

## International Relations of the Peoples: The Unheard History of Thailand-Laos Relations

Thanachate Wisaijorn<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This article argues that International Relations that discusses the issues of Thai-Lao relations is elite-oriented. Employing the historical approach, this article calls for a more multidisciplinary approach that focuses on the issues of the Thai-Lao relations. The discussion on the relations of the two states do not have to be limited within International Relations as a discipline but extended to other fields of social sciences such as political science in government, anthropology, sociology, geography and borderland studies. The voices of the peoples on the ground that are engaged with the Thai-Lao relations will be more heard. The research question of this article is what are they ways in which the elites have played out in defining the bilateral relations of Thailand and Laos from 1954 to the present. During the colonial days, the elite's monopoly over space and time during the colonial days is academically present. This trend continued when Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) was established in 1975 and in 1989 when the Cold War was over. Since then, the voices of the peoples on the grounds are more reflected in the discussion of the Thai-Lao relations, despite still being state-centrally conceptualised. This article argues that the academic inclusion of other fields in social sciences will help support the voices of the peoples on the ground. Accordingly, International Relations as a discipline that analyses the relations of Thailand and Lao PDR will be able to shed lights on more layers of interaction.

**Keywords** International Relations, Interdisciplinary, Borderland Studies, Thai-Lao Relations, Greater Mekong Subregion

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<sup>1</sup> Lecturer, Ph.D., Department of Government, Faculty of Political Science, Ubon Ratchathani University, Ubon Ratchathani 34190. E-mail: thanachet.v@ubu.ac.th, thanachatew@gmail.com

## ความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างประเทศของผู้คน: พลวัตที่ไม่ได้ยืนของความสัมพันธ์ไทย-ลาว

ธนเชษฐ วิสัยจร<sup>2</sup>

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### บทคัดย่อ

บทความชิ้นนี้เสนอแนวคิดที่ว่าวิชาความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างประเทศที่กล่าวถึงประเด็นความสัมพันธ์ไทย-ลาว มีแนวโน้มที่จะยึดมุมมองการตีความของชนชั้นนำ บทความชิ้นนี้จึงได้ใช้วิธีการศึกษาทางประวัติศาสตร์และเพิ่มข้อเสนอต่อไปอีกว่าการศึกษาความสัมพันธ์ไทย-ลาว ควรจะมีลักษณะที่เป็นสหวิทยาการมากขึ้น โดยการวิเคราะห์ความสัมพันธ์ของทั้งสองรัฐ ไม่จำเป็นต้องจำกัดอยู่แต่เฉพาะความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างประเทศในฐานะสาขาวิชาเท่านั้น หากแต่ยังอาจจะขยายมุมมองไปยังสาขาวิชาอื่น เช่น รัฐศาสตร์ การปกครอง มานุษยวิทยา สังคมวิทยา ภูมิศาสตร์และชายแดนศึกษา เสียงของผู้คนที่อาศัยอยู่บนผืนดินที่มีส่วนประกอบสร้างความสัมพันธ์ไทย-ลาวจะได้รับการได้ยินมากขึ้น คำถามวิจัยของบทความชิ้นนี้ก็คือว่า ชนชั้นนำได้เข้ามามีบทบาทในการกำหนดความสัมพันธ์แบบทวิภาคีระหว่างไทยกับลาวตั้งแต่ ค.ศ. 1954 จนถึงปัจจุบันในลักษณะใดบ้าง ในยุคอาณานิคม ชนชั้นนำได้ผูกขาดการตีความทั้งทางด้านพื้นที่และเวลาซึ่งการนำเสนอทางวิชาการก็มีแต่เสียงของชนชั้นนำ ลักษณะเช่นนี้ส่งผลต่อเนื่องมาจนกระทั่งสาธารณรัฐประชาธิปไตยประชาชนลาวได้สถาปนาขึ้นในปี ค.ศ. 1975 และจนถึง ค.ศ. 1989 ซึ่งสงครามเย็นสิ้นสุด นับแต่นั้นมาเสียงของผู้คนที่อยู่อาศัยอยู่กับผืนแผ่นดินก็เริ่มได้รับการสะท้อนมากขึ้นในวงวิชาการที่มีการกล่าวถึงความสัมพันธ์ไทย-ลาว ถึงแม้ว่าจะเป็นกรกล่าวถึงพวกเขาโดยยึดมุมมองจากรัฐเป็นศูนย์กลางก็ตาม บทความฉบับนี้เสนอว่าการนำมุมมองของสาขาวิชาอื่นทางสังคมศาสตร์เข้ามาร่วมวิเคราะห์ความสัมพันธ์ไทย-ลาว จะช่วยส่งเสริมให้เสียงของผู้คนที่ไม่ได้เป็นชนชั้นนำมีเสียงที่ดังขึ้น วิชาความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างประเทศที่รวมมุมมองของสาขาวิชาอื่นมาวิเคราะห์ความสัมพันธ์ไทย-ลาวก็จะสามารถฉายภาพให้เห็นถึงมิติต่างๆ ที่มากยิ่งขึ้นตามไปด้วย

**คำสำคัญ** ความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างประเทศ, สหวิทยาการ, เมืองชายแดนศึกษา, ความสัมพันธ์ไทย-ลาว, อนุภูมิภาคลุ่มน้ำโขง

<sup>2</sup> อาจารย์ ดร. คณะรัฐศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยอุบลราชธานี จังหวัดอุบลราชธานี 34190 อีเมล: thanachet.v@ubu.ac.th

## 1. Introduction

This article argues that the state of International Relations that discusses the issues of Thai-Lao relations is elite-oriented. With the analysis of the Thai-Lao relations from 1954 to the present, the elites' monopoly in the discipline in both spatial and temporal interpretation. In other words, International Relations in Thailand is the field for the elites (Poonkham, 2019). Both in terms of space and time conceptualised in the discipline, the elites' monopolise the discussion on Thai-Lao relations. According to the definition of who the elites are as proposed by both Poonkham (2019) and Paribatra (2019), most are students who are trained to work in the ministry of foreign affairs of the two states. In addition, this article proposes that even the state officers who serve the Thai and Lao state and also academic like the author of this article could be defined as the elites. Therefore, this article asks what are the ways in which the elites have conceptualised space and time in the analysis of Thai-Lao relations and how the voices of the marginalised peoples can be included in the discipline. This article argues that to enrich International Relations that more people are academically heard, "action and speech" of everyone, regardless to their class should be recognised (Arendt, 1958, p. 22). The definition of the non-elites would cover those who are marginalised by the state foreign policy on the issues of the Thai-Lao relations. If the voices of the non-elites aforementioned are included in the discipline, more perspectives of space and times will be academically portrayed. Accordingly, this article calls for a more multidisciplinary approach to the issues of the Thai-Lao relations that do not have to be limited within International Relations as a discipline. However, the analysis of the bilateral relations of the two states is extended to other fields of social sciences such as political science in government, anthropology, sociology, geography and borderland studies. Also, the analysis of the Thai-Lao borderlands should be recognised as, the voices of the peoples on the ground that are engaged with the Thai-Lao relations will be more heard. The research question of this article is that what are they ways in which the elites have played out in defining the international relations of Thailand

and Laos from 1954 to the present. It also asks how can the voices of the peoples be included in the analysis of the Thai-Lao relations.

In terms of spatial conceptualisation in International Relations as a discipline, this article has been inspired by the notion of territorial trap of Agnew (1994). The traps are the perception of the inside/outside dichotomy of the state, the myth of self-contained state perception and the policy monopoly by the elites. Mainstream International Relations tends to assume that borders are monopolised by elites because they play a crucial role in interpreting space and time. The voice of state elites continues to dominate the discipline in two aspects: the source usually come from state practitioners and the scholars are also often practitioners themselves. Le Bow (2003) stated that Morgenthau's book *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* was one among many other important sources for students and policymakers in international politics. This is also true for International Relations students in Thailand (Paribatra, 2019). There is also another case, among many others, that elites monopolise the discipline of International Relations. For example, George Kennan was both theorist and practitioner. As a diplomat to Soviet Union, Kennan (1947) penned 'the long telegram' as well as *The Source of Soviet Conduct* discussing an appropriate foreign policy the US ought to have taken in the 1940s. He said that to defend the US national interests, the US should implement a containment policy.

This article further argues that the elites monopolise the temporality in the theory. Using the concept of temporal interaction between *chronos* and *kairos* of Hutchings (2008), the elites controls the interaction of how *chronos* should be run and how *kairos* should intervene. When time runs its course, *chronos* is the repetition of a set of activities and cycle of life duration. When the temporal repetition is controlled by the state, that is considered *chronos*. Meanwhile, *kairos* is defined as unpredictable political events in history (Hutchings, 2008). In the historical narrative in International Relations, when the ancient state continued its existence for centuries without changing the structure of government, that is considered *chronos*. However, once the state has been

transformed from the ancient structure of government to a more modernised one, the transitional phase is defined as *kairos*. The modernisation of Siam in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century could be a good example of this interaction. Having a strong relationship with spatial conceptualisation, as the Westphalian border was practised for the first time in late 19<sup>th</sup> century, time of the state was perceived as if it was contained by the territorial border. Accordingly, time of the state is perceived as homogenous. In the analysis of Thai-Lao relations, this article argues that the interaction between *chronos* and *kairos* is monopolised by the elites. To explain this argument more, this article is divided into six sections. While the first is the introduction that gives the overview of the article and discusses the elite's monopoly both in space and time during the colonial days. As a matter of fact, there were close relations with the then Isan-Thai members of the parliament and the Lao members of anti-colonial group known as Lao Issara. The latter even collaborated with the Free Thai movement during World War II (Ivarsson & Goscha, 2007). The second discusses the time when Lao became an independent state in 1954 and 1975 when Lao PDR was established. Thirdly, it analyses how the elites' voices are echoed academically from 1975 to 1989 which was the end of the Cold War. Fourthly, it talks about how the Thai-Lao relations are narrated in social science and how the voices of the peoples have been more echoed from 1989 to the present day. Fifthly, the proposal of the academic inclusion of other fields in social sciences will be portrayed, as the voices of the people engaged in the bilateral relations of Thailand and Lao PDR are more echoed in sociology, anthropology, geography and borderland studies.

## **2. In the colonial days: Pre-independent Laos**

The elites' monopolisation of space and time in international politics of Thailand and Laos can be traced back to the colonial days. Spatially, the elites controlled how space should be interpreted. They originally had their own interpretations of borders which differed from those of the Westphalian system which was later introduced by colonisation (Soja, 1989). Wolters (1999, p. 27)

employed the Sanskrit term *mandala* which referred to the ancient power relations in the region without rigid territorial boundaries to describe the situation when the most powerful king at the centre acted as a suzerain and expected tributes and respect from the less powerful vassal kings. Regalia and manpower were as a result provided by the less powerful vassals to the overlord king. Winichakul (1994) noted that very often, less powerful kings to send tributes to more than two suzerains at the same time. For example, tiny Lao statelets recognised the more powerful vassals from Siam, Annam, and sometimes China (Evans, 2002).

Siamese elites especially those in the court of Bangkok slowly accepted the idea of Westphalian borders when Burma was annexed to the British Empire in 1885 (Winichakul, 1994). By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and such acceptance of spatial conceptualisation meant the silencing of the voices of the local peoples. For example, various Lao statelets along the Mekong previously attached to the *mandala* system were forced to accept modern administrative reform in 1893 from Bangkok (Bunnag, 1968). Siam adopted colonial tactics similar to the West resulting in military clashes with the French in 1893 and the ‘loss’ of vast areas on the Eastern banks of the Mekong to French Indochina (Strate, 2015). After the Franco-Siamese conflict, the Siamese-Indochina border was drawn for the first time and became the technology of spatial control that has been monopolised by the elites’ interpretation.

Temporarily, it was the time when *chronos* was controlled by the political elites who acted on behalf of the government of Siam in Bangkok on the one hand, and French Indochina on the other. Certainly, ratifying the 1893 Franco-Siamese Treaty, the representatives of the two sovereign states put the concept of the territorial border into practice for the first time using the Mekong river as the natural boundary (Kasetsiri, 2011). In accordance with rigid space management according to the Westphalian concept, time thus was transformed into *chronos* by the political elites in Bangkok and Hanoi under the guidelines of those in Paris, France. Temporal dimension is implied in the fact that the government elites in Bangkok used the experience in the past as a formulation of the then foreign

policy. Implicitly, the government based on mandala power relations was out-of-date and should have been replaced with a more modernised one. They decided that Westphalian concept of space had to be implemented in order to modernise Siam so the nation-state entered a new phase of history.

French travel journals of the time reveal how time was monopolised by the French elites since the temporal conceptualisation found in the historical archives represent the voice of state representatives. These include the documents of the Minister of Colonies (Ministère de Colonies) Roland Meyer (1931), as well as the journals Eugène Picanon (1901), a former civil servant in Indochina, August Pavie (1902, 1903), the formal consul of Indochina, and Alfred Coussot and Henri Ruel (1898), former military officers. These examples represent the temporal views of the French colonialists who viewed that the government form in Europe was more modern and the Siamese and Lao statelets with the concept of mandala lagged behind them. For instance, in the book titled *Douze Mois chez le Sauvages du Laos*, the knowledge of space and time of the French was portrayed as obviously superior. Coussot and Ruel (1898) implied that the French need to organise how the government in the colonies should be run. The word ‘les sauvages’ means ‘savage’ in English. When it was used to describe the people in Indochina, it means that they were still less civilised than France. As such, the chronos of the French is implied that the French is more advanced than the people in Indochina because they had a more modern system of government. The local people had to catch up with them. The French officers were of course described as the elites in the region. These elites’ interpretation of the past affected their judgement at the moment they thought that the spatial concept of Westphalian had to be implemented in the Mekong basins so that the area entered the same historical route as the Europeans.

Ò Tuathail (1996) argued the colonialists thought it was their duty to ‘tame’ the unknown land outside of Europe. This concept goes with the French slogan of mission civilisatrice as they had to civilise the people in the Mekong basins (Sankhamanee, 2012). Temporal element was implied in that barbaric land soon would reach another step of progress by imitating the more advanced knowledge

of space management (Said, 1977; Chakrabarty, 2008). This knowledge of space management was gradually monopolised by the French on the left bank of the Mekong. In the initial stage, the newly arrived colonialists struggled in put the meaning of Westphalian space and time with the local elites (Walker, 2008). This politics of meaning implementation lasted for decades, as with the case of Chiang Khong, Walker even argued that the Siamese elites in Bangkok were the party who actually put the concept of Westphalian border into practice instead of the French. This is because Siam did not want the local people to be under the French sovereignty (Walker, 1999, 2008). To apply Hutchings' term, chronos was monopolised and applied by the French colonialists which included the consulate, state officers, and civil servants who worked in Indochina. In the meantime, the Siamese civil servants also monopolised chronos on the other side of the Mekong. There are some areas on the right bank of the Mekong that the French and Siamese had to compete with each other to exercise the state sovereignty. For instance, Champassak then was under the French sovereignty but was handed to the Thai state in 1941 because the Thai elites believed that that portion belonged to Thailand. The Phibunsongkhram Regime could exert the sovereignty of Bangkok over the city with the assistance of Japan (Breazeale, 1975; Strate, 2015). At that time Phibunsongkhram tried to annex the lands in which Tai-Dai people resided. Champassak on the right bank of the Mekong river was one of the targets together with the province of Lane Xang in the north. With the assistance of Japan, the Thai government could impose its sovereignty over Champassak (High, 2009). Eventually after World War II ended, Champassak became under the French Indochina again in 1946 (High, 2009; Charoenvatthananukul, 2020). The changes of the boundaries reflect the temporal dimension monopolised by the elites in Thailand and France.

The temporality of the centre of the state was enforced all over the territory of both Siam and Indochina. Chronos of the state is dictated by the elites from the centre who are positioned in different provinces located in the edge of the state. Such state-centric chronos was reflected in the official report from Ubon Ratchathani (Thailand) and Champassak (Lao PDR) written in Lao and Thai. Indeed, the ethnically Lao people in what is called Northeastern Thailand nowadays define

themselves as Lao and this was even more obvious before the 1960s as proposed by Keyes (1966). As a matter of fact, there were close contacts of the politicians in Isan who were ethnically Lao and anti-colonisation movements in Laos. There were meetings of ethnic Lao in Thailand and in French Lao. They were Thongin Phuriphat and Tieng Sirikhan who planned for a possible trans-Mekong Lao confederation which covers the area of the right and left bank of the river (Ivarsson & Goscha, 2007). As a member of the Lao independent movement, Oun Sananikhone later disclosed the details of the Isan politicians to the French about their plan of trans-Mekong confederation. Indeed, Oun Sananikhone stayed in Thai territory for quite sometimes. He even worked with the Seri Thai the anti-Japanese empire at that time led by Pridi Banomyong, the former Thai prime minister during World War II. Back then, Oun Sananikhone was working alongside with Tieng Sirikhan and Thongin Phuriphat who were later the politicians as mentioned (Ivarsson & Goscha, 2007). In terms of temporal interpretation, it must be accepted that there was a plan of trans-Mekong confederation, meaning chronos of the Thai and Lao state could have been merged. However, the plan has never been put into practice.

Ian Baird (2013) shows the Thai-Lao cities had very close contacts. Before 1893, Ubon Ratchathani and Champassak had the history of their own, written by the local elites. However, once Ubon Ratchathani was under the sovereignty of Siam, temporality of Bangkok which was the capital of Siam had to be imposed on Ubon Ratchathani. In the meantime, Champassak was under the temporality of Paris. Accordingly, the local elites had to follow the temporal practices of the elites from the centre; Ubon to Bangkok and Champassak to Hanoi and Paris. For example, when the local narratives of the description of the population in Ubon had to be reported to Bangkok, the person who reported had to cross out the word Lao used to describe people's ethnicity. This suggests that Bangkok tried to make Ubon more Thai at that time so that its connection with their Lao brethren on the other side of the Mekong was cut (Iijima, 2018). It was not only the first temporal trap that can be noticed but also the homogenous perception of the state time. It means Ubon Ratchathani's time was separated from that of Champassak by the territorial border.

### 3. The Royal Government of Laos from 1954 - 1975

This section argues that in mainstream International Relations, the elites' perception on space and time plays an important role in two aspects: the source usually come from state practitioners and the scholars are also often practitioners themselves. In the international context at that time, the most important discourse that shaped justification for the US intervention to contain communism in Indochina during the Cold War was Domino Theory (O'Sullivan, 1998). Indeed, the comparison of a state with a domino resulted from the spatial conceptualisations that insist that Westphalian state is the best form in international politics and mandala in terms of time was seen as lagging behind. Such comparison of a state with a domino can be found in words of the intellectuals of statecraft and International Relations theorists. For instance, the then US president Eisenhower stated that "the loss of Vietnam, together with Laos" would be a threat to "not only Thailand but also Burma and Malaya" (1963, p. 333). It was a like domino falling over other dominos. Eisenhower moreover indicated that Laos was a key "domino" in the area because the Ho Chi Minh Trail that the Viet Minh used as a route to support military operations in South Vietnam was in Lao territory (Kissinger, 1994, p. 641). A couple of years later, such comparison of the state with a domino was again reproduced by Eisenhower, as he stated "the fall of Laos to Communism could mean the subsequent fall – like a tumbling row of dominoes – of its still-free neighbors" (Eisenhower, 1965, p. 607). Furthermore, another US president John F. Kennedy said that the US had to contain communism in Indochina and bluntly stated that that the fall of Laos to communism would threaten its neighboring states (O'Sullivan 1998; Stevenson, 1972). Also, the former US Secretary of the State, Henry Kissinger criticise the spatial conceptualisation in US foreign policy at that time that compared the state with domino. However, at the time he criticised this very concept he still reproduced the domino metaphors on a number of occasions as if he accepted it. For instance, the metaphor of domino is found more than ten times in Diplomacy. It implies that he accepted the theory

when he mentioned the correspondence between Truman and Churchill (Kissinger, 1994).

Hans Morgenthau (1965) simply reproduced the domino metaphors of the state practitioners aforementioned identifying Vietnam as the first domino that was threatened by communism. He echoed the words of the US Secretary of the State at that time, John Foster Dulles, that North Vietnam was “the first cork of the bottle” (Morgenthau, 1965, p. 33). Consequently, the US intervention in the region was justified. To contain the communist threat, the US forces needed to be stationed in South Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. Such justification can be noted in the writing by John Herz (1959). For example, he said that state territory was important like a “hard-shell” that should be used to protect the citizens and the centre of the state (Herz, 1959, p. 40). However, with more advanced technology, especially after World War II, Herz (1959) stated that territorial borders in the Westphalian sense were obsolete. For example, the US border was ‘shifted’ to Indochina to defend the region against communism. Such a statement reveals that the US statesmen, as they are also the elites, and even some members of academia, wanted to defend their imaginative geography in Indochina. The Lao right wing groups that supported the Lao monarchy were supported by the US and the Thai dictator at that time to fight with the left wing Pathet Lao groups assisted by the communist Vietnamese (Kesboonchoo Mead, 2007). The northeastern Thailand was used as the military airbases for the US to intervene in Laos. If the spatial conceptualisation of Herz (1959) was applied here, the US border may have shifted to Indochina. However, it must also be noted that the position of Herz changed ten years later because he emphasised the importance of state territory in the Westphalian system again (Herz, 1968).

The elites’ monopoly in the discipline is found on the issues of Thai-Lao relations. At Chiang Mai University, Bansoon Ladavalaya (1970) authored a textbook on International Relations that showed the temporal monopoly of the elites, especially when foreign policy with the Kingdom of Laos was formulated. Very often, the history of the pre-colonial time before 1893 was cited and this influenced his foreign policy analysis of Thailand towards Laos. At that time, there

was no modern Thailand, nor was there a modern Laos. There was only Bangkok, Vientiane and other Thai-Lao statelets. The two had an ancient relationship based on mandala relations (Wolters, 1999). The kings of a number Lao kingdoms were vassal states that had to pay tribute to Bangkok. In the meantime, they could pay tribute to other more powerful lords. There was no enforcement of territorial integrity in the Westphalian sense (Winichakul, 1994; Charoenvattananukul, 2020). Ladavalaya (1970) notes that, adopting a Westphalian lens, the territory of those Lao statelets were under the sovereignty of Bangkok. Yet, secondary school textbooks in the present Lao PDR interpret this differently (Somsanith & Vayakhone, 2012), noting that Lao kingdom was not part of Thailand before the arrival of the French. However, after 1893, the Laos was torn into two parts as Bangkok colonised the right bank of the Mekong and the French on the left. What is written in the text by Ladavalaya (1970) was considered the reproduction of the elites in the Court of Bangkok in the past that did not include the argument of different perspective of Lao scholars who would have a different claim. That will be discussed more in following sections.

The concept of territorial integrity was adapted to match the will of political elites in US, Thailand, Laos and South Vietnam. Elites evoked the idea of “national interest”, mostly as presented as a defence against communism. The fact that national interest was interpreted accordingly could be described as one type of judgement of how foreign policy should have been formulated. It was a kairotic moment among political elites of these states. For example, the foreign policy in Thailand, Laos, and the US was formulated when the interest of the political elites was agreed with the cloak of national interest which was to contain communism. US forces were allowed to conduct military operations in Thailand, South Vietnam and secretly in Laos before 1973. After the US withdrew from the region and Laos became a communist state in 1975, Vietnamese forces could be stationed in Lao PDR (Oldfield, 1998). The principle of territorial integrity was not strictly applied with governments that were friendly to the host state such as US to Thailand before 1973 and Vietnam to Lao PDR after 1975. Normally, military intervention of one state is not supposed to conduct operation in another state

but this case, the US forces were the exception. Still, territorial integrity remained important because if it was broken too often, the state would lose legitimacy in the international arena. For example, the US and Thailand had military operations in Lao territory against communist forces a secret before 1973 (Lee, 2012). To publicly accept that this operation existed would not be legitimately accepted by international actors.

Accordingly, it leads to another important narrative of the Cold War known as ‘Domino Theory’ (O’Sullivan, 1998). When the US tried to contain communism in the region, the domino discourse was very often included in political narratives produced by the elites. Dwight Eisenhower (1965), the former US president, said that if Laos became a communist state, it was like a domino falling over others. The neighbouring countries to Laos would become communist too. With such a rhetoric, time was in the territorial border as the surface of that piece of domino. In addition, the classical realist Hans Morgenthau (1965) even expressed similar perception of time as he said that the Vietnam was like a cork in a wine bottle. Once, it became communism, it was like the bottle was uncorked and the wine spilled everywhere, meaning the neighbouring state such as Laos and Thailand. Therefore, the US had to intervene to contain communism. With such a rhetoric was uttered by the elites in the US, the the Thais and the Laos accepted it and put it into practice.

The temporal explanation of Thailand and Laos in this period is monopolised by the elites who thought the Westphalian state as the best form of political spatial management to survive the anarchical international politics. It means other forms were perceived as lagging. The Lao historian Maha Sila Viravong (1964) interpreted the interactions between chronos and kairos in a unilinear manner. The historical narratives of the Laos resembled that of the Thai authored by Wichit Wathakan who pioneered the history of the Thai race during World War II (Strate, 2015). For example, the Lao people migrated southwards from the Altai Mountain, just like the Thais did and then settled in the river valley of the Mekong (Pholsena & Banomyong, 2006). The temporal phases were narrated in a unilinear manner (Viravong, 1964). As the evolution of the Laos was

portrayed from a nomadic tribe that started their journey from the North of China. Then they moved southwards and became a mandala state in the Mekong valleys. The Lao Chao Khamman Wongkitrattana (1973), who of course had the title of the elite as the blue-blood 'chao', reproduced the journey from Altai, similar to what Wichit Wathakan and Viravong (1963) did. That was how the Laos became a nation.

At this kairotic juncture the ancient mandala state became a modern one. Tej Bunnag (1968) implied that the Westphalian form of spatial management is the most appropriate in international politics. It was not directly stated so, but he said the Siamese bureaucracy needs to be reformed at that time and territorial borders need to be established. It is assumed further by this article that with such modernisation favoured by Bunnag (1968), Siam then survived the anarchy of international politics. Such monopolisation of the elites can be found in Ladavalaya (1970) as he implicitly said that the Westphalian state was the best form of spatial management. If the transformation from ancient mandala state to a modern Westphalian Siam was considered kairotic, this kairos occurred from 1893 to 1915 was monopolised by the elites in Bangkok 1892 – 1915. During Siam's early period of modernisation in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the half-brothers of King Chulalongkorn were sent to work as the local governors over the Lao speaking provinces on the right bank of the Mekong. Taxes were collected and census organised. In Ladavalaya (1970) textbook and Bunnag (1968) doctoral dissertation, there was no comments from the local princes on how space should be organised or how local history should be written. Recently historical research by Iijima (2018) finds that the people in Ubon Ratchathani called themselves 'Lao'. However, over time the word 'Lao' was replaced by political elites with words Thai and Isan, a Pali-Sanskrit term which referred to people who live in the northeast of the country. The chronos of several border towns where Lao speakers were the majority, were subsequently assimilated to Thailand, and Champassak, despite in the right bank of the Mekong, to French Indochina, as the French were at time the major sponsor of how the history of the Lao should be written during World War II (Ivarsson, 2008).

#### 4. Lao People's Democratic Republic from 1975 – 1989

This article takes 1975 as the beginning stage of analysis as Laos became Lao People's Democratic Republic (Evans, 2002), and 1989 as the end point because it was the year that Thai Prime Minister Chatchai Choonhavan announced the economic project of turning the battlegrounds into the marketplaces (Erlanger, 1989). The elites' monopolisation of space that results in time from the previous phase continued.

The elites' spatial conceptualisation of the social science texts that discuss the Thai-Lao relations see the border as a fixed delineation of the state with homogeneous space and time. For example, Surachai Sirikrai (1984) insisted that the territorial integrity of the Thai and Lao state should not be violated. However, after 1975, as the central-economic plan of the Lao government was implemented, a number of Lao people crossed the Mekong border river to Thai territory (Phuangkasem, 1984). If the territorial border was seen as the edge of a homogenous space and time container, that edge is very porous. Lao people who unofficially crossed the border but were not verified by the Thai state were labelled in International Relations texts as "refugees", such as in the work of Corrine Phuangkasem (1984, p. 29). There were "refugee camps" along the Northeastern border provinces and these people became the issues of Thailand and Lao PDR.

Additionally, the dichotomous understanding of the inside/outside was outstanding in the texts in International Relations during that time and that was imposed by the elites. What needs to be problematised is that the length of the container changes over time, depending on how it was measured and the type of equipment used. For example, Virat Ruampongpatana (1988) shows how maps are used by the Thai government to back its claims over disputed borderlands. However, the Lao government similarly used another version of the modern maps to counter these claims (Nvasyvathn, 1985). It means that even the boundary used as a pseudo edge of a container can be contested. The Thai side used aerial photography and equipment by the US to back its claim, while the Lao government used the French version during the colonial heyday.

Moreover, the length of the Thai-Lao border is contested. The State Department indicated in 1975 that the Thai-Lao border is 1,750 kilometres in length. However, since the 1980s several Master degree theses in International Relations at Chulalongkorn University have indicated that it is 1,180 (Kutranon, 1982; Ruampongpatthana, 1988; United States of America, Office of Geography, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Department of the State, 1962). Even in 2013, Paribatra (2013) confirmed again in his PhD thesis that the length of the border is 1,810. Accordingly, the line used as the edge of the homogenous containment of the state space and time is very problematic.

On the temporal aspect, there were academic texts produced in this period but analysed the Thai-Lao relations between 1954 to 1975, in which chronos was very state centric. For example, Surachai Sirikrai (1979) was aware that people in Northeastern Thailand and Lao PDR were ethnically, linguistically and culturally related. However, the implementation of Westphalian spatial logic in 1893 between French and Siam led to the separation of the reification of the states' space and led to the development of different historical narratives. The Laos under the French became a new state in 1954, with its own history, while the Laos under Siam became Thai citizens according to Thai historiography. As the Laos in the then Lao PDR were under a communist regime, the Thai state did not want the Lao speakers in the northeast to be closely related to Lao PDR, the military regime in Bangkok therefore launched several development projects. This scheme was funded by the US who also implement policy on communism containment in the region (Kesboonchoo-Mead, 2007). For example, the construction of the Mittraphap Road or Highway No.2 from Bangkok to Nong Khai, which was opposite to the Lao capital city of Vientiane was planned by the Thai and American elites as part of the communism containment project.

The academic texts presented to the political elites of both states at the time usually used pre-colonial conceptualisation of space and time to claim for the possession of territory whenever there were border disputes. For instance, Sukhumbhand Paribatra (1984), who was both a scholar in International Relations and held a position at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs two decades later, bluntly

said that Laos was part of the ancient kingdoms of Thailand. He used the spatial-temporality of the mandala to support his argument, using the frameworks outlined by Wolters (1999) and Tambiah (2013), that the Lao kings had to pay tribute to the more powerful Thai kings in Bangkok. It means that the peoples on the ground were not taken into academic account of how the Thai-Lao border should have been practised at that particular time. Indeed, this article argues that from the empirical data, the voices of the elites were outstanding.

The relations between *chronos* and *kairos* in the social sciences, especially in International Relations, has been state-centric and hence unilinear. However, the unilinearity of how history is narrated reflects different interpretation by the two states. For instance, the Thai diplomat and scholar Paribatra (1984) employs uses a sense of Thai nationalism in claims of ‘lost territory’. This is in stark contrast to the point of view from Laos (Ngaosyvathn, 1985). In this period of 1954 and 1975, although the claim to have a fixed territory which is one of the four basic elements of the state was presumed, at least different contested points of views were heard among Thai and Lao scholars. As Thailand and Lao PDR had land border disputes of the three villages called Bang Kang, Ban Savang, Ban May in 1984, the diplomat and scholar Ngaosyvathn (1985) insisted that in 1891 King Rama V of Siam handed the map no. 200 to the King of Luang Phrabang at that time, indicating that the three villages were under the sovereign power of the Lao king. Even though the evidence used predates the modern Lao state, evidences from the pre-colonial time are nevertheless still used to support claims over the 1984 border dispute. Accordingly, Ngaosyvathn (1985) disagreed with the claim of the Thai state that the three villages were under the Thai sovereignty. If that was the case, Lao historiography was not different from that of Thai as they both are unilinear. It means that *chronos* was run in a unidirectional manner with the transitional phase defined as *kairos* that occurred from time to time. For example, the *kairotic* transition from mandala state to a Westphalian was similar in both national discourses. However, what was disagreed on was to whom this territory belonged to. Ngaosyvathan (1985) represented the nationalistic discourse of the Lao state, while Paribatra (1984)

represented the nationalistic discourse of the of the Thai state. It must be noted that the voice of the people who live in the three villages were rarely mentioned. The bilateral relations of Thailand and Lao PDR over the border disputes were interpreted by statesmen, diplomats and scholars.

Such elites' temporal interpretation was reproduced in other texts by other well-known Thai international scholars. For example, Sirikrai (1979) stated that territorial integrity was very important for the Thai state. He said that Vietnam was the threat to the Thai border with Lao PDR, hence reproduced the pre-colonial discourse as Bangkok, which saw Vietnamese invasion as a threat the power of the Thai sovereign power exercised over the Lao people on both sides of the Mekong (Sirikrai, 1979). This elite's temporality was reproduced again to explain the Cold War politics between Thailand and Lao PDR, and as a matter of fact, Paribatra (1984) held similar perception as Sirikrai (1979) did.

## 5. The end of the Cold War in 1989 to the present days

After 1989, academic texts on Thai-Lao relations began to consider in greater depth the role of non-state actors. It suggested a spatial and temporal contextualisation in policy academia that was less monopolised by political elites. Nevertheless, spatial conceptualisations in the discipline still prioritises the Westphalian state. Numerous analyses of Thai-Lao relations were conducted by scholars in political science and International Relations such as Raschada Jiwalai (1994), David Oldfield (1998), Ramses Amer (1999), Khien Theeravit and Adisorn Semyeam (2003), Polvichian Phookongchi (2003), Surachai Sirikrai (2003), and Pinitbhand Paribatra (2013). However, their interpretation of space and time remains state-centric. It means that even the voices of people living in the borderlands are academically heard, but they are still often framed as illegal by the literature.

Jiwalai (1994) argued that elites play a crucial role in defining the chronos of the state and taking it as a fundamental assumption of the politics between Thailand and Lao PDR. This is because Jiwalai (1994) looks at how the Thai bureaucracy functions in settling the border disputes of the two states in 1984

and 1987-1988. Although the Thai bureaucracy is the primary focus, other historians like Martin Stuart-Fox (1997) started to question that the military clashes in 1987-1988 were actually conflicts between local Thai and Lao military units in the borderlands. If that is the case, international politics, especially the temporal dimension, is still very much monopolised by elites, one that is reflected in academic texts to this day. What is worth mentioning is that such a monopoly is starting to be critically examined. For example, the historian Arne Kislenko (2002) cast doubt that the border conflicts between Thailand and Lao PDR in 1987-1988 and instead suggested they were conflicts between Thai-Lao local military officers on illegal logging.

The monopolisation of temporality by political elites is further reflected in the mechanisms of international organisations. For example, Surachai Sirikrai (2003) and Narut Charoensri (2010) introduced the notion of the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) to ostensibly develop communication and transport networks along the Mekong as well as encourage greater cooperation in the domains of agriculture, energy, environment, human resources, investment, tourism and trade (Charoensri, 2010). Indeed, the one of the objectives included greater support for the rights of peoples along the Mekong compared to theirs during the Cold War. It means the voices of the peoples on the ground were more recognised. Yet, to be academically heard, it is unavoidable that the elites are the political actors who produce the texts.

Similar patterns can be observed in other organisations such as when Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the United Nations (UN) began to address the plight of the displaced Hmong in Thai territory (Chanthavanich & Pliansri, 2008). ASEAN planned to solve conflicts in the past because they undermined the security of Thailand and Lao PDR, including the “Thai-Lao border” and “Lao refugees” (Amer, 1999, p. 1042).<sup>3</sup> Such phrases

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<sup>3</sup> During the Cold War, there were a number of Hmong who joined the US to fight the communists (Pholsena 2006), although it could be argued that some Hmong joined the communist Pathet Lao in the battle against the Royal Lao government too (Hillmer, 2010; Lee, 2012). As a result, when the US withdrew from the, the Hmong who joined the US had

implied that past conceptions of space and time were still taken for granted, even though ASEAN with a mechanism called “constructive engagement” was proposed to tackle the political conflicts of displaced persons (Amer, 1999, p. 1031).

Paribatra (2013) insisted that the lack of this territorial state meant that the Hmong can only be refugees or displaced people in theory. Without their own state, the movements of the Hmong are not recognised internationally and theoretically. In other words, their movements are interpreted as abnormal to the logic of citizenship and it should be the member of a particular state. Very often, they were defined as “insurgents” if they were involved with insurgency in Lao PDR (Oldfield, 1998, p. 174). Paribatra (2013) indicated that the displaced Hmong in Thailand had contacts with the insurgents in Lao PDR in the 2000s. At that time the bilateral relations of the two states was not in its best shape. After resettlement schemes programmed to accommodate the Hmong by Thailand and the US in 2003 and 2009, Thailand had better relations with Lao PDR (Paribatra, 2013). With such interpretation, again, the spatial conceptualisation of the westphalian state was privileged. Chanthavanich (2011) reported, comments from the Thai Minister of Foreign Affairs in the 1980s, Siddhi Savetsila, how refugees from Indochina, including the Hmong, were a burden to the Thai state. Because displaced peoples were perceived as a threat to the state security (Chanthavanich, 2011), once they crossed the Thai-Lao border, three steps of state practice were taken. First, humane deterrence was applied as displaced peoples were detained, then later forced/requested to return to their supposed home state. Second, a resettlement program to third countries was offered to displaced persons. Thirdly, voluntary repatriation was offered to them. The state, theoretically, did not listen if the place where the peoples had escaped from threatened their lives. As a result, people on the ground tended to be completely

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to flee Lao PDR as Pathet Lao chase them and indeed it was argued that genocide of the Hmong took place even in the early 2000s (Evans, 2002). A number of Hmong had to cross the Thai-Lao border and stayed in Thai territory.

silenced. Chronos of the state is prioritised over the kairos of the displaced peoples. Statesmen defined the clear-cut line of the two states in the form of Westphalian state as the most develop government method as it is a Thailand and a Lao PDR.

The temporal conceptualisation of the peoples on the ground are better reflected in other subfields of the social sciences. In government, Theeravit and Semyeam (2002) conducted research on the bordertowns of Chong Mek (Thailand) and Vang Tao (Lao PDR) in 2000. Temporality of the peoples on the ground was reflected, as their historical narrative of the past Royal Kingdom of Laos was used to arouse the feeling of the people in the bordertown aforementioned. A group of Thai citizens with Lao ethnicity and related Lao citizens on the other side of the river launched a military attack on an official Lao building. They claimed that they were related to the group of the Royal Lao Government that existed before 1975. After a few hours, the Lao military reclaimed the building and twenty-eight militants crossed the border back to the Thai side. They were later arrested by the Thai police (Theeravit & Semyeam, 2002; Phookongchi, 2003). Theeravit and Semyeam (2002) started to interview the people in that area on what they thought about the incident and the Thai government's measure after the incident. It means that the voices of the people on the ground started to be heard academically. In the work by Phookongchi (2003), local military officers were interviewed in tandem with people. Although the question did not specifically focus on how time and space were interpreted, and although more people were academically heeded, spatial conceptualisation of Westphalian state is still prioritised.

The historical narrative of the state, of course, is produced by the Thai and Lao elites and often heard in the discussion on Thai-Lao relations. Lao scholars such as Ngaosyvathn and Ngaosyvathan (1994), and Louangphasy (2010) revealed an obvious sense of Lao nationalism, by discussing the historical narrative of the central government. Mainstream historicism of the Thais overlooked the voices of the Lao statelets on both sides of the Mekong. Lao was a "nation and a state" before the arrival of the French (Ngaosyvathn & Ngaosyvathn, 1994, p. 10).

Louangphasy (2010) further countered the discourse of the territorial loss by the Thai state, as claimed by the Thai government that Siam lost Lao territory to France (Strate, 2015). Loungphasy said that the Thai did not lose Laos to France, but the Lao kingdom was torn into two pieces, the eastern bank of the Mekong were colonised by France and the west by Siam. The two discourse of nationalism reflect the conceptualisation of state development on both space and time. On spatial conceptualisation, it means that the Westphalian state was still favoured academically. On temporal conceptualisation, the Thai scholars insisted that the nomadic groups from what is China today to the settlements of the river valley along the Mekong and Chao Phraya basin will unidirectionally become a modern Westphalian one. The Lao scholars disagreed and insisted that the Mekong valleys must establish their own Westphalian state which is distinctive from the Thai. Ivarsson (2008) said that one factor of why the historical line of the Laos diverted from the Thai was the support from France during the colonial heydays. The French tried to counter the claim of the Thai state during the Thai Prime Minister Phibunsongkhram that the Thai and the Lao belong to the same race (Strate, 2015). The discourse of that Thailand lost Laos to France was then produced and reproduced (The History Revision Committee of Khong Chiam, 1997). Although they shared the same origin, the Thai tried to define that the Lao were simply a subgroup, and the Thai need to liberate the Lao from France (Ivarsson 2008). However, as the Thai were not successful, although some parts of the right bank of the Mekong such as Champassak and Lane Xang were under the Thai sovereignty because of the 1941 Tokyo Convention with the support of Japan (Charoenvattananukul, 2020), meaning they were incorporated into chronos of Bangkok. After Japan lost the war, the two provinces had to be returned to France. They then were under chronos of Paris and after independence of Vientiane.

## **6. Spatio-temporal dimension of the borderlands**

To bring in the voices of the peoples on the ground, this article calls for the inclusion of non-state actors in International Relations and make it more

multidisciplinary, especially when the Thai-Lao relations is discussed. Especially, when the analysis of the non-state actors on the Thai-Lao borderlands is included in the discussion of international politics, the voices of the people will be projected more. Over the past three decades, there have been a number of scholars whose work focuses on the Thai-Lao borderlands. These include Jonathan Rigg (2005, 2007), Jakkrit Sangkhamanee (2006), Andrew Walker (2008), Holly High (2009), Sverre Molland (2012), Soimart Rungmanee (2014), Ian Baird (2013), Wisaijorn (2015, 2017, 2018) and Sarah Elsing (2019). Their work generally focuses on people's interactions across the Thai-Lao border. While many of these researchers do not see themselves as part of International Relations as a discipline, their focus of analysis covers the borderlands which is the area where two nation-states meet. This article insists that the consideration of these literatures will enrich the analysis of Thai-Lao relations.

A land with more economic opportunities attracts peoples from a land with less. Due to Thailand's higher levels of economic development, significant numbers of Lao people cross the border for economic opportunities (Rigg, 2005). Actually, the very first factors could be traced back even before the end of the Cold War as the then Lao government launched the New Economic Reform (NEM) or *chintanakan mai* in 1986 (Phouxay, 2010). It was the policy initiated by the Lao government who was supposed to follow centrally-economic planned according to socialist doctrines. However, they were more open to market mechanism according to economic liberalism. Lao people were accordingly introduced with market economy and Thailand which is located on the opposite side of the Mekong river became the destination. Some search for jobs, but not all are legally registered. In 2001, the number of illegal migrants from Lao PDR to Thailand was 58,411 (Pholsena & Banomyong, 2006). Accordingly, several anthropologists have the temporal dimension of everyday border crossings of the peoples in the area. They often have complex motivations for crossing the border. For example, Pholsena and Banomyong (2006) argue that Thai entrepreneurs target Lao people because they are a cheap source of labor. Furthermore, Lao youngsters, who are often the big fans of Thai TV, developed a keen interest in visiting and living in

Thailand (Pholsena & Banomyong, 2006). Because of these two factors – economic and adventure – the daily flow of Lao people between twin cities of borderlands, such as Mukdahane and Savannakhet, was regarded as normal (Pholsena & Banomyong 2006). With such reports of the everyday border crossing, the relations between *chronos* and *kairos* of the local is portrayed more. In the research by Pholsena and Banomyong (2006) the state's interpretation of Westphalian territorial border as space does not disappear. The poor people still have to face such national obstruction when they have to make crossing. Some are policed if their crossings are undocumented. Some manage to cross but still have to face with hardship without legal document of entry to Thailand.

High (2009) further indicated that the Thai-Lao border acted as a fence that obstructs the movements of poor peoples during the Cold War. At the end of the Cold War, economic developments turned the border into a bridge, improving the livelihoods of people on the ground. However, for the poor, the border remained a fence. High (2009) further explains how border crossing in the post-Cold War era demythologises the assumption that the Thai-Lao border was a bridge rather than a fence. She argued that a supposedly borderless world often claimed by policymakers and International Relations scholars after 1989 was for the rich, and discourse about turning the battlefields into marketplaces was not for the poor (High, 2009). On the Nong Khai – Vientiane border, the voices of marginalised peoples are academically reflected in the work of Molland (2012) who explores how the marginalised females from Lao PDR crossed the border informally to find jobs in Nong Khai. In line with Rigg (2005), peoples from less developed economies are incentive to cross the border in search of economic opportunities. People often have to make a decision of when and where to cross the border. Their *chronotic* moment depends on their actual interpretation that they decided not to conform to *chronos* of the Thai state which indicates where and when to cross the border to Thailand. Sometimes, they cross at the spots where there is no border at all but just personal piers of the people who live in both banks of the Mekong but in different nation-states. Very often, such crossings occur at what Sarah Elsing (2019) calls a quasi-state checkpoint, such as in Loei

(Thailand) and Sayabouli (Lao PDR). Elsing saw the importance of the local border crossing as equal as the international checkpoint. Gift giving is important in transborder trade at these quasi-state checkpoints. Licitness is very important, more important than legality. Negotiation between local political actors thus form parts of everyday practice in the borderland (Elsing, 2019, p. 216).

The border as imposed by the Thai and Lao elites are challenged by the people on the ground as reported by a number of anthropologists. For instance, Jakkrit Sankhamanee (2006) examined how the local people in Chiang Khong (Thailand) and Houayxay (Lao PDR) negotiated with state officers when crossing the river border in their everyday lives. With this level of analysis, the local people's judgement whether to conform to the national territory was brought into the analysis. When they encounter state officers, they must judge whether they conform with the logic of national territory or they could just cross it because the officers will facilitate their crossing if they have good personal relationship. Rungmanee (2014) said that the area of Mukdahane and Savannakhet is unique in that people who cross the border might is illegal according to the standard of both central governments. Their border-crossings are not approved by the Thai and Lao officers at formal checkpoints – they simply cross the Mekong with their personal vehicles. However, such methods are considered legitimate in the area and hence licit. It means that both temporal and spatial conceptualisation is very much focused when the interpretation of Thai and Lao people without state authority per se is discussed. Accordingly, the interaction among state and non-state actor has been less monopolised by the elites of the two states.

Wisaijorn (2018) calls the situation in which the people on the Thai-Lao border have to judge when and where to make crossing as kairotic moment. In his analysis on the everyday lives in Khong Chiam, Ubon Ratchathani (Thailand) and Sanasomboun, Champassak (Lao PDR), multiplicity of border crossings can be witnessed (Wisaijorn, 2018). People from Thailand can cross to Lao PDR every day from 8.00 a.m. to 4.30 p.m., but they are not allowed to proceed beyond the area of the village opposite to Khong Chiam. Also, they are required to come back that very same day. People from Lao PDR are allowed to cross to Khong

Chiam three days per week; Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturday. The people who cross the border from Thailand are organised to used a different pier from those from Lao PDR. Sometimes, the people who make crossings conform to the chronotic temporality by the state that they cross on the time the Thai state allowed the local administration to organise. However, sometimes, they do not because these people have their own personal piers. They can use these channels to visit their relatives living on both sides of the river which are in two nation-states. The judgement of when to conform to border as spatial and timetable as the temporal imposition of the state can be considered kairotic.

## 7. Conclusion

This article has argued that space and time conceptualised on the issues of Thai-Lao relations is monopolised by the elites who are the state officers of the two states. Their worldview of international politics, both spatially and temporarily, are constitutive with mainstream International Relations scholars. This article has asked what are the ways in which space and time have been framed in International Relations as a discipline when Thai-Lao relations is discussed. International Relations as a discipline should be more multidisciplinary and the examinations on the relations of the two states should be extended to other fields of social sciences the voice the people on the ground and their space and time conceptualisation. This article has portrayed how the elites have played out their spatial and temporal interpretation on the international relations of Thailand and Laos from 1954 to the present. The introduction section has discussed the elite's monopoly both over space and time during the colonial days. The second has discussed the Thai-Lao relations from 1954 to 1975. Thirdly, this article has analysed how the elites' voices are exchoed academically from 1975 to 1989. The fourth section has examined the narratives on Thai-Lao relations in other fields of social science and how the voices of the peoples have been more recognised since 1989. Fifthly, the proposal of the academic inclusion of other fields in social sciences has been portrayed. The voices of the

marginalised have been more echoed in sociology, anthropology, geography and borderland studies. Therefore, that is the springboard to the argument of this article that the analysis of Thai-Lao relations will be multilayered if it is interdisciplinary.

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