the same time, marginal officials continued to work for the state and assert their belief in

63 Singh, *Natural potency and political power*.
64 Sheller and Urry, 'The new mobilities paradigm', p. 211.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463411000026 Published online by Cambridge University Press

its authority.[65] These tensions in the experiences of marginal officials sit uncomfortably with their nominal role as loyal representatives of the state and deliverers of development to the backward uplands. This is not to suggest that marginal officials overtly question typical upland–lowland distinctions. Rather, through their lives and discursive practices, these officials both reinforce and challenge these divides. Quite simply, for marginal officials in Laos, the desirable lowlands have negative connotations of exclusion, while the undesirable uplands offer possibilities for bureaucratic and personal progression. In other words, the desirable lowlands represent sites of inaccessible prosperity while the undesirable uplands represent a more accessible prosperity. Most significantly, while the hope of lowland prosperity is the motivation for migration, in becoming a part of the upland bureaucracy marginal officials express a belief in the alluring potential of the uplands and of the state to bring them prosperity. This finding suggests that attending to the mobile margins of the bureaucracy may offer a broader view of modern states and upland–lowland distinctions in Southeast Asia.

65 See also Singh, 'Living within the state'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463411000026 Published online by Cambridge University Press