



# *The Chinese of Vientiane*

A dispatch from the capital of Laos, by Iain Manley



*A second wave of Chinese immigrants is coming to landlocked, underdeveloped Laos. The first was escaping widespread famine; they intermarried and adopted local customs, but because China is again at the centre of world affairs, the second wave is different: they want to get rich.*

# Part I: New Arrivals

On the banks of the Mekong in Vientiane, there is a Chinese temple that is empty for most of the day. The city's children use its concrete parking lot to practice BMX and skateboard tricks, popping Ollies and kickflips in torn jeans and t-shirts with obscure English prints – like *Your Momma Is My Bitch*, on a podgy boy of about twelve. The dragons and roosters on the temple's roof are coated in waterproof enamel, a layer of primary colour that is strikingly new, because Laos' temples and monasteries are mostly dilapidated, with paint and mould peeling off their sun-bleached walls. Inside the temple, an electric pump pours water into a stone tank and a polished Buddha presides over the empty room. There is a plastic seat for an attendant beside the shrine, but when I visited even he wasn't there. His pack of cigarettes, with a photograph on it of orchids bobbing on water in a copper bowl, was the only sign of ordinary life.

Opposite the temple, across the Mekong, is the Thai town of Phan Phrao. Phan Phrao was originally a part of Vientiane, but in 1887, when France drew up the borders of its new protectorate in Southeast Asia, the Mekong was used as a boundary. Vientiane was cut in half. If it had still been Laos' capital, the French would have been guilty of exactly the sort of brash land grab for which European colonialism is reviled, but in 1887 Vientiane was not the capital of Laos. It had been annexed by Siam in 1779 and in 1827, during a rebellion, it was razed by a Siamese army. The Emerald Buddha was carried off with the spoils. It is now a talisman of the Thai kings, [enshrined at the royal Wat Phra Kaew](#) in Bangkok.

At night, smugglers cross the river with products Laos cannot manufacture itself. It is a tempting run. Although Laos is a member of the ASEAN trading bloc, it imposes duties of up to 40 percent on imports from Thailand. The crossing is simple too, a straightforward A to B over unpatrolled water. The Mekong is a few hundred metres wide where it flows past Vientiane, but the water is sluggish and heavy with silt. On the Lao side, a wide sandbar called Don Chan Island halves the distance from riverbank to riverbank. Don Chan is, for the moment, just a strip of mud and scrub, but a joint venture with a Chinese company and 180 million dollars of cheap Chinese loans will soon transform it into an island of wealth, with apartments and offices, a shopping centre, a hotel, an entertainment complex, a medical centre and an international school.

Even my Lonely Planet guidebook, which I normally dismissed as a vapid guide to [Southeast Asia's banana pancake trail](#), contained a reference to the Chinese

presence in the city. Fifty thousand labourers from China had moved in, it said, as part of a deal between the two countries' governments. In return, China had built the city's stadium for the Southeast Asian games, along with the road to it. A waiter at the Mekong View Café told me that the empty temple was built for these 50,000 new arrivals. It might have explained why nobody ever paid their respects to the deity inside: Laos had apparently reneged on the agreement, with the lame excuse that the wrong official had signed the papers. But my waiter had been wrong. Fude Temple was established in 1968, [by immigrants from China's Guangdong province](#); its parking lot was smooth and its coat of enamel still bright because as part of the redevelopment of the promenade along the Mekong – a project funded by Korea – the old temple had been knocked down and rebuilt.

The demolished temple, which was well known for its opera recitals on festival days, and its spotless replacement were emblematic of a larger change: a wave of Chinese immigrants had come to Vientiane in the years after [the Taiping Rebellion](#), when swathes of southern China were laid to waste; they had continued coming all through the first half of the twentieth century, in the steady movement of people across trade routes and family networks that established [the Chinese diaspora](#). Immigration slowed to a trickle in 1949, when the communist government made getting out of the mainland perilous, but now, after a fifty-year-long interregnum, Chinese people were again flocking to Laos. The pre-1949 wave of immigrants were separated from the new arrivals by [the Great Leap Forward](#) and [the Cultural Revolution](#), by the former's acclimatisation to Laos, which had happened gradually, over the course of generations, as well as by the latter's cocksure emergence from a country where big things were happening, where it was once again easy to feel that China was at the centre of the world. It was easy to imagine that the cultural divide between these two Chinese populations was as wide as the divide that separated China from Laos, and at Fude Temple there were hints that this might be true.

Claire and I decided to seek out Vientiane's Chinese community on our [train from Bangkok to the border of Laos](#), when a businessman drunk on Thai whiskey slurred "China is the father, Vietnam is the mother" to a tourist he was plying with booze. It didn't take us long. Two blocks from our guesthouse – [Syri I](#), in a crumbling French mansion with circuit breaker light switches that rarely worked – we chanced upon a restaurant that advertised Beijing duck and *dōngběi jiaozi* – boiled dumplings from China's northeast – in large red characters on a sign above the entrance. We went inside, unsure if we should speak English or Chinese to the staff. "Nihao, kěyi kàn càidān ma?" Claire asked. Yes, a waitress replied, we could look at a menu – and it

seemed like we could also use Chinese.

We sat down to decide whether we would have dumplings filled with pork and celery, pork and cabbage, pork and shrimp or plain mutton. It was a difficult decision after months away from the mainland and I was enjoying the clipped sounds of Mandarin coming out of my mouth again, while we argued over *yáng ròu* and *qīng cài*, when a man came over, putting a Pekinese poodle down on the floor as he did.

“You speak Chinese,” he said flatly. The man was middle-aged: bald with a pronounced belly and wrinkles bunched-up around his eyes. His gaze – narrow and stern, but not rude – was probably intended to hide his curiosity, but it gave the man the appearance of a suspicious immigration official, hunting through our passports for a missing stamp.

Although he hadn’t asked us a question, we responded as if he had, with practised modesty. “We can only speak a little Chinese,” I offered, and from there, as with immigration officials, the conversation moved on predictably. The man told us we spoke Chinese very well; we told him we still had a great deal to learn. He asked where we had studied; we said Shanghai. He asked where we were from; [we told him South Africa](#). He was surprised.

“Aren’t all the people in Africa black?” he probed.

“Actually, there are a lot of white people in South Africa,” I said, and he accepted this quite easily.

“Where are you from?” Claire asked.

“I’m a Beijinger,” he replied.

“Oh, Beijing,” said Claire, with a hint of relief. He was not from a town somewhere in Henan or Shanxi that we, pretending to be old China-hands, might be expected to know. “We really like Beijing,” she continued, and the man smiled knowingly. Who, his expression indicated, wouldn’t like Beijing?

“Is this your restaurant?” I asked.

“No, no, no. My friend owns this place, but he’s not here. I’m just helping out.”

“Do you live here?”

“I don’t, but I come to Vientiane often. I have business here.” The word he used – *shì* – was broader and more secretive than my English translation: business. In Shanghai, friends would excuse themselves from a party by simply saying “Tomorrow, I have *shì*.” Colleagues would ask for a day off work with the same explanation. “I have *shì*,” they would tell our manager, and that was almost always enough. The man from Beijing might come to Vientiane to work through the details of some legitimate trade, but he might equally keep a lover in the city, or export

Laos' precious and endangered wood, or be a spy. Asking for details would have been impolite; instead, Claire changed the subject.

"Do you like it here?" she asked.

The Beijinger waved his arm dismissively. "It's too hot," he said, "and it's – you know – it's undeveloped."

"What about the culture?"

"The culture?" he chuckled. "What culture? China has 5,000 years of history. How old is Laos? A few hundred years old. It's a backward country."

The [oldest surviving examples of Chinese writing](#) date to 1200 BCE, which makes Chinese history no more than 3,200 years old. China did not exist as a country until 221 BCE anyway, but the Communist Party has made an eternal, united empire the bedrock of its propaganda, and the ordinary people of China have swallowed its misinformation whole. The Beijinger was poorly informed, but his ignorance annoyed me less than his quantitative, material idea of culture. Arguing the point was useless, and once again Claire gracefully changed the conversation's tack. "Are there many Chinese people in Vientiane?" she asked.

"Oh, very many."

"Is there a Chinese neighbourhood?"

This confused the Beijinger. "There isn't," he replied hesitantly. "We live all over the city."

"But is there an area with Chinese restaurants and businesses?"

"Oh, yes, there is a place like that," he said with relief, which was how we learnt about Sanjiang Cheng – Three Rivers City – and once we had gobbled up our dumplings, with imported vinegar and weak corn tea, Sanjiang Cheng was where we went.

We arrived in a *tuk tuk* with a punctured tyre. It had lost air steadily, tilting our seat progressively to the left; by the time we were at Sanjiang's back entrance, three kilometres away from Vientiane's low-rise centre, Claire was squashed into my side and the tyre was completely flat.

The compound was staked out by a concrete wall; inside, concrete warehouses with tin roofs and rusty, roll-down doors were separated by concrete roads and concrete pavements. Cheap Chinese lanterns, strung forlornly from the buildings' eaves, were the only attempt at charm and the only nod to a Chinese past. The warehouses were stocked with cheap plastic toys or tools or stationery; it was all piled high and covered in dust. The families that lived and worked inside these single-purpose stores sat amongst their stuff, in the shadow of boxes and notebooks

and hanging chords, and it seemed as if they too might gather Sanjiang's dust. They were made up of two or three generations: children, scratching out their homework distractedly or playing a computer game; their parents, gazing absently in our direction, with the occasional cousin or second cousin in between. There were no grandparents; [they had been left behind](#) by their families as much as by the changing times.

For a while we thought that these closely clustered warehouses were the whole of Sanjiang, but the Beijinger had described a larger space, with a variety of restaurants. Although there were two here, with oversized pictures of Chinese dishes plastered across their grimy windows, both were closed. We asked a woman from Hunan where we might find others and she pointed us to the north, past Hong Kong City, where fake Louis Vuitton handbags and cheap, animatronic novelties – like Funny Toilet Guy and Sassy Girl, whose top fell down when she bent over, revealing enormous white breasts – were priced in Thai baht. It was cheaper for Thais to cross the Friendship Bridge into Laos than it was for Chinese products to make the journey in reverse and Sanjiang had, as a result, become one end-point of a supply chain that started somewhere on China's east coast, in a factory dedicated to the production of this whimsical junk.

Beyond Hong Kong City and a handful of warehouses, with agricultural machinery or furniture lined up in neat rows on their cement floors, the compound opened up into a wide parking lot. There, at last, was a sign – Laos Three Rivers International Trade and Commerce City, in grubby white characters on a red background – above the entrance to a square, single story building a few hundred metres deep. Other signs, in Lao and Chinese, were stretched out across the full width of the building, advertising the contents of the shops inside: domestic appliances, outboard motors, garden furniture, sound systems, computer parts, computer accessories, fashion accessories, chandeliers, cutlery, crockery, bedding, groceries, DVDs, toys, clothing, shoes. In the eighties, Chinese people had obsessed over three possessions: a refrigerator, a washing machine and a television. The country had moved onto more expensive markers of wealth – apartments, cars and iPhones – but domestic demand for appliances had brought prices down far enough to make the made-in-China trappings of middle-class life affordable in poorer places, like Laos.

The compound's restaurants were to the north of the indoor market. A few specialist shops were clustered just past them, to the east, and then, abruptly, without the formality of a ceremonial gateway, Sanjiang ended at a tarred road. It was a Chinatown, with Chinese businesses and Chinese people, but now that we had seen the whole of it, Sanjiang was also nothing like the tourist-attraction Chinatowns of

San Francisco or Sydney, with their dragon dances on festival days and medicine shops resembling alchemists' dens. It was the largest shopping centre in Laos and the "largest mall for Chinese products in Southeast Asia," according to Ding Gou Jiang, the Sanjiang Company's president, but it had been built for trade and trade only. Although families lived in lofts above the warehouses, they had done nothing to make the compound more liveable.

Sanjiang was irredeemably ugly and I found it difficult, at first, to look past its ugliness, but as we wandered deeper in and met people who had uprooted themselves from the mainland to come and work in Vientiane, Claire and I recognised that it might also be a microcosm – a low-grade recreation of modern China transplanted onto Laos, with no vestiges of the past but everything of the present's mobility and hunger for money – and that it could, perhaps, be understood as both a testament to and an indictment of what China had achieved since [Deng Xiaoping opened up the country's economy in 1979](#).

It was, by now, mid-afternoon: long past Chinese lunchtime but well before Chinese dinner time too. The restaurants we had been looking for, in three rows, with tiled tables and tiled benches placed outside, were either empty or closed. We walked up to them anyway, attracting the sort of curious stares and exclamations – "Look! A foreigner!" – that were normal in mainland China. Outside a restaurant that specialised in Chongqing hotpot, curiosity led to conversation. "Where are you from?" asked a man with a strong, consonant-swapping Sichuanese accent, and we were soon sitting inside his restaurant, which smelt of *huājiāo* pepper and slowly rotting meat, drinking Namkhong beers and describing our [overland journey home](#).

The man did not sit down to talk to us. He poured our beers and hovered beside our table; when we offered him a drink, he declined and went off in search of his boss. "These two foreigners lived in China," he said excitedly when he returned, introducing us to the young man he had summoned from the kitchen. Both men were wearing t-shirts, shorts and cheap plastic sandals. Their only physical distinction was age: the man who had stopped us at the restaurant's door had the loose, weathered skin of a fifty-something; the new arrival was at least fifteen years younger, but he was the boss, and he carried himself with an easy, understated authority. A wide, honest smile is the inquisitive traveller's most useful tool, and when Claire and I stood to say hello – both of us worried that we were imposing – we were smiling wide. The boss smiled back and said hello, but instead of sitting down, he hovered awkwardly with his older colleague beside our table.

"Will you sit down and have a beer?" I asked.

The boss declined, almost certainly because declining was the polite

thing to do. When I gestured to the open seat a second time he agreed, pulling out a box of brown-tipped Chinese cigarettes as he sat. He offered them around while I poured beer into an empty glass. We exchanged names: Claire and I unnecessarily gave our full Chinese names; the boss gave only his family name, Huang, leaving us to choose a title. We called him Mr Huang instead of Old Huang or Small Huang or Boss Huang; it was less intimate, without any implied status. Once his cigarette was lit, Mr Huang raised his glass. “Gānbēi!” he said. “Dry your glass!”

“Gānbēi!” we responded, and when we clinked the small, round cups used for beer in China, Mr Huang was careful to keep his glass lower than our own. The older man had taken a seat at the next table. With our strange insistence on beer drinking accommodated at last, he prodded us to continue the story of our journey. “When are you going back to China?” he asked.

“From Laos, we’re going back to Thailand,” Claire replied. “Then we’re travelling through Cambodia and Vietnam. From there we’ll go to China. It should take us a few months.”

“Are you going to work in Shanghai again?”

“No,” I said, “but we will visit our friends there. We’re only going to China to travel this time. After that, we’ll carry on all the way to South Africa overland – without taking an aeroplane.”

The old man was confused by this. “You’re going to leave China?” he asked uncertainly.

“That’s right.”

“When will you come back?”

“I don’t know.”

“So you’re not going back to China to work?”

“No...well, maybe one day. There’s nothing to go back to now – we packed up and left at the end of last year.”

Explaining travel for travel’s sake is never easy. Explaining it when you yourself regularly question what the result of long, aimless periods of wandering might be is like lying. Wandering becomes a way of life like any other, with a set of habits and routines that are comfortable or productive or enjoyable. There are sublime moments and stretches of intensive, heady learning, but sedentary life can offer these too, and asking Claire and I why we travelled had become like asking other people why they stayed still.

Our long journey without any recognisable purpose – like business or study or

a holiday – was not something the old man could reconcile with his experience. We tried to tell him about our route, stumbling when we didn't know the Chinese for Kyrgyzstan or Uzbekistan, but he returned again and again to our decision to leave China. China made sense to him; returning to it, especially here, amongst people that considered time away from home a sacrifice, made even more sense. His insistence on China as his geographical centre as well as ours was flattering: he was treating Claire and me, with our mediocre Chinese, like Chinese people, and he seemed to think we shared his desire for the comforts just north of the border. Eventually we gave up and turned our attention to Mr Huang, who was by now topping up our beer glasses and offering around more of his strong-smelling cigarettes.

“Are you the owner of this restaurant?” I asked.

“I own it with a friend, but he isn't here right now.”

“Have you been here long?”

“Almost a year.”

“That's not so long. Do you like it?”

“It's too hot,” he replied, and later, when Claire and I asked other new arrivals from China the same question, Laos' climate was always foremost among their reasons for disliking the country. Once or twice we pointed out that China was uncomfortably hot in the summer too, but that only led to other reasons why it was difficult to get used to life in Laos. Time here was something to be endured rather than enjoyed, and nobody could imagine staying for long. “So why did you come here?” Claire asked.

“People from my hometown came here twenty years ago, to build roads and work in construction, so I have connections. Laos is undeveloped, you know. They have no factories, no industry, nothing – so they need everything. There are opportunities here.”

“Is business good?”

“Business here is difficult. It's too expensive – everything costs more than it does in China: food, clothes, even our salt is expensive, because we import it from China, and there are too many Chinese people here already. Look at this place: there are three Sichuan restaurants and not enough customers, so it's very competitive.”

At this Mr Huang raised his glass for another *gānbēi*. “Beer in Laos is stronger than it is in China,” he said when our glasses were drained. “I don't normally drink much of it.” “Do you spend most of your time here, in Sanjiang?” I asked.

“I live here, I work here. I go out sometimes, but it isn't convenient. The people here can't speak Chinese, so it's difficult to communicate, and I can't read the signs. It's easier in Sanjiang.”

“How long do you think you’ll stay?”

“It depends on what opportunities come my way. If I’m making money, maybe I’ll stay for a few more years, but then I’ll go home. I’m not married yet and it’s difficult to find a wife here.”

“You could marry a Lao girl,” Claire chimed, which made Mr Huang giggle.

“No, no, no,” he said. “Our cultures are too different.”

I poured the three of us a last glass of beer while we spoke. Mr Huang toasted us again and, with his obligations as a host done, stood up, explaining that he had to prepare for the evening service. We thanked him and paid; his older colleague escorted us out. We promised we’d come back at a better time, for a hotpot, and made our way a little drunkenly into the central market.

Sanjiang was as uniformly drab inside its mall as it was outside, viewed from the parking lot. The vast, perfectly square indoor space was divided into identically-sized square shops by chipboard walls and glass fronts. All the passageways were perfectly straight; they ran right through the building at regular intervals and had the same floor tiles as the shops. It should have been an easy, logical space to navigate, but because so many of the shops were decorated and stocked without imagination or differentiation, we had trouble finding a landmark and, once or twice, got lost.

Almost all the businesses inside and out were owned and staffed by new arrivals from the mainland. We met a handful that afternoon and more when we returned, on three separate occasions, to write [a guide to Vientiane’s new Chinatown](#). There were people from Zhejiang and Jiangsu selling domestic appliances and electronic gadgets, along with jade dealers from Yunnan and a range of entrepreneurs from Hunan; there were restaurants owned by people from Heilongjiang and Liaoning up north and people from crowded Sichuan with a finger in everything. There were tailors from Laos too; they had given up on Vientiane’s medieval Talat Sao Market and seemed to be doing good business here, amongst the Chinese at Sanjiang.

It was possible, after a while, to generalise about the motives and opinions that held this community of émigrés together. There were varying degrees of interest in Laos’ culture and its people, and the Chinese were apparently quick studies when they decided to learn to speak Lao – but only a few ever did. We were told again and again that Laos was undeveloped: it was *luòhòu*, backward, but the description was never entirely negative. It was why the Chinese had come. The people here seemed to feel that they had missed the boat in China. Its economy was already too advanced to continue lifting up people like them, but the same kind of growth might soon come to Laos, and when it did they could get in at the ground floor.

Development was a national obsession in China. It was how the government

measured its success and what ordinary people liked to discuss. It was among the first abstract Chinese words I learnt to recognise, because the taxi drivers and teachers I interacted with excused China's embarrassments by saying that it was still a developing country and wondered if South Africa was a developing country too. The Chinese idea of development was now being exported with its people, into a culture with different obsessions, where it might not take such a firm hold.

## Part II: A Way of Life

Laos is sparsely populated, with roughly six and a half million people scattered across a wet, mountainous north and marshy south. It covers an only slightly smaller area than the United Kingdom, but compared to its closest neighbours – Thailand, which squeezes 68 million people into a slightly larger space, and Vietnam, which packs in almost 78 million – it is all but empty. Even the single Chinese province of Yunnan, on Laos' northern border, has a population seven times larger than its neighbour's.

The economic conditions that define [China's push into Africa](#) are not unlike conditions in Laos. It shares a place with African nations on the United Nations' list of the world's [least developed countries](#). It has timber and precious metals, but without bought expertise and borrowed capital, it can't connect mine to market or even dig its copper, gold and tin out of the ground. Its roads have been improved over the last decade – mostly by Chinese and Japanese contractors – but the journey from the capital to Luang Prabang, Laos' third largest city – which is, as the crow flies, only 218 kilometres away – still takes eleven hours by bus. On the overnight buses that crawl along Laos' single-lane thoroughfares, conductors hand out plastic bags to collect passengers' vomit; at corners, the buses inch up to rock walls blasted out of the mountainside, and it can seem as if there is nowhere else to go but forward, gradually but inevitably into the rock face, until at the last moment they swing to the right or left and the potholed asphalt, wedged impossibly between mountain, thicket and the occasional wooden home, continues along its narrow course.

Vientiane is the capital of a country that has been independent for 57 years, but its scruffy shop-houses, open air markets and cafés, with baguettes lined-up in their windows and tables straddling the pavement, still give it the feeling of a slow-moving county town in France. Tax concessions on utility vehicles have encouraged residents to buy long-bodied, four wheel drive [bakkies](#) and expats at the Hare and Hound, where Claire and I drank, bemoaned witnessing their first Laotian traffic jam, but Vientiane's roads remained quiet, especially by Southeast Asia's frenzied standards. The city's population is growing slowly: almost 73,000 people moved in between 1995 and 2005, but 14,500 moved away during the same period and there are few signs of the kind of urbanisation that is changing the shape of other parts of Asia. In 2005, when the last census was taken, 92 percent of Laotians were counted in exactly the same district they were in ten years before and only 26 percent lived in urban areas.

In the lead up to [the Secret War](#), which gave Laos the terrible distinction of being most bombed country per capita on earth, the American journalist Stanley Karnow [visited the country for Life Magazine](#). He described an unchanging, peaceful idyll that was being sucked into the Cold War against its will. Laos, he wrote, “is an improbable little landlocked country of affable, gentle, easygoing people who would like nothing better than to be left alone.” Karnow was careful to explain, listing examples of an idealised Laotian backwardness. “Foreigners in Laos may be exasperated by primitive inefficiency and shattering inertia,” he wrote, “but as Crown Prince Savang Vatthana once told an American reporter, no Laotian has ever suffered a nervous breakdown.”

Karnow went on: “Language is a key to behaviour. The most common phrase in the local idiom, delivered with a nod of the head, is *bo pen nyan*. It means anything from ‘It doesn’t matter’ to ‘Who cares?’”

And on: “In Laos it is downright bad taste to work more than is absolutely necessary. The acquisition of wealth is considered both pointless and sinful. A man cultivates only as much land as he needs to feed everyone in his family, dividing the property into one strip for each member of the household. If a baby is born, he clears an additional strip and works it. If grandmother dies, he promptly abandons the parcel of soil that provided her food.”

Even the French had been bewitched by lazy Laos: “The French, when they controlled the country, barely made their presence felt. Most of them were thoroughly delighted by the Laotian way of life. So deeply enamoured with Laos was one French administrator, it is said, that when the Japanese occupied Indochina in 1941 he assembled his 31 Laotian concubines in his bungalow, applied a torch and carried himself and his harem to Nirvana in a blaze of glory.”

Karnow’s description fitted in well with other American portrayals of the war in Laos. The country was just one more domino that was going to topple over into communism passively, without choosing to fall, because its people chose to lead a simple life. It was tempting to continue looking at Laos through Karnow’s eyes. Other tourists we met did: they told us that shop owners had turned them away in mid-afternoon, while they were taking a nap, because money did not overly interest the people of Laos. The story, which we heard from four people on separate occasions, was always identical – it was always mid-afternoon and the shop-owner was always stretched out on a reclining chair – but we never experienced it ourselves. It was a part of the tourist lore of Laos – a relative of the urban legend, which people heard once or twice and told as their own.

Only, Laos was not happily stagnant. The country’s single-party government

wanted Laos off the list of least developed countries by 2020 and foreign investment – in mining, transport, hydropower and, to a lesser extent, agriculture and services – was how it planned to get there. The plan was working too: [Laos' economy](#), which neither grew nor shrunk substantially in the eighties and nineties, quadrupled in size between 2002 and 2010. Its traditional investors were Thai and Vietnamese, but last year, by investing \$344 million over the course of just six months, [Chinese companies had overtaken them both](#).

In central Vientiane, a single, gaudy building is the only clear indication of China's close ties with its neighbour. The National Culture Hall, built by China as a gift to the people of Laos, was an oversized, concrete imitation of a Southeast Asian wat. It more closely resembled a sleazy karaoke parlour in Shanghai and towered over the Lao National Museum on the opposite side of Samsenthai Road, but it was rarely used: Laos' government had never allocated a budget to the hall, and it was only opened for passing events or shows.

The scale of Chinese investment was more obvious outside the capital. [In Ton Pheung](#), in [the Golden Triangle](#), it was ploughing \$2.25 billion into a special economic zone – a “Macau on the Mekong”, where gambling was legal and both the currency and the parallel government were Chinese. China was also an important part of Laos' plan to remake itself, by becoming the hydroelectric battery of a power-hungry region. The country is damming its abundance of rivers at a pace that is staggering and – [some say](#) – alarming: it has ten hydroelectric plants in operation; another seventy are either under construction, already planned or being assessed for feasibility. Chinese companies have a majority stake in at least twenty of these; Thai, Vietnamese, American, French and Russian companies are partners in the rest.

The casino city on the Mekong and the rollout of made-by-China hydroelectric plants both pale in comparison to China's other big project in Laos: the construction of a high-speed railway that will connect Beijing to Singapore, transforming Laos, which has long been hindered by its geography, into a transport hub. Work was supposed to start this year, but in April [it was postponed indefinitely](#). China's injection of money into high-speed trains left loose cash flowing through the Ministry of Railways; in February, the man in charge was sacked for corruption. In August, less than a month after two high-speed trains collided in China – killing at least 40 people and calling the whole programme into question – Thailand's new government announced that its own rollout of high-speed railways would no longer extend to [Nong Khai, on the border of Laos](#). Laos, which desperately wants the railway, has been left waiting and hoping, at the mercy of its richer neighbours' shifting domestic concerns.

Even if the railway line through Laos is never built, Chinese investment, on

top of investment from Thailand and Vietnam, will probably [crowd out aid from the West](#), with its knit-picking emphasis on political reform, open markets and sustainability. It is another thread from the story of China's expansion in Africa, in which hardworking immigrants from the mainland are pitted against white aid workers in white four by fours living within a white economy overseas.

At the Hare and Hound, among the mining engineers, small business owners and English teachers, aid workers were regarded with open scorn. They drank just down the road, at a bar called Sticky Fingers, but it was clear that most weren't welcome at the gritty pub, where the landlord drank Namkhong from the bottle while his Indonesian wife served bangers and mash or shepherd's pie. Justin, a smart, cynical regular from England, justified his dislike by describing the city's UN volunteers. "I earn about a thousand dollars a month," he said, "but these *volunteers*, they outearn me, and they get a free apartment, free phone calls – they even get free flights home."

Justin had left home after being roughed up by a policeman. He was caught shooting out security cameras in London with a paintball gun; when he refused to sign a statement, because his name had been spelt incorrectly, he was punched. Justin hated England; he hated its inane pop culture and the hypocrisy of the War on Terror. In 2009, he left, came to Laos and found a job as an English teacher. He swore to Claire and me that he would never return; in Vientiane, he could live without politics and pathetic game shows, in rejection of the west. "These *volunteers* can't even speak Lao," Justin continued, "but that doesn't really bother me. I don't even mind that they earn so much. It's that they have the cheek to call themselves *volunteers*! It's absurd!"

Claire and I perched ourselves at the Sticky Fingers bar counter twice, hoping to draw out the aid workers' side of the story. We met two fifty-something white men – one a senior staff member at an international NGO, the other attached to the city's US embassy – but in our backpack-wrinkled clothes, we looked and smelt like the lowest species of foreigner in Laos, and neither took much interest in our questions. The latter denied that China's involvement in Laos was any more substantial than America's. "We do work here, they do work here, and that's it," he said, before turning away, to focus on his beer.

I sympathised with the aid workers' concerns and when drinking with them failed, I should have tried to set up a formal interview. I didn't think they should live in penury, but I thought it was silly to call well paid people volunteers. I did start to think that perhaps every westerner in Laos – the aid workers and the tourists, as well as Justin and Karnow, the journalist from Life – was cynical about what the rush for

modernity would bring. The result was that they all idealised Laotian backwardness to some extent. It was aid workers who had warned that Laos was damming its rivers too quickly, without properly studying the consequences. They wanted Laos to learn from the mistakes of industrialisation elsewhere, but it was difficult for this to sound anything but paternalistic, like a father telling his son Do what I say, not what I do – or did.

Chinese people were closer to backwardness; they understood its pains and frustrations. There was growing resistance to development at all costs in China, but the immigrants in Vientiane were not, as yet, cynical about the fruits of modernity, and it made sense that their ideas about development, along with their cheap refrigerators, televisions and mobile phones, would more easily find a market in Laos.'

The altar at Wat Si Muang is an overcrowded, asymmetrical jumble of gods, animals, plastic flowers and lucky charms. On the edges of its bottom tier, wrought iron dragon heads curl out and long elephant tusks curl in, framing five golden, seated Buddhas with hair ending in sharp, conical tips, along with a sixth, carved from stone, with the Bodhi tree in intricate relief forming a canopy over his head and gold leaf pressed into the crevices of his robe. On the upper tier, at least ten more Buddhas, both seated and standing, share space with wooden elephants and cones of woven banana leaves or pressed silver – like small, sub-tropical Christmas trees – as well as a vaguely phallic pillar wrapped in a flag, with a thick layer of gold on its tapered top.

The pillar is the altar's centrepiece. It was put in place in 1563, when King Setthathirath transferred Laos' capital to Vientiane, and it was consecrated by human sacrifice. A pregnant volunteer named Si was said to have been placed in the hole dug for the pillar; a horse went in after her and together the woman and the animal were buried alive. Si Muang was a Buddhist temple and Setthathirath a Buddhist king, but the ritual was not recognisably Buddhist – it was a remnant of the region's older beliefs, incorporated to propitiate older gods. There had been a Khmer shrine in the same place, dedicated to a Hindu deity, and behind the temple a part of it still stood. It was now just a pile of crumbling volcanic rocks, guarded by a stork with wide black wings and a hunchback's stoop, but visitors still made offerings at the site, by putting food or an elaborate wreath into the spirit houses that had been set atop the rubble – or, if they thought she might answer their prayers, at the feet of a smiling, female idol in traditional dress, who I supposed might be Si.

Claire and I did not arrive at the wat intentionally. We came across it while walking back from lunch at a restaurant that served steak with chunky French fries and a red wine jus. The shrine room was busy with barefoot people our age – with

men wearing jeans and women carrying smart handbags, who had left their high heels at the door. They all knelt quietly in front of the shrine, closed their eyes and bowed. Some took the religious observance seriously, flattening themselves in front of the altar; others only knelt for a moment, then stood up and smiled, while a friend took a photo with a mobile phone.

We sat down cross-legged behind them, enjoying the temple's quiet gravity, and after a few minutes went outside, where a Buddhist monk sat in the shade of a tin canopy, blessing a new car. It was a white Toyota with no license plates; blue ribbons were still wedged into the passenger doors. The owner, who had probably driven it straight here from the dealership, was kneeling with four members of his family in front of the monk, all of them holding a length of rope that was wrapped at one end around the bonnet of the car. The monk was chanting in Pali, the high language of North India in the third century BCE, while the family hummed along, to the lilt of ancient *slokas*, praying that their new investment would carry them safely along Laos' broken roads.

The blessing, like the sacrifice of Si, was not a part of strict Buddhist doctrine. [In India](#), Hindu temples list the price of *pujas* for a new car clearly, on signs like fast-food menus, but the ritual unfolding in front of Claire and I was more closely linked to [the indigenous animism of Southeast Asia](#) – to a belief in spirits called *phi*, which are benevolent as often as they are wicked and untamed – than it was to Hinduism. The monk blessing the car was also a shaman, convening with spirits, and if he properly satisfied the *phi*, they might lend the driver a helping hand.

Laos' kings and commissars have occasionally tried to suppress animism, but its long meld with Buddhism has made the two practices difficult to pick apart, and the pillar at the centre of Wat Simuang exemplified the country's easy going syncretism. When King Setthathirath moved his capital, he built monasteries and temples, hoping that Vientiane would become a centre of Buddhist scholarship. He wanted to reinforce his father's ban of spirit worship and to continue his dynasty's links with Theravada Buddhism, but the pillar was quickly adopted by animists, who saw in it a home for Vientiane's guardian spirit. Nobody seemed to think he – or perhaps she – would mind keeping Buddha company.

When the blessing was over, another family with another new car took its place in front of the monk. Claire and I moved on, drifting through the temple compound. We played with a kitten lying in the sun outside the monks' quarters and bought small cones of homemade coconut ice-cream, sold off the back of a bicycle by a woman wearing a conical hat. We left while we ate it, and carried on towards our guesthouse in the sweaty monsoon heat.

A few blocks past the temple, we noticed a marquee set up across the width of a single lane suburban road. Lao folk music set to a rudimentary electronic beat blared out of it; when we peered up the road, wondering what sort of party was held on a Thursday afternoon, the people under the marquee beckoned for us to join them.

We approached timidly. Ten round tables had been set up beneath the marquee; all of them were piled with food – with rice noodles, shredded roast chicken, bowls of salad and clear soup. The gates of the home adjoining the marquee were wide open. In its dusty, pebble-filled courtyard people were dancing, some of them barefoot, or singing karaoke, warbling into a microphone with its volume set high.

“Would you like to join us?” asked a man with a grey-flecked moustache set above wide, pink lips. The strip of facial hair was sparse but carefully cultivated, and it made his round, friendly face look distinguished, like a schoolteacher’s while speaking to a favourite student.

“Um, yes – if that’s okay,” I replied.

Two chairs were brought out; as soon as we sat, tall glasses of ice were put in front of us and filled with Beer Laos. The man with the moustache introduced himself along with the two men sitting beside him, who did not speak English as well. He was called Ae; the older of his friends was the owner of the property and the younger, who was babbling drunkenly to us in Lao, was the owner’s brother. Two women had been sitting at the table, but they had leapt up when we arrived, to fetch beers and plates for our food. After asking Ae to translate their invitation to eat, one had gone off to join in the dancing and the other had sat down next to me with her dog, which she fed scraps from the table. Ae introduced her too: she was the owner’s wife and had, he said, prepared all of the food in front of us.

“Bottoms up!” the owner instructed, giggling at his own English. We slugged our beers and they were immediately topped up, raising vapour from the big chunks of ice.

“What are you celebrating?” Claire asked.

“My friends have built a new house. It’s over there,” Ae replied, pointing at an unpainted brick structure without windows, set beside the same courtyard as the main house. “It isn’t finished yet, but today is a very good day to have a – how do you say – a housewarming?”

Ae explained that the new house was for the younger brother and his family. They had lived in the main house, but could at last afford to live separately, a step or two removed from the elder brother’s authority. It was a cause for celebration I could understand and it helped me empathise with the younger brother’s gleeful stumbling between our table and the courtyard – where he would sing badly,

forgetting most of the words – but there was another explanation for the party, with which I was not yet familiar. Ae didn't use the word, but by describing the party to expats at the Hare and Hound, Claire and I learnt that we had joined [a baci](#). It was closely related to the animist ritual we had witnessed at the temple. The monk was missing, but the eldest brother had acted as shaman here, before we arrived, and in the threads tied around every attendee's wrist, there was another echo of Hinduism: they held the thirty-two essential spirits called to the body during a *baci* in place, just as they helped preserve the benefits of a *puja* in India. Ae did tell us that on [Laos' Buddhist calendar](#) the day was considered auspicious. Although the house was weeks and maybe months from being finished, I accepted his explanation, but later, as Claire and I moved through Laos and came across *bacis* again and again, on a succession of similarly auspicious days, I started to suspect that the two brothers were just impatient for a party on a work day. The ritual was, after all, a perfect excuse.

While we sat talking to Ae, other guests came over to introduce themselves by vigorously shaking our hands. Some brought beers to toast us; when they did, the elder brother took charge, happily exclaiming "Bottoms up!" and draining his glass. Others wanted us to dance with them. We declined a few times, but eventually – when refusing started to seem rude – we gave up and reluctantly made our way into the courtyard. My giggling audience was lucky: dancing in Laos did not require much movement. Everybody shuffled slowly on a single spot, saving their concentration for their hands, which they moved through graceful spirals with index fingers and thumbs touching. We lasted two songs; when the younger brother started to insist we sing, thrusting the microphone into our hands, we retreated to the table and continued our conversation with Ae. I asked how he had learnt to speak English so well. "I studied economics in Germany," he said, "and I learnt a little bit there, but mostly I learnt German. My German is still better. When I did my master's degree in Thailand, I needed English for my research."

I was surprised. Other than his moustache, Ae had no noticeable pretensions. He wore a shirt made from coarse, traditional fabric, with big buttons and strips of tinsel woven into it in horizontal lines. The setting of the party was basic and the food simple but tasty. It was not where I expected to bump into one of the 403 Laotians that hold master's degrees from foreign universities. Ae now worked at Société Générale, as a consultant on the environmental impact of large development projects. The owner of the property turned out to work for the electricity board. Ae had met him in Germany, where they were students together. We tried to quiz Ae about development in Laos. When I asked about urbanisation,

he told us that there was no rush to live and work in the city, and that the reverse was just as common – friends of his were leaving Vientiane, to lead simpler, village lives – but the setting did not suit intellectual discussion, mostly because the elder brother was trying to keep up, with his limited English, while making sure that our glasses were regularly filled up – and regularly emptied. I took Ae's mobile number and, by calling and sending him texts, tried to arrange an interview. At first he made excuses, but eventually, after my fourth or fifth attempt, he stopped responding. He didn't say it, but I assumed that talking to us about politics was a problem. Other people in Vientiane were as reluctant; they went quiet when we asked even vaguely contentious questions. Although Laos did not feel like a police state, and I don't remember seeing a single policeman during my two weeks in Vientiane, it was clear that talking to writers might cause trouble. A local spoke to us openly only once, when we promised him anonymity.

The party ended at around six, when the sun started to go down. There was a last song reserved for the elders, who slow-danced in pairs, and after it the last of the guests dispersed. Pouring our beers over ice had prevented us from getting completely drunk, but we were both well past tipsy, as were our hosts. Ae insisted on giving us a lift to our guesthouse, and after we had vowed to visit the owner of the property again one day, we climbed into Ae's four by four and left, driving down Lan Xang Avenue, past a triumphal arch nicknamed 'the vertical runway', because it had been built with an American donation of money and cement intended for an airport, and to the corner of Rue Saigon, where we got out.

The Frenchman who had postponed his departure again and again, until three years later he was still at Syri I, was sitting outside the guesthouse, drinking a beer with the receptionist, Mr B. We said hello and walked inside, to find a lady-boy employee mincing between the television and the reception desk in tiny denim shorts, trying to control the owners' young son and daughter.

Syri I and its sister guesthouse, Syri II, were both family owned. The children's mother handled the day to day management of our guesthouse and her husband, who we only saw on a few occasions, took care of the other property. It seemed like a happy balance of responsibility, but after speaking to the couple, I began to suspect that they both took orders from the children's paternal grandmother, the family's matriarch. Neither Claire nor I ever met her, but we were told that she was born in Vientiane to immigrants from Guangdong in southern China and had married a Laotian. Her son, the manager of Syri II, had never learnt to speak Chinese, but there were still links between the family and their relatives on the mainland, who visited occasionally. On the grandmother's insistence, the children were going to a Chinese

primary school in the city, and she planned to send them to high school in China. We tested their Mandarin once or twice by saying *nihao* when they ran past, but the son only looked at us with incredulity, while the daughter, who was the youngest, went to hide from these white, Chinese speaking giants behind the nearest doorframe.

Their father had different plans: he wanted to send them to be educated in the US, where he had lived for twenty years, joining in exile [a full ten percent of Laos' population](#), which had fled the country in 1975, after the Vietnam-backed Pathet Laos came to power. The most urgent refugees were people with links to the former regime, but they had traders among them too, who were worried about their future in a communist state. For Chinese immigrants, the situation deteriorated further in 1979, after the Sino-Vietnamese War broke out. Laos' government bowed to pressure from its closest ally and severed ties with China. The relationship was only normalised ten years later 1989, when Laos started to open up its economy. The children's father, who had been living in Hawaii, returned to Vientiane that same year.

In a second hand bookstore nearby, I had found a book called [Letters from Thailand](#). It was novel in the form of letters written by a Chinese immigrant in Bangkok to his mother, who he had left in his village without saying goodbye. The immigrant clutched stubbornly onto his heritage and – with the full weight of his paternal authority – tried to impose a Chinese way of life on his children. It was no use: they adopted Thai dress, took Thai names, married into Thai families, and felt more comfortable speaking and writing Thai.

I thought the matriarch of the Syri family might tell a similar story about her parents. She might have been softened by Lao culture, but it was clear that she retained her Chinese heritage and wanted her grandchildren to inherit it. The altar at Syri I's reception desk contained the animist and Theravada idols of Laos' Buddhism as well as the grim guardians of Mahayana Buddhism in China, and when I passed by on my way in and out, it reminded me of how Laos' first wave of Chinese immigrants had changed. It was a domestic equivalent of the syncretic altar at Wat Simuang, adapted – with its offerings of sticky rice and bright yellow bananas – to a different climate.

In Bangkok, the author of [a book about the city's history](#) had talked to me about how Thais – like Laotians – were disparaged elsewhere in Asia. They were called a soft race, unlike the hard-bitten people of China and Vietnam, but on a trip to the latter, the author's Vietnamese colleague had reflected on the advantages of a soft, pliant approach to change. Thailand gave way to the gunboat diplomacy of Britain and France, ceding land but retaining its sovereignty. It established an uneasy alliance with Japan during WWII and accepted that America would use it as a base

during the Vietnam War. It accommodated larger powers to a point and, by doing so, avoided the worst ravages of modern history. The author's colleague felt that this soft, flexible approach – a diplomacy reminiscent of water, which follows the line of least resistance – was why Thailand's economy was now ten or twenty years ahead of Vietnam's, with its traditions and culture intact.

The same period, with the same currents, had not been as kind to Laos, but a liquid adaptability did characterise its people. The tributaries of the Mekong that bend through the country's highlands gnaw at rocks and erode riverbanks, but also carry their silt, and Laos' culture resembled the muddy but fertile result. It was a solution of indigenous and imported beliefs that found a way around obstacles more often than it pushed against them, and perhaps it was no accident that dams were central to the government's plans for development. Hydroelectric dams, with their product of electric power, capture something of the essence of modernity. They disrupt earlier ways of life, forcing people to relocate, and stamp man's mastery on nature. In China, the government was damming its culture with as much energy as it was damming its rivers. It had even used the metaphor, giving the name [Green Dam Youth Escort](#) to censorship software it wanted installed on every new computer.

The way of life that Chinese immigrants brought to Vientiane before 1949 had been eroded slowly and carried into the diffusion of Lao culture. They were regarded with suspicion by their successors, who came out of the mainland proudly and planned to return. "They left for bad reasons," said a Chinese DVD seller I spoke to, with Japanese porn among his Hollywood counterfeits. Although his shop was only a few metres from the restaurant where the old Chinese community met every morning, he didn't know any of its clients. He didn't want to, because they did not fit into his narrow goal: quick profit and a prosperous homecoming. I imagined that when the Syri matriarch's parents arrived, they had brought narrow goals too, and that if the DVD seller stayed long enough, he might also be unwittingly changed. I couldn't be sure: the two generations had departed from different Chinas and arrived in different Laos, but I thought that the answer might lie in the balance struck between dam and deluge, obstruction and flow.