

HOME IN A NEW PLACE:  
MAKING LAOS IN MORGANTON, NORTH CAROLINA

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## **ABSTRACT**

Kathryn Anne Clune:  
Home in a New Place: Making Laos in Morganton, North Carolina  
(Under the direction of Bernard L. Herman)

This thesis explores, through the world of one family, how Lao-Americans have crafted their home in a small southern community. By chronicling their experiences in Morganton, North Carolina, I tell a larger story about emergent global landscapes across the South.

The extended Phapphayboun family is an anchor for the Lao-American community in Morganton. With three generations now united, the family asserts their Lao heritage every day. This project explores three realms essential to the Phapphayboun's identity: their home and holiday traditions; the family restaurant; and the local temple they helped establish. Across each of this family's worlds, traditional foodways knit together the threads of their identity for personal and public display. Food gives the Phapphayboun family a strong foundation. It is the taste of Laos, played out in papaya salad and chilies, which enables the Phapphaybouns to exercise their heritage among one another, the local Lao community, and other Morgantonians.

“It is the sense of place going with us still that is the ball of golden thread to carry us there and back and, in every sense of the word, to bring us home.”

—*Eudora Welty, “Place in Fiction,” 1957*

“When you live your life, it is like going to a rice paddy. Your focus is on the rice, but along the way you may pick up a cricket or see a snail. You take what you can along the way: life is not tunnel vision.”

—*Lao proverb, as told by Noubath Siluangkhot.*

For Toon Phapphayboun, whose generosity in both story  
and hospitality made this project possible.

With deep gratitude to Dan and Judy Clune, who taught me how to see the world.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The success of this project depended on unwavering help from my family, mentors, and of course, the Phapphaybouns, who welcomed me into their home again and again, eventually giving me a key. From our first meeting, Toon offered wise reflection on her experiences and her country. She also took me to Asian Fusion Kitchen, her sister Dara's restaurant, which has felt like home ever since. Each time I left Morganton to return to Chapel Hill, heavy bags were pressed into my hands, full of leftovers and sweet sticky rice wrapped in banana leaves. Dara and Danil are always the most gracious hosts at Asian Fusion Kitchen, as Mee and her husband Noh are at their home. Meemee never lets her guests want for anything and always dishes out portions too generous for my own good. I thank Khamsi for his eagerness in welcoming me to Wat Lao Sayaphoum and Noubath for showing me what real Lao cooking in North Carolina tastes like. Airsikhay was patient and forgiving with me as I made my first video.

My committee members and mentors at UNC-Chapel Hill gave me the courage to take this project on and see it through. Bernie Herman was the first to convince me it had to be done, and I am grateful for that push. Marcie Cohen Ferris was my most faithful cheerleader and encouraged me to take video and as many photographs as possible—even lending me her camera in the early days. Together, Marcie and Bernie helped me form a new understanding of the cultural importance of food and dramatically shaped my writing. Patricia Sawin, with endless patience, gave me the foundational theoretical understanding

this fieldwork rests upon. Glenn Hinson encouraged me to make my first trips to High Point, Hickory, and Morganton, and affirmed my decision to keep going back, however nervous I was about telling this story. Amanda Millay Hughes at the Ackland Art Museum gave me valuable personal and professional advice, trusted in my abilities, and contracted me for special projects—for which I am very grateful.

I have had other helpful mentors, though they are less likely to call themselves by that label. Mattiebelle Gittinger, the longtime research associate for Southeast Asian textiles at The Textile Museum in Washington, D.C. was rode her bicycle across Indonesia and documented the art and people she met as early as the 1960s. It is women like her, looking past the center of what academia typically celebrates, who inspired my path. Ajan Chansamone, the Lao language teacher at the US Embassy in Vientiane, was so helpful in answering my questions: I often went to her with a photo of something that caught my eye and left with a deeper understanding of Laos. Betty Belanus, my supervisor and friend at the Smithsonian's Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, helped me discover the shape of my career. Whitney Brown, a constant voice of encouragement, introduced me to the Folklore Program and has forged countless connections and new friendships for me in the Triangle and D.C. One of those dear friends is Emily Wallace, who shared work dates and weekend getaways—sometimes one in the same—throughout these two years. Emily and Sandra Davidson, my classmate and MA twin, saw me at my best and my worst during these two years, and with them, I could laugh through it all.

Finally, I have to thank my family. By raising me around the world, my parents Dan and Judy Clune indelibly shaped my interests, values, and goals. They have given me endless emotional and logistical support—from California to D.C. to North Carolina—as I made the

decisions which led me to pursue this MA. I am so grateful I could spend eleven weeks in Vientiane with them during the course of this project. It is a time-out-of-time I will always remember. My sisters Margaret and Sarah and their families were there to offer encouragement every time I faltered. I am deeply grateful for the strength and joy my family gives me every day—whether we are near or half a world apart.



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Nancie McDermott (in person).....	Raleigh, NC, April 18, 2014
April McGreger (over email) .....	March 22, 2015
Toon Phapphayboun (in person).....	Morganton NC, March 10 and April 12, 2014
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.....	Morganton NC, March 10 and May 11, 2014
Airsikhay Ammalathithada (in person).....	Morganton, NC, May 7 and September 21, 2014

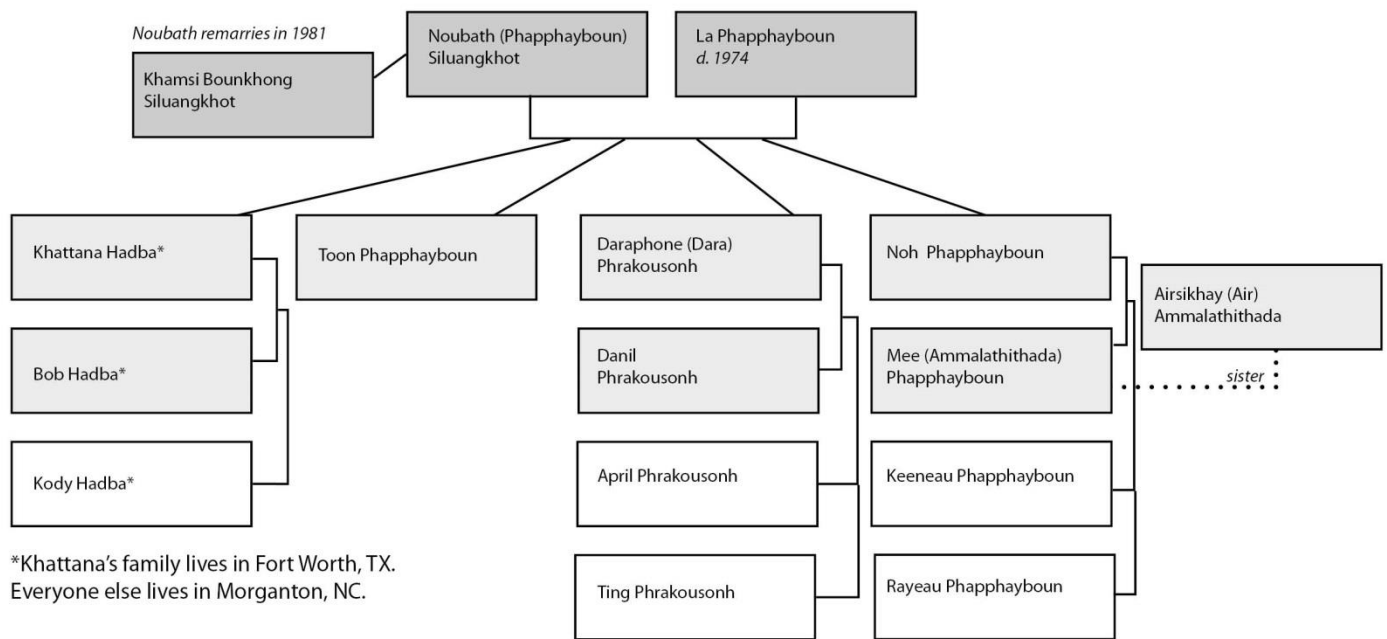
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**Figure 1.1** Phapphayboun family tree.





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## INTRODUCTION

Food is the sensory landscape of Laos. In the city streets of Vientiane, smoke rises from grilling fish, chicken, and pork. Over charcoal, lower to the ground, soft, short bananas are turned to evenly brown. The fruit vendor rings his bell as he bicycles down the street. There is no explanatory sign or text: the gleaming fruits declare themselves on their own terms. Red and spiny rambutan, green raw mango (paired with spiced salt), and pale, chewy yellow corn gleam from behind the glass. Mobile vendors dart in and out of traffic, which slows as drivers judge the pineapples for sale on the back of a parked truck. The markets (*talats*) overwhelm you with a kaleidoscope of produce. Maneuvering through the heavily laden tarps, tables, and bargaining shoppers is a feat. Herbs and bitter greens lie beside parts of plants you never thought to eat: the leaves of squash and galangal flowers. Vientiane embraces a bend in the Mekong River, and even here, in the country's largest city, men and women fish in its waters. You see them heading home at dusk with shining silver fish in plastic crates. Venture just beyond the urban center and the landscape opens into lush rice paddies. Green papayas hang on drooping branches just steps from the kitchen and the mortar and pestle that will pound flavor into their flesh.

This is the world the Phapphayboun family left behind upon moving to the United States. Toon Phapphayboun, one of three daughters and a son, was the first to leave Vientiane. She did so by swimming across the Mekong, fleeing an unbearable regime heralded by the rise of the communist Pathet Lao party. She arrived in Los Angeles in 1981.

Eleven years later, she had assisted the rest of her family in leaving Laos for the United States. After living in California and Connecticut, the Phapphaybouns almost entirely reunited in Morganton, North Carolina, in 2003. The small city is located in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Today, Toon, her parents Khamsi Bounkhong and Noubath Siluangkhot, her sister Daraphone (Dara) Phrakousonh and her family and her brother Noh and his family live in two houses a few miles apart (see figure 1.1 for a family tree). Their daily togetherness is a triumph over history and circumstance, and the family joyously asserts their Lao heritage.

Upon moving to Morganton, the Phapphaybouns embarked on remaking Laos in the mountain South. Their world is split across three primary realms: family homes; Asian Fusion Kitchen restaurant and the adjacent grocery run by Dara; and Wat Lao Sayaphoum, the Buddhist temple the family helped found, now situated in a double-wide trailer and carport in the surrounding hills (figure 1.3). Across each of these worlds, traditional foodways knit together the different threads of the Phapphayboun's identity for personal and public display while granting the family a foundational strength. It is the taste of Laos, played out in papaya salad and chilies, which enables the Phapphaybouns to exercise their heritage among one another, the local Lao community, and other Morgantonians.

My research for this thesis stretched from November 2013 to May 2015, from Morganton to Laos. I visited Morganton ten times and overlapped with Toon, Noh, Meemee and their two sons in Vientiane for six weeks during July and August 2014. I drove from Chapel Hill for family celebrations, temple ceremonies, and visits to Asian Fusion Kitchen. The last time Toon visited Laos was in 1988. As she experienced her home country after twenty-six years away, I was discovering it for the first time. While in Laos, I visited the

Phapphaybouns in their ancestral home and took copious notes in the many markets, temples, and restaurants I explored. My interviews with the family, their friends, my language teacher at the US Embassy, and others are supported by countless conversations with Toon. She translated my questions to Lao and assisted with my interviews with her parents and a visiting monk at the Morganton temple. As a result of my growing friendship with the Phapphaybouns, and with deep thanks for their support of this project, this thesis is an intimate portrait of their lives in Morganton.

It is a timely exploration of how individuals like the Phapphaybouns are helping to transform the South by integrating global influences into the region. Most of the scholarship on immigrants from Laos in America deals with the Hmong, not Buddhist, Lao.<sup>1</sup> Literature on Lao immigrants in North Carolina is extremely limited, yet increasingly important given that Asian-Americans are one of the fastest-growing populations in the state. In 2000, the census recorded that North Carolina's Asian population was 1.4 percent of the entire state.<sup>2</sup> By 2010, the figure rose to 2.6 percent.<sup>3</sup> This thesis is in conversation with folklorist Barbara Lau's foundational work, which provides a parallel examination of the Cambodian

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1997); Sami Scripser and Seng Yang, *Cooking from the Heart: The Hmong Kitchen in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Sucheng Chan, ed., *Hmong Means Free: Life in Laos and America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994); Cathleen Jo Faruque, *Migration of Hmong to the Midwestern United States* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2002); Sue Murphy Mote, *Hmong and American: Stories of Transition to a Strange Land* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co., 2004).

<sup>2</sup> "Race, North Carolina, 2000," United States Census Bureau, prepared by Social Explorer, accessed April 12, 2015. <http://www.socialexplorer.com/tables/C2000/R10932136?ReportId=R10932136>

<sup>3</sup> In 2010, there were a recorded 205,335 Asian-Americans living in North Carolina. Of this, 10,433 were Hmong, compared with 5,566 Lao. "QuickFacts Beta, North Carolina," United States Census Bureau, accessed April 12, 2015, <http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/RHI425213/00,37>.

population in Greensboro, North Carolina, through the lens of a large temple (2000).<sup>4</sup> In its analysis of how immigrants negotiate remaking home in a new context, this thesis relates to a much broader body of literature. Two new collections of essays address the growing diversity in the South, demonstrating the increasing interest in the subject: *The Larder: Food Studies Methods from the American South* (2013) and *Asian Americans in Dixie: Race and Migration in the South* (2013).<sup>5</sup> By chronicling the Phapphayboun's journey to the United States and their lives in Morganton, I add their voices to this growing scholarship.

To begin, Chapter One provides an essential overview of the political and social issues in Laos that motivated Toon to escape her country at the age of fourteen. I provide background on the family's journey to Morganton to emphasize the triumph their daily togetherness represents. Chapter Two moves the reader inside the two family homes, which serve as a foundation for the Phapphaybouns. Their houses reflect their cultural heritage and family values, and include kitchens large enough to support the many festive gatherings they host each year. Chapter Three provides an overview of the food of Laos, and then invites the reader into Asian Fusion Kitchen, where Dara pulls from her private world of family cooking and Lao cuisine to gracefully articulate of her identity for the wider public. Finally, the temple Wat Lao Sayaphoum is introduced in Chapter Four. Here, amidst the intricate altar display and golden Buddhas, the connection between cooking and sharing traditional foods and the Lao worldview grows evident. The overlap between these three realms demonstrates that, for the Phapphaybouns and Lao-Americans across the country, the heat and bright

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<sup>4</sup> Lau, Barbara. "The Temple Provides the Way: Cambodian Identity and Festival in Greensboro, North Carolina." Master's thesis, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Edge, John T., Elizabeth Engelhardt and Ted Ownby, eds. *The Larder: Food Studies Methods from the American South*. Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2013.  
Joshi, Khyati Y. and Jigna Desai, eds. *Asian Americans in Dixie: Race and Migration in the South*. Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2013.

crunchiness of papaya salad bolsters their implicit, unspoken understanding of what it means to be Lao.

## CHAPTER 1: FROM VIENTIANE TO MORGANTON

*“Laos has a spirit of survival. It is a beautiful country.”* —Toon Phapphayboun, March 10, 2014

### **Laos: A Brief History**

Before visiting Laos, I spent several weekends in Morganton learning about the country from the Phapphaybouns. Their stories, together with my meals at Asian Fusion Kitchen, helped bring the distant nation to life. We talked excitedly about my upcoming trip, Toon telling me, “You’ll see once you get there.” Her parents encouraged me to “Drink Beer Lao like water!” I checked out books on Lao history and culture and thumbed through my own glossy, color-photograph coffee table volume in anticipation. Still, nothing could prepare me as my plane from Bangkok lowered into Vientiane. It was an overcast day and fertile flatlands stretched from the riverbank towards distant mountains. No skyscrapers defined the skyline—fields and trees ran up against the city. Gray concrete buildings were punctuated by bright red and gold tiered temple roofs. Red dirt roads, so close to airport tarmac in a capital city, surprised me. This lack of development, in comparison with neighboring nations, symbolizes the complicated modern history and political sea changes behind the Phapphayboun’s decision to leave their home country for the United States.

Laos is the only landlocked nation in Southeast Asia, and its top-heavy shape is defined by the course of the Mekong River, which winds its way from remote highlands to the South China Sea (figure 1.2). Positioned between China and Burma to the north and



northwest, Thailand and Cambodia to the south, and Vietnam to the east and southeast, Laos is a relatively small country (roughly the size of Great Britain). Its population today is under seven million—tiny in comparison with the sixty-eight million people living in neighboring Thailand.<sup>6</sup> Laos is a nation defined in the nineteenth century at the hands of external powers. Bernard Fall, one of the earliest historians to write on the Vietnam War, claims Laos was “neither a geographical nor an ethnic or social entity, but merely a political convenience.”<sup>7</sup> Before the French took the country as a colony in 1893, Thailand threatened to control the native, centuries-old Kingdom of Lan Xang (Kingdom of a Million Elephants and the White Parasol) that ruled a fracturing region from the north. The royal seat, Luang Prabang, was also the center of Lao Buddhism. As the French mapped boundaries of this new nation, they encircled nearly fifty different ethnic groups, who spoke variations of five different linguistic families.<sup>8</sup> Among these peoples, there was no sense of belonging to the same home. The new French borders followed the Mekong in southwest Laos and excluded Isan, a region in North Thailand, despite the fact that the population was ethnically Lao and nearly culturally identical to its neighbors just across the river. Grant Evans, one of the few western historians of Laos, explains: “Even for the French, Laos was, at that time, more a cartographic reality than a social or historical one.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> "East and Southeast Asia: Laos," Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*, accessed April 12, 2015, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/la.html>.  
"East and Southeast Asia: Thailand," Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*, accessed April 12, 2015, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/th.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Bernard B. Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis: The Laotian Crisis 1960-1961* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1969), 23.

<sup>8</sup> Grant Evans, ed., *Laos: Culture and Society*, (Chang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1999), 26.  
Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, 24.

<sup>9</sup> Grant Evans, *A Short History of Laos : The Land in Between* (Crows Nest NSW, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 2002), 70-71.

While the concept of a single nation was introduced to Laos by outside powers in the modern era, a nationalistic spirit grew increasingly important in the twentieth century. Following World War II, the colonial hold on Laos was weakened and the French left permanently in 1953. The Royal Lao Government (RLG) was formed under the old royal family in Luang Prabang and new statesmen in Vientiane. Yet the RLG's hold over its people was still tenuous. In the simplest of terms, Laos defines itself by three ethnic and geographic divisions: the highlands or mountains, which are largely Hmong; the foothills, which are home to a more diverse set of peoples, many of them also animist; and the lowlands, where the Lao Loum live.<sup>10</sup> This is the majority ethnic group of Laos, and the country's practitioners of its national religion, Theravada Buddhism. While the Lao Loum were optimistic at the notion of independence under the RLG, Laos was soon engulfed by the turmoil in Southeast Asia. Its national identity was tentative and its economy was underdeveloped: the French relied on opium as the largest export, a crop the West was now unwilling to legally trade. As the conflict in Vietnam worsened, President Eisenhower began covert interventions in Laos that would last into the Johnson Administration. By 1955, the United States provided training to the Royal Lao Army and in 1957, the US gave more aid money to Laos than any other nation.<sup>11</sup> After Kennedy took the reins from Eisenhower, he addressed the country in 1961, saying, "Laos is far away from America, but the world is small. The security of all Southeast Asia will be endangered if Laos loses its neutral

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<sup>10</sup> "In pre-war Laos, the various ethnic groups were as stratified as a pousse-café glass." Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You*, 120.

<sup>11</sup> Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You*, 125.  
Roger Warner, *Shooting at the Moon: The Story of America's Clandestine War in Laos* (South Royalton, Vermont: Steerforth Press, 1996), 7.



**Figure 1.4** Much of Laos is still undeveloped, as this shot of the mountainous landscape in the north from the air demonstrates. Photo by Kathryn A. Clune.

independence.”<sup>12</sup> Kennedy referred to the threat posed by the rising communist party Neo Lao Hak Xat, more commonly known as the Pathet Lao (or Lao State).

In support of the Royal Lao Government, the CIA covertly enlisted willing locals in what became known as America’s “Secret War.” Fighters were largely Hmong, an ethnic minority living in the highlands who sought independence from any government—including the Pathet Lao. At its peak, this army (the Hmong Armée Clandestine) numbered 30,000, led by the fierce General Vang Pao.<sup>13</sup> By paying the Hmong to fight an American war, the United States adhered to the 1962 amendments to the Geneva Accords on paper. Meanwhile, the US dropped more than two million tons of bombs on Laos, “an average of one bombing sortie every eight minutes for nine years.”<sup>14</sup> Much of this artillery targeted the Ho Chi Minh trail, which ran through southeastern Laos. Despite US attempts, in May 1975 the Pathet Lao took over Vientiane. Seven months later, the party overthrew Laos’s ancient monarchy and the nation was renamed the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (LPDR). America’s intervention failed, and today national and international teams continue to remove tons of unexploded ordinances from Laos’s countryside.

Following the Pathet Lao takeover the “bamboo curtain” descended and LPDR embraced policy that isolated the country from the rest of the world.<sup>15</sup> Restrictions were put in place, including a ban on western dress and all trade that was not state-sponsored. As a result, this new government grew increasingly unpopular. Between 1975 and 1985, ten

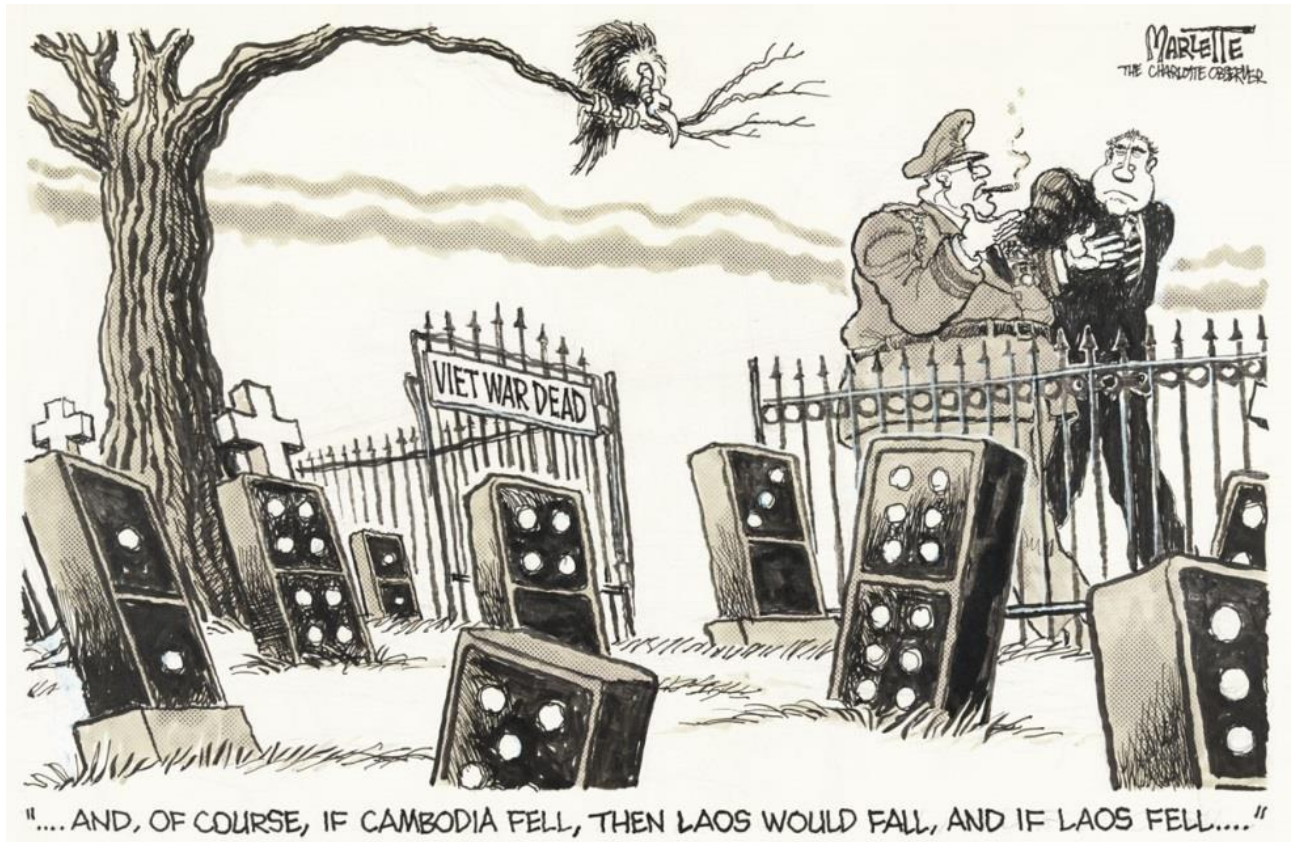
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<sup>12</sup> Warner, *Shooting at the Moon*, 48.

<sup>13</sup> Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You*, 130.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>15</sup> Evans, *Laos: Culture and Society*, VII.



**Figure 1.5** Political cartoons from the 1960s and 70s occasionally featured Laos, but the country was typically left out of public discourse in the US.

Doug Marlette, "And of course, if Cambodia fell, then Laos would fall, and if Laos fell...", c. 1972. President Nixon with a military officer. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Art Wood Collection of Cartoon and Caricature, LC-DIG-ppmsca-19765.

percent of Laos's citizens left the country as refugees.<sup>16</sup> The intellectual and middle to upper classes of lowland Laos joined tens of thousands of Hmong (who now faced retaliation) in making dangerous journeys across mountains and rivers in search of a new home. The Hmong General Vang Pao was among those who left, arriving first to farm outside of Missoula, Montana, in 1975 before settling in Santa Ana, California.<sup>17</sup> With the war in Laos never publicized in the United States, the nation's newest citizens slowly rebuilt their lives and families while bearing the burden and memory of their country's untold history.

### **The Phapphayboun's Journey to America**

The Phapphayboun family history is tightly woven into this larger narrative of civil war, US intervention, and escape. Their story begins in their hometown, Vientiane, in the 1970s and fragments, running in parallel narratives until 2003, when nearly the entire family reunited in Morganton, North Carolina. Reflecting on her mother's experience, Toon says, "My mom [Noubath] is like a chameleon. She can be the lady of high society, or she can plant rice right next to you and it wouldn't make her feel small. She adapts."<sup>18</sup> Born in Laos in 1946, Noubath married La Phapphayboun when she was seventeen. La was later elected Mayor of Tha Deua, a town roughly twenty miles further south along the Mekong from Vientiane.<sup>19</sup> Faithful to the RLG, La was swept into the in-fighting that ravaged Laos in the 1970s. Bounsang Khamkeo, who worked for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs leading up to and following the Pathet Lao takeover, described the political scene as a "systematic brainwashing of the Laotian population by methods that included political indoctrination,

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<sup>16</sup> Martin Stuart-Fox, *Laos: Politics, Economics, and Society* (London: Frances Pinter Publishers, 1986), 53.

<sup>17</sup> Warner, *Shooting at the Moon*, 382.

<sup>18</sup> Noubath Siluangkhot, interview by Kathryn A. Clune, Morganton, NC, March 10, 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Toon Phapphayboun, phone interview by Kathryn A. Clune, Morganton, NC, March 22, 2015.

peer pressure, lies, threats, rewards for compliance, manipulation by fear and guilt, and physical abuse.”<sup>20</sup> Toon’s father fell victim to this instability, and was assassinated while campaigning for a local gubernatorial seat in 1974. While the blame was placed on the increasingly powerful communists, Toon explained those responsible were “actually people from his own side [motivated by] jealousy.”<sup>21</sup>

Noubath was left a single mother to four children: Khattana, Toon, Dara, and Noh. She made a good living selling homemade food and running a small shop with the help of her daughters. However, as conditions in her home neighborhood Ban Sikai and Vientiane worsened, friends and their children fled for Thailand. Only the Mekong River stood between Laos and the possibility of amnesty and freedom. Then teenagers, Khattana and Dara enjoyed their social life at school too much to think of leaving. But when a close friend with political connections offered to take Noubath’s children to Thailand by posing as their mother, Toon jumped at the opportunity. In her words, “I left Laos with no idea of where I wanted to be . . . But I said, ‘You got to send me . . .’ I told my Mom, ‘Just send me. I’ll just deal with whatever.’” Fourteen years old, Toon left Laos on May 30, 1980.

Like others who made the same dangerous journey, Toon’s escape left an indelible mark on her. She arrived in the United States after eight months—a relatively short journey compared to many.

We had ten people and two canoes. We started in the early morning, but didn’t cross until . . . the next day. In between we were hiding from the officials so we didn’t get arrested. We were so thirsty, when we crossed a sugarcane field we broke the sugarcane and chewed it to get some juice and water in our body. . . . We walked on

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<sup>20</sup> Bounsang Khamkeo, *I Little Slave: A Prison Memoir from Communist Laos* (Spokane and Cheney, Washington: Eastern Washington University Press, 2006), 15.

<sup>21</sup> Toon Phapphayboun, interview by Kathryn A. Clune, Morganton, NC, March 10, 2014.

mud along the rice paddies. All that horror stuff you read in books, I went through that. My canoe had a little boy in it and there was a hole. So I jumped down—I was a good swimmer—and started paddling and pushed the canoe to shore, kicking in my jeans. . . . That’s how I got to Thailand.<sup>22</sup>

Thousands of Lao men, women, and children left during the 1970s and early 1980s.

Airsikhay (Air) Ammalathithada, Toon’s sister-in-law, also left Ban Sikai with little idea of what lay before her: “I didn’t have any money, not even a dollar or a penny. I didn’t think about that when I crossed . . . I was young, I just followed with the folk. Everybody said, ‘Let’s go, Let’s go!’”<sup>23</sup> Air jumped into the Mekong and swam across the river in darkness. “I almost died in the middle of the river because my leg cramped. I told my friend, ‘I cannot swim anymore, I’m going to sink in the water right now!’ He told me, ‘Hang on to this.’ One bamboo stick, that’s how I made it across the Mekong River.”<sup>24</sup>

The Phapphayboun household intimately felt the threat posed by the new government. In 1981, Noubath fell in love with a young doctor, Khamssi Bounkhong Siluangkhot. When they met, Khamssi was newly freed from a Pathet Lao run “re-education camp.” Nearly 20,000 of the country’s best and brightest were sent to these notorious labor camps.<sup>25</sup> A former RLG army doctor, Khamssi experienced hard physical labor throughout his six years in prison. As with Noubath, Khamssi’s resilience served him well as he moved from army doctor to prisoner to head doctor at Laos’s largest hospital before travelling to America, where as a newly arrived US immigrant, he became a machine operator.

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<sup>22</sup> Toon Phapphayboun, interview by Kathryn A. Clune, Vientiane, Laos, July 28, 2014.

<sup>23</sup> Airsikhay Ammalathithada, interview by Kathryn A. Clune, Morganton, NC, September 21, 2014.

<sup>24</sup> Airsikhay Ammalathithada, interview by Kathryn A. Clune, Morganton, NC, May 7 2014.

<sup>25</sup> Judy Rantala. *Laos Caught in the Web: The Vietnam War Years* (Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2004), 178.





**Figure 1.6** This is a story cloth, a type of narrative embroidery made by the Hmong. The style has its origins in the refugee camps. This particular example, in the collection of the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico, depicts Vientiane. The city's French name, "Vieng Chan," is spelled out, and the monuments Patuxay and That Luang are pictured. Hmong are shown escaping across the Mekong to Thailand in canoes or by swimming. This is how Toon and Air left Laos.

Zoua Vang Lor, White Hmong, *Story Cloth* (detail), ca. 1985 – 1989. Made: Ban Vinai Refugee Camp, Laos. Cotton, 64 15/16 x 97 1/4 in. Museum of International Folk Art, IFAF Collection (FA.1990.61.1).

For those who escaped Laos, most awaited news of their fate in a refugee camp in Thailand. Toon and Air spent time in Camp Nong Khai, directly across the river from Tha Deau, where Toon's father had earlier campaigned. Judy Ranthala, wife of a USAID employee, visited Nong Khai in 1976. There to see former friends from Vientiane, she described rough conditions where the barracks were "divided into fifty rooms, and a family was assigned one room of less than ninety square feet."<sup>26</sup> While some families lived in these camps for years, Toon stayed only four months. She moved to the Philippines for another few months before finally arriving in Los Angeles on January 13, 1981.

As the first Phapphayboun to live in the US, Toon helped each member of her family make the journey to America. Khattana, her oldest sister, was the second to leave Laos in 1986, encouraged by Noubath. "My Mom realized I needed somebody. . .the moment I picked up my sister at the airport I felt great," Toon remembers.<sup>27</sup> While she pursued her education—first a high school diploma, then a BA in English from UC Santa Cruz and a MA in English from Cal State—she also learned about immigration law. In 1989, her brother Noh and Noubath came for her college graduation, and only Noubath returned to Laos. In 1990, Dara came on a student visa and moved in with Toon and Noh. Finally in 1991, with an application using her student P.O. address, Toon successfully filed for a green card for her mother. Khamsi also entered the country legally and the two settled in Bridgeport, Connecticut, where they stayed until moving to Morganton in 2003. Eleven years after stepping into a canoe to cross the Mekong River, Toon's family was finally in the United

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<sup>26</sup> Rantala, *Laos Caught in the Web*, 183.

<sup>27</sup> Toon Phapphayboun, July 28, 2014.

States. After describing this journey, Toon shook her head in amazement, saying, “If you didn’t know me, it’s a fiction, isn’t it?”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER 2: AT HOME IN NORTH CAROLINA

“If you can plant your roots well, nothing can shake you.”—Toon Phapphayboun, April 12, 2014

When I ask the Phapphaybouns and their relatives why they chose to settle in Morganton, a small city surrounded by hilly countryside, they always provide the same answer: It is a little bit like Laos. The two distant places—one in Asia, one in North Carolina—share a similar mountain foothills landscape, a tie viscerally felt by the Lao families. When Daniel Phrakousonh, Toon’s brother-in-law, visited Morganton before moving there he thought, “It looks like Laos! A lot of trees, a lot of mountains. Plus at that time, I was considering the cost of living. . . .When I came down here it was quiet [and] there was a lot of time for family and outdoor activities.”<sup>29</sup> Air Ammalathithada also embraced the town’s peace and quiet and recognizes that it was a good place to raise her son.<sup>30</sup> Morganton has a population of roughly 17,000 and is sixty miles northeast of Asheville.<sup>31</sup> As you exit I-40, fast food and chain restaurants give way to a small historic downtown. This central shopping district is contained on a grid of narrow streets lined with tidy two-story brick buildings. As in most small cities across America, a few storefronts stand empty. Still, Morganton’s historic downtown feels like the heart of the community. The lawn of the

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<sup>29</sup> Danil Phrakousonh, interview by Kathryn A. Clune, Morganton, NC, September 20, 2014.

<sup>30</sup> Airsikhay Ammalathithada, September 21, 2014.

<sup>31</sup> The 2010 census recorded a population of 16,918. The census also recorded that the population of “White, alone” in Morganton was roughly 70.1% in 2010, as compared with 68.5% for the state overall. “State & Country QuickFacts: Morganton (city), North Carolina,” United States Census Bureau, accessed April 21, 2014, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/37/3744400.html>.





**Figure 2.1** "Union Street, Morganton, N.C." c. 1930. in Durwood Barbour Collection of North Carolina Postcards (P077), North Carolina Collection Photographic Archives, Wilson Library, UNC-Chapel Hill

**Figure 2.2** The look and feel of downtown Morganton has changed little since the 1930s (when the postcard pictured above was created), but important developments are occurring beyond the central business district. Photo by Kathryn A. Clune.

original cream-colored courthouse, built in the 1830s and crowned with an ornamented cupola, is the site of city festivals and holiday light displays. As you continue north, nineteenth-century mansions stand as worn but dignified testaments to the city's affluent past. The landscape quickly opens into hilly rural suburbs. The surrounding mountains—like those in Laos—hang heavy and blue on the horizon, closer now than they were from the interstate. Roadside signs reinforce their presence—Smokey the Bear offers a fire safety rating and advertisements for rock climbing and camping compete with signs for local churches.

In this corner of the South, in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, the Phapphaybouns have successfully created a highly personal version of Laos. Reunited and living across two homes, the family has adapted this place to reflect their identity and support cultural traditions from everyday cooking to sacred gatherings. By choosing to make Morganton their home, the Phapphaybouns are actively shaping an evolving South.

### **Morganton: Context and Change**

Until the 1980s, the South was not a destination for immigrants. Historian Tom Hanchett notes that industry in the region was small enough to initially draw its workforce from local white and black populations.<sup>32</sup> Morganton, the oldest settlement in western North Carolina, is a bit of an anomaly. Commissioned as the seat of Burke County in 1784, Morganton first prospered as a railroad stop before lumber operations, furniture factories, and textile mills were established. The success of these industries required immigrant labor earlier than other parts of the South. Labor historian Leon Fink notes that French-speaking

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<sup>32</sup> Tom Hanchett, "A Salad Bowl City: The Food Geography of Charlotte, North Carolina" in *The Larder: Food Studies Methods from the American South*, eds. John T. Edge, Elizabeth Engelhardt, and Ted Ownby. (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2013), 169-170

Waldensians from Italy settled in and around Morganton at the turn of the twentieth century. The region's most recent wave of immigrants—indigenous Maya from Guatemala—began arriving in the 1980s. Between these two movements, Hmong refugees from Laos came to the region in increasing numbers. The first families arrived in 1976 with the support of Marion's Garden Creek Baptist Church.<sup>33</sup> By 1980, 800 Hmong families lived in Morganton.<sup>34</sup>

Many of the Southeast Asians who moved to North Carolina after the 1980s came from other regions of the US, making a "second migration." Displaced by the conflict in Vietnam and its repercussions, refugees were initially resettled in the United States with the help of federally-funded programs and local sponsoring agencies such as churches. In 1982, the government shifted the responsibility for refugee support from the federal to the state level. As a result, California and Minnesota enacted more generous policies than many other states, drawing large influxes of immigrants in the following years.<sup>35</sup> However, rising costs of living and increased crime pushed many immigrant families to move elsewhere. Morganton was a natural choice. Industry was sustained by the construction of Interstate 40 in 1960-61, connecting the region with the state's urban centers and the rest of the country.<sup>36</sup> A shoe company, fish hatchery, knitting mill, a poultry processor, and machine parts factories came in the following decades, and by the mid-nineties, nearly half of the county's labor

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<sup>33</sup> Carole Diane Breakstone, "I Come Back, Will Remember: Tales of a Hmong Community Leader in Morganton, North Carolina" (master's thesis, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, 1990), 26.

<sup>34</sup> Jo Woestendiek, "Hmong refugees adjust well to life in N.C. mountains: Family conquers culture clash, starts making living," *The News & Observer*, November 28, 1991, B9.

<sup>35</sup> Lau, "The Temple Provides the Way," 48.

<sup>36</sup> Leon Fink, *The Maya of Morganton: Work and Community in the Nuevo New South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 8.



**Figure 2.3** Mountains and rice paddies make up much of the countryside in Laos. Champasak Province, Laos. Photo by Kathryn A. Clune.

**Figure 2.4** The Blue Ridge Mountains surround Morganton and evoke the landscape of Laos for those who left. Photo by Kathryn A. Clune.



force worked in manufacturing.<sup>37</sup> Even for new immigrants with little knowledge of English, jobs were easy to come by. Kathleen Quinby, program director for the Favorable Alternative Site Project of Lutheran Family Services in Greensboro, remembers one job developer who placed Cambodian immigrants in manufacturing positions “by the six pack” in the late 1980s.<sup>38</sup> Barbara Lau, who has studied and collaborated with the Cambodian population in Greensboro, explains the area’s appeal: “The land was cheap, it looked sort of like home, it wasn’t too cold, and you could go fishing.”<sup>39</sup>

For all of these reasons, and because Dara Phapphayboun and her new husband Danil were ready to try something new, the couple moved from Bridgeport, Connecticut, to Morganton in 1994—the first in the family to do so.<sup>40</sup> Dara and Danil worked at the Valdese Weavers textile factory, starting with little more than a mattress on the floor of their rental apartment. After their daughter April was born—the first Phapphayboun born in the United States—the rest of the family considered joining them in North Carolina. Toon moved to Morganton from Los Angeles in 1997, followed by her brother Noh and his wife Meemee. Air, Meemee’s sister, came in 1997 after leaving Los Angeles for Charlotte. Khamsi and Noubath Siluangkhot left Bridgeport, Connecticut for North Carolina in 2003. Khattana, the eldest Phapphayboun daughter, is the only sibling living out of state and, according to Dara, she is “dying” to join everyone in Morganton.<sup>41</sup> At last Noubath, who “came to America to

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<sup>37</sup> Fink, *The Maya of Morganton*, 8.

<sup>38</sup> Lau, “The Temple Provides the Way,” 53.

<sup>39</sup> Barbara Lau, interview by Kathryn A. Clune, Durham, NC, November 17, 2014.

<sup>40</sup> Danil is brother to Daniel Phrakousonh. Without knowing it, the two brothers chose the same American name to go by upon arriving in the US years apart.

<sup>41</sup> Khattana, Bob, and their son Kody live in Fort Worth, TX. Daraphone Phrakousonh, March 10, 2014.

create her Laos,” as Toon says, could enjoy having three of her four children and their families together.<sup>42</sup> For a family separated for over two decades, their daily togetherness is a joyous triumph over tragedy.

### **Family Home as Foundation**

The white February sky hangs low and threatens snow as I hurry from my car to the front door. Taking off my boots, I add them to the growing pile of shoes before stepping inside. I pass underneath the miniature fish net baskets that hang above the threshold for good fortune. Dara, Danil, their two children, and Khamsi and Noubath share this house, and today Noubath is hosting Têt, a celebration of the New Year in Vietnam. This year’s gathering is smaller than last year; the living room is dark and quiet, except for Noh’s two boys glued to video games on their phones. Dark leather couches line the walls, and to the left of the door is a glass and wood display case that holds ornamented silver bowls used for temple offerings—the *oh* for men and the taller *kahn* for women. Towards the front of the room, bathed in the warm glow from the kitchen, family photographs are arranged across the piano, mantle, and television cabinet. The picture frames glint in the low light, revealing giddy first grade portraits and solemn photos of relatives in traditional dress in Laos. On this special day, bright yellow flowers are positioned between the photographs, offered to the memory of family. As I step into the kitchen—the heart of the home—Noubath and Khamsi hug me warmly in welcome. While waiting for the party to begin, the family watches Khamsi’s old home videos, which jump between Laos, Morganton and Connecticut, and weddings and funerals. Noubath and Meemee move between the indoor kitchen, the dining table, and an elaborate kitchen on the porch, straightening dishes as they make room for the

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<sup>42</sup> Noubath Siluangkhot, March 10, 2014.



**Figure 2.5** The Clay Street house, where Dara’s family and Noubath and Khamsi live. Photo by Kathryn A. Clune.

**Figure 2.6** Noh’s family and Toon live on Deerfield Street. Both homes are adapted to reflect of family priorities. Photo by Kathryn A. Clune.

grocery store cake Noh just brought inside. There is little space: a barbequed pig dressed for the occasion—purple chrysanthemums in its ears—is at the center of the table. Roast duck, chicken, and fried fish are placed by its side. Smaller plates of sour pork, pickled daikon, sesame-mung-bean balls, candied fruits, as well as tea, Beer Lao and a bottle of wine from Lake James, North Carolina, are arranged around the table’s perimeter. More photos hang on the paneled walls of the kitchen and its adjacent room. Underneath a black and white studio portrait of the Phrakousonhs in Lao formal dress is April’s cheerleading portrait for Morganton’s Walter R. Johnson Middle School Yellow Jackets. Surrounded by family and friends, those present and those remembered, Noubath signals it is time for the meal to begin.

While the table is fuller and more elaborate at Têt, little else changes for everyday meals in the Phapphayboun homes. The family is divided into two households that are four miles apart, tucked into the suburbs of Morganton. Dara’s family shares their home with her parents, and Toon lives with her brother Noh, Meemee, and their two boys. Social time is split between these two houses, which Toon calls “Clay” and “Deerfield” after their respective streets (I will do the same here for the sake of clarity). The houses are one-story ranch homes, typical of their neighborhoods, but the family has adapted them to suit their needs and tastes in a powerful articulation of culture and heritage. With nine family members sharing two modestly sized homes, the atmosphere is typically lively and convivial—a feeling the Phapphaybouns acknowledge and love. When Noubath and Khamsi left Connecticut, Dara invited them to live with her. “This is my house, but in Lao culture it is different,” she explains. “I like [my mother] to feel that it is her house. That is how we stay

together. Nine people. A bunch of big houses [around here] only have two people. Not my house—everybody is there. I really like it.”<sup>43</sup>

Homes like those of the Phapphaybouns are foundations for both intimate and more public personal expression, which material culture scholars have analyzed as evocative “texts.” Countering claims of the diminished role of the handmade in today’s world, folklorists and anthropologists look to the process of personal collecting and alteration that occurs in homes as a vibrant expression of creativity. Folklorist and cultural theorist Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett argues that “people save, collect, and arrange their possessions in ways that are profoundly meaningful,” and in so doing, undertake a review of their life that empowers them to craft their own narrative of identity and becoming.<sup>44</sup> In *The Stars of Ballymenone*, Henry Glassie visits Ellen Cutler in her whitewashed thatched-roof home in Northern Ireland. Cutler, a “house-proud” woman, takes care of her dresser of blue and white china.<sup>45</sup> Among its carefully arranged shelves, Glassie sees a life: “Her platters and plates were her family and friends, her memories . . . her ornaments were bits of beauty that made memories and connections,” forming “a halo of identity, memory, [and] social connection.”<sup>46</sup> Glassie argues the house, remodeled and filled with objects, is an exhibit of will and creativity. As he explains in his seminal work *Material Culture*: “It is not the food bought, but the food processed and made into a meal—it is not the shirt bought off the rack that is you, but the shirt as a component in a composition of attire that informs on you. Whole

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<sup>43</sup> Daraphone Phrakousonh, March 10, 2014.

<sup>44</sup> Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, “Objects of Memory: Material Culture as Life Review,” in *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres: A Reader*, ed. Elliot Oring (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1986), 330.

<sup>45</sup> Henry Glassie, *The Stars of Ballymenone* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 197.

<sup>46</sup> Glassie, *Stars of Ballymenone*, 201.



**Figure 2.7** Mementos of Laos and family photos are spread throughout both homes. On important occasions such as Têt, the Phapphaybouns place flowers between the frames in honor of their ancestors. Photo by Kathryn A. Clune.

**Figure 2.8** (Left) Khamsi, Noubath's second husband, as a young man in his RLG uniform. (Right) Noubath, La, and their four children in a silver tree picture frame. Photo by Kathryn A. Clune.

meals, sets of clothing in action . . . and collections of commodities assembled into domestic settings—these are the key creations in the material culture of industrial civilization. They are our mirrors; we see ourselves in them. They are our lenses; others read us through them.”<sup>47</sup>

“Reading” the Phapphayboun homes in this manner—as collections that reveal identity, memory, and values—it is evident how these spaces are designed to support family and social gatherings. Food brings the family together, thus the kitchen is the center of both houses. In Laos the kitchen (*heuan khua*), cooking, and eating define family (*kuap khua*) life: the terms for each even share a word.<sup>48</sup> Noubath transformed the porch of the Clay Street house into a semi-outdoor kitchen. In winter, the screen windows are covered with plastic to keep the heat in, but in summer, warm breezes flow freely through the space. “This is *my* house,” says Noubath, as she peeled a fragrant lime on a May morning.<sup>49</sup> In these four words Noubath demonstrates the importance of this space that suits her needs so well. With two stoves, a sink, a refrigerator, two work tables, improvised counters, and two shelving units, there is still barely enough room to contain her cooking. Two tennis balls protect Noubath from the sharp corners of an eye-level shelf. A *pah kao*, a low straw platform and portable table, hangs on the wall above a row of twenty or so pots and pans, ordered by size. *Thip kao*, or sticky rice baskets, dangle in unwieldy bunches from the wall near the refrigerator alongside sieves, steamers, spatulas, graters, and whisks. In the summer, the kitchen extends out into the yard, where Noubath dries sticky rice in the North Carolina sunshine

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<sup>47</sup> Henry Glassie, *Material Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 84.

<sup>48</sup> Monica Janowski and Fiona Kerlogue, eds., *Kinship and Food in Southeast Asia* (Copenhagen: Nias Press, 2007), 230.

<sup>49</sup> Noubath Siluangkhot, interview by Kathryn A. Clune, Morganton, NC, May 11, 2014.





**Figures 2.9–2.10** Noubath has transformed her porch into a customized Lao kitchen. Photos by Kathryn A. Clune.



**Figure 2.11–2.12** Meemee’s kitchen, which blends America and Laos together, extends outside when she cooks more elaborate meals. Photos by Kathryn A. Clune.



Meemee's kitchen at Deerfield Street house is less elaborate, but just as central to family life. Meemee loves decorations; each time I visit she has added another item to her collection. As Glassie noted during his time in Ballymenone, "the kitchen was everyone's. Irish icons among the ornaments brought them together."<sup>50</sup> Such is the case at Meemee's home. There are touches of Laos throughout the kitchen—some obvious, like wooden carvings and sparkling textiles with elephants and tropical flora, and some less public, like the homemade *padaek* (fermented fish sauce) she keeps under the sink. A Keurig coffee maker shares counter space with a metal and bamboo sticky rice steamer. A woven bamboo basket, with the national monument That Luang and "Lao" in bold letters, hangs above the microwave with its American flag sticker and a growling bulldog promoting 92.1 FM. Family photos cover the counter and the refrigerator. Meemee alters the space with each changing season. In November, two small ornamented Christmas trees stood on her counter. During my February visit, the trees were replaced by gold Buddha statues found at TJ Maxx, a nearby homewares discount store. The kitchen extends outside, where Noh installed a grill, stove, and a small roof with a light on the porch. Here Meemee uses larger pots to cook curries and broths for noodles and Noh grills, rain or shine.

In crafting their Morganton homes in this manner, the Phapphaybouns purposefully integrate the home life and social connection they experienced in Laos. Vientiane is a city of just 810,000 and is divided into roughly 500 neighborhoods (or *baan*, which translates to village).<sup>51</sup> Each *baan* is centered on a temple and this tight-knit community is managed by an

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<sup>50</sup> Glassie, *The Stars of Ballymenone*, 202.

<sup>51</sup> Chansamone Inlavongsa, July 17, 2014.

"East and Southeast Asia: Laos," Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*.

elected leader who hears grievances and periodically gathers with other *baan* leaders across the city. While it is the nation's capital, in many ways Vientiane is a series of small towns. The streets of Baan Sikai, the Phapphayboun's neighborhood, quickly turn to alleys and dirt roads off of the main thoroughfare. Houses are so close it is easy to spend an afternoon between neighbor's living rooms and kitchens, visiting and eating. Laos's love of food and company are encapsulated in sayings about the country. In Laos, you are always either preparing for a party, having a party, or cleaning up after a party. Tourist shirts are sold with "LDPR" spelled out as "Laos: Please Don't Rush." Edgar Buell, an American volunteer in Vientiane in the 1970s, observed that "everyone seemed caught in a languid tropical daydream, as though the national sport was waiting in the shade."<sup>52</sup> Past the bustle of downtown, the same could be said of the city today. In open cafes, riverbank restaurants, and in private homes across the city, relaxed meals and social gatherings define life in Vientiane.

In Laos, it is common to sit, visit, and linger for so long after a meal that, as Toon says, "lunch turns into dinner and we eat again."<sup>53</sup> When I visited Toon and her family in Ban Sikai, we did just that. Without our leaving the table, our small personal plates were swapped out for clean ones, more entrees came from the kitchen, less full serving dishes were combined, and beer glasses filled for another round of socializing. Long, convivial meals like this were the center of the day, often combined with a walk around the neighborhood. We stopped to sit and catch up with an aunt, a friend, or perhaps Meemee's brother, who once snuck out of work, saying he had to pick up an ingredient, just to visit with

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<sup>52</sup> Warner, *Shooting at the Moon*, 3.

<sup>53</sup> Toon said this during a meal together in Ban Sikai, Vientiane, Laos on July 13, 2014.



**Figure 2.13** A street in Baan Sikai, Vientiane, Laos, where houses are close to one another and nearly everyone knows each other. Photo by Kathryn A. Clune.

**Figure 2.14** A meal in a friend's home in Baan Sikai, one of the many I shared with the Phapphaybouns. Photo by Kathryn A. Clune.

us. While I could not understand much of the conversation, hospitality needs no translation. We were always offered something at each stop, if nothing more than a bottle of water.

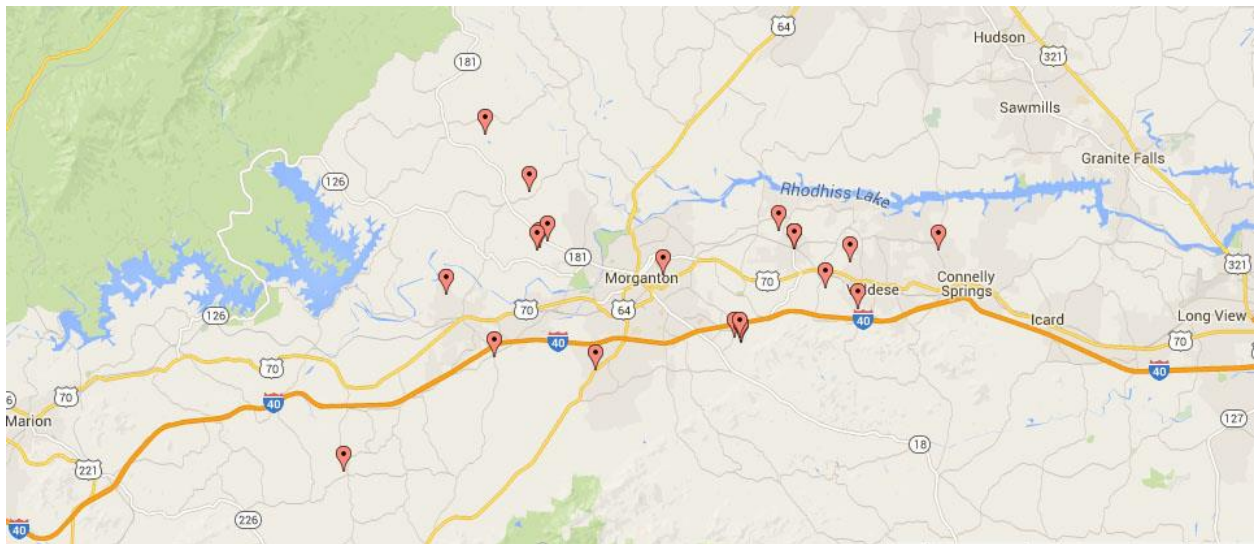
In Morganton, and across western North Carolina, families are divided by larger distances, and the impromptu visiting they knew in Laos is not possible. Khamssi and Noubath help manage the Lao Family Association of Morganton, a social-aid membership of roughly thirty families, or eighty people.<sup>54</sup> This association is modelled after the *baan* in Laos and is loosely affiliated with the Morganton temple. As the maps indicate (figures 2.15 and 2.16), membership is dispersed as far as High Point. In this context, drawing together the community becomes more difficult, yet more meaningful. Toon commented on the different attitudes towards time and coming together in Morganton and in Laos while she was in Vientiane. “If you and I want to get together [in America] it’s got to be a weekend. . . . Here, if someone says, ‘Let’s get together!’ They mean tonight. And if it’s a Friday night, great, and if not, they still get together.”<sup>55</sup> In the context of an undeveloped economy in which having a fulltime job is rare, Laos can prioritize social gatherings.

To make up for the distance between families in North Carolina, the Phapphaybouns make their homes the sites of annual celebrations. Their kitchens are specially designed for preparing the feasts associated with each gathering. Every year, Noubath and her children organize the Têt holiday, which she celebrates in honor of her Vietnamese father, who was killed as a young man. Noubath has hosted Têt since 1978, when, after she began suffering from headaches, a traditional healer explained that the cause for her pain was “someone from

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<sup>54</sup> Khamssi Bounkhong Siluangkhot, interview by Kathryn A. Clune, Morganton, NC, September 21, 2014.

<sup>55</sup> Toon Phapphayboun, July 28, 2014.



**Figures 2.15–2.16** The thirty current households in the Lao Family Association of Morganton, as of February 2015. The community is spread apart, so opportunities to come together in celebration are created and the Phapphaybouns are frequent hosts.

your past . . . asking for an offering.”<sup>56</sup> In coming together for this occasion—the largest family gathering of the year—the Phapphaybouns pay respect to Noubath’s father and their ancestors. If Noubath cannot host this event, “there is a little tie in her heart.”<sup>57</sup> She has adopted this New Year holiday for her own purposes. In her words, the day is about “all the family living together, eating together.”<sup>58</sup> Toon elaborates: “It is about the love and compassion for her children. [It is about] getting them together to let them know this tradition, respect for the family, the love, the bond, and keeping it in the younger generation so hopefully they’ll continue.”<sup>59</sup> Preparing for the holiday requires much organization, determining in advance which daughter will pick up the pig and other barbequed meats.

Before the family fills their plates, Noubath directs a New Year’s blessing. I joined them this past February. We took three sticks of incense and lit them from a candle on the table. Thinking about my own family, I followed Khamsi and Toon outdoors to place my burning incense together with theirs in the front lawn. The ground was soon studded, blue smoke coiling and dissipating into the white winter sky. Meemee and Noh lit a fire in an iron ring as their sons took intricately folded gold paper and made a wish before tossing the delicate wreaths into the flames. Inside, Khmasi’s home videos continued to play. The parties, toddlers, and meals viewed on the screen reinforce family memories for the Phapphaybouns, uniting their past with the present.

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<sup>56</sup> Noubath Siluangkhot, March 10, 2014.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.





**Figure 2.17** The extended family at the 2014 Têt gathering (front row, left to right: Dara, Meemee, Khattana, Noubath, Aunt Norm, Air, and Toon). Photo courtesy of Toon Phapphayboun.



**Figure 2.18** Meemee with her sons Keeneau and Raayeau throw folded paper into a fire as they make wishes for the new year. Photo by Kathryn A. Clune.



**Figure 2.19** Meemee spoons out *kaopoon* from her kitchen counter at the November 2014 celebration for Raayeau's birthday and Thanksgiving. Photo by Kathryn A. Clune.



**Figure 2.20** Khami looks past the full table to one of his home videos at the 2015 Têt party—a meal in Laos from year before plays on the screen. Photo by Kathryn A. Clune.

Têt holds strong personal significance for the family, but they also invite nearby friends and relatives to join in the celebration. When I attended in 2014, food was laid out on an eight-foot table in the living room and nearly thirty people were gathered in Clay Street house. Similarly at Deerfield Street house, Meemee combined her younger son Rayeau's birthday with Thanksgiving in 2014 and scheduled it on a Saturday so friends and family could come. Those that traveled great distances were invited to spend the night. These important annual celebrations both reinforce family for the Phapphaybouns and reduce the distance among members of the dispersed Lao community in western North Carolina.

The customized cooking spaces, the decorations from Laos, and the many family photos in their homes are powerful physical representations of what the Phapphaybouns value. These houses support a sense of rootedness, a connection to their homeland, and make possible the many social gatherings that define Lao life. Folklorist Debra Lattanzi Shutika examines the complicated way Mexican families, who have moved to the United States for work balance their concept of home between Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, and their hometown. Many of these families retain their homes in Mexico (though they now stand empty), a phenomenon referred to as the *casa vacía*.<sup>60</sup> Their family photographs and mementos are on display in empty rooms, memorializing an implicit dream to return. For the Phapphaybouns, there is no dream to return. Laos is the dream: a home suspended in time, another climate and a world away, a place incapable of supporting hopes for their children. Laos defines the Phapphaybouns, but they can only visit, and decades separate each return. Sitting in her father's home in Ban Sikai in the cool dark air, Toon remarked, "I missed Laos

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<sup>60</sup> Debra Lattanzi Shutika, "La Casa Vacía: Meanings and Memories in Abandoned Immigrant Houses" in *Beyond the Borderlands: Migration and Belonging in the United States and Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 67-90.



the day I landed in Laos.”<sup>61</sup> In this she acknowledges the impossibility of staying, and the ever-present, bittersweet connection to her country. This visceral connection is constant as the Phapphaybouns weave Laos into their daily lives in Morganton. As Shutika says, home is “a landscape that provides the setting for the expression and development of the self.”<sup>62</sup> This strong foundation enables the Phapphaybouns to share this world beyond the walls of the Clay and Deerfield Street houses.

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<sup>61</sup> Toon Phapphayboun, July 28, 2014.

<sup>62</sup> Shutika, *Beyond the Borderlands*, 74.

### CHAPTER 3: SHARING THE FLAVORS OF HOME

“When life gives you green papayas, make papaya salad.” —Toon Phapphayboun (July 28, 2014)

Sunlight streamed into Asian Fusion Kitchen, brightening the yellow walls and casting shadows about the carefully arranged décor. Garlic and the sweet smell of lemongrass filled the small dining area, situated around a bubbling indoor fountain. The metallic bustle of pots and pans passed through silk elephant curtains covering the kitchen’s threshold. I sat in the back at the family table and chatted with Toon. We had met for the first time in Hickory, North Carolina, only a couple of hours earlier. Before we parted ways, she insisted on bringing me to her sister’s new restaurant in nearby Morganton for dinner. As we ate a simple (off-menu) chicken and basil stir-fry with sticky rice, I could feel the sisters’ palpable pride in their food and the restaurant. Asian Fusion Kitchen is the accomplishment of Dara. The family celebrated its second successful year this past February 2015 and business is thriving. Dara is the only chef, by her choice. She works twelve-hour days six days a week, but in her words: “To cook for me is not work. It’s something I enjoy.”<sup>63</sup> Soon after she moved to Morganton with her husband in 1994, Dara quit her job at Valdese Weavers so she could attend nursing school. Following this, Dara worked at a retirement home. After having her first daughter, and with her husband still working long shifts at Valdese, Dara dreamed of the freedom of running her own business. She explained, “I said one of these days I am going

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<sup>63</sup> Daraphone Phrakousonh, interview by Kathryn A. Clune, Morganton, NC, March 10, 2014.



**Figure 3.1.** Lao Lanxang Asian Grocery and Asian Fusion Kitchen are in a strip mall roughly two miles outside of downtown Morganton. Photo by Kathryn A. Clune.

to [start] a business and try to bring everyone together.”<sup>64</sup> In 2010, she opened the Lao Lanxang grocery store, named for Laos’s ancient monarchy. The prepared foods she sold with her mother on Thursday nights grew so popular she could imagine a successful restaurant. In 2013, Dara rented two adjacent storefronts on West Fleming Drive and opened the second iteration of Lao Lanxang next to her new restaurant, Asian Fusion Kitchen.

Tucked into a plain strip mall roughly two miles south of downtown Morganton, these two spaces are a direct connection to the culinary and cultural worlds of Laos. At Asian Fusion Kitchen, Dara expresses her cultural identity while gently inviting others to learn about Laos. This is a powerful introduction in a place where the Lao community is small and Laos is largely unknown by locals. Dara explains, her restaurant “bring[s] something out to show everybody where I come from, who I am, and why I do what I do because I wanted to introduce everyone to Laos. Because everybody says ‘Hey, you Chinese.’ Laos never exists! That’s why I said I’m going to open a restaurant or grocery store one day and I’m going to tell them I’m not Chinese, *I am Lao*.”<sup>65</sup> Through the food and conviviality Dara and her family share with each customer, Asian Fusion Kitchen vividly conjures Laos in full color and full flavor and supports the Phapphayboun family’s and the wider Lao community’s cultural identity.

### **Laos is its Food**

Food is at the heart of daily life in Laos. It is intimately tied to the landscape, has several unmistakable dishes and flavors, and a distinct ethos. On early neighborhood walks in Vientiane, I see steam wafting from sticky rice in the morning light. Women sit on low

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<sup>64</sup> Daraphone Phrakousonh, March 10, 2014.

<sup>65</sup> Daraphone Phrakousonh, March 10, 2014.

bamboo stools waiting for *tak baht*, the morning ritual of giving monks their daily meal.<sup>66</sup> Each dawn, wrapped in dark orange robes, young men walk single-file cradling alms bowls in their hands. As they pass each group of morning worshippers, the line stops, turns to face away from the street, and chants in thanks. While the warmth of the sun is still gentle, fishermen and women wade into the Mekong using longboats and intricate homemade bamboo nets. Fresh river fish is sold across Vientiane, skewered and grilled, wrapped in banana leaves and steamed, or cooked at waterside tables in hot pots. Kitchens in Laos are typically outdoors, and in many homes are open to passersby. As the day heats up, women move their vegetables and cutting blocks into the breezy shade, transforming neighborhood streets into ad-hoc prep areas. On sunny days, the sidewalk becomes auxiliary counter space. Chilies are set to dry in low-walled baskets and bamboo nets lean on fences holding drying patties of sticky rice. More enterprising home cooks season their dishes with herbs grown in improvised raised beds. Papaya trees grow just as well in Vientiane as in the country, and only the smallest of the green fruits hang unpicked near the trunk. I have seen stalky greens used in soups and stir fries planted on city balconies.

The roadside farm stands and markets of Laos overwhelm the senses with their abundance of fresh vegetables, fruits, and meats. With the Mekong River running through the entire western length of the country, and with plentiful smaller waterways, fish is the main source of protein.<sup>67</sup> It is prepared in a thousand variations, from pickled to steamed with herbs and spices, to stews, salads, and salty jerkies. While rice is the most common crop in

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<sup>66</sup> *Tak baht* is the more widely used term for this ritual, but *sai baht* is more accurate. Chansamone Inlavongsa, interview by Kathryn A. Clune, Vientiane, Laos, July 17, 2014.

<sup>67</sup> Xaixana Champanakone, *Lao Cooking and the Essence of Life* (BookBaby, 2014), 92.



**Figures 3.2–3.5** (Clockwise, from top left) A day in Vientiane starts with the *tak baht*, or alms offering. Fishermen and women are common sights along the Mekong at dawn or dusk. The kitchen extends into the street in Laos, as cooks make use of the sunshine to dry sticky rice and seaweed. Photos by Kathryn A. Clune; photo of drying seaweed by James Roche.

Laos, farmers truck in seasonal cucumbers, pineapple, or pumpkins, and arrange them in towering piles. In the morning market in Luang Prabang, elaborate displays of produce are next to women with simple arrangements of foods they foraged, caught, and cooked. Markets are overwhelmingly run and visited by women, who navigate the narrow walkways to inspect foods, checking for freshness and bargaining for the best price. There is dark seaweed, eels, leaves fragrant and foreign—leaves of the forest without English names. Under the market canopies, it is a sea of green with flashes of silver (fish), red (chilies), purple (eggplant), and the occasional burst of orange from a vendor selling temple offerings studded with bright chrysanthemums. The market is local by necessity, and seasonal specialties are coveted. In spring in Luang Prabang there are round, earthy dumpling-like mushrooms, dark jumping toads, and a foraged ant nest that rests on a banana leaf. There is an art to these market displays. Quilts of colorful vegetables and fruits are laid out on the ground, and jerky and home-cooked rice snacks hang from above, bundled together with bamboo ties.

Lao cuisine reflects this natural abundance and is prepared with ingenuity and a mastery of flavor. Xaixana Champanakone, who has recently published a Lao cookbook, connects the Lao attitude toward food with the spirit of the country: “The cooking of food, like everything else in Laos, reflects the easy and immediate reliance on nature as guide and provider.”<sup>68</sup> Lao cooking shares characteristics with other Southeast Asian foodways. As Nancie McDermott, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in north Thailand and is an expert on Thai cuisine, explains, “the flavors and the cultures in the Mekong delta all blend together.”<sup>69</sup> Jeffrey Alford and Naomi Duguid, who have travelled and eaten their way across Southeast Asia since the 1970s, capture the central characteristic of the region’s cuisine. In every dish,

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<sup>68</sup> Xaixana Champanakone, *Lao Cooking and the Essence of Life* (BookBaby, 2014), 92.

<sup>69</sup> Nancie McDermott, interview by Kathryn A. Clune, Raleigh, NC, April 18, 2014.





**Figure 3.6–3.7** Markets in Laos are a riot of colors and textures and feature produce both farmed and foraged. Photos by Kathryn A. Clune.



cooks strive to balance the basic palate of “hot, sour, salty, sweet, and sometimes, bitter.”<sup>70</sup> Fresh vegetables and herbs, purchased daily, are paired and contrasted with spiced meats, rice, and rice noodles to achieve a harmony of flavors and textures. Dishes are often finished according to the eater’s individual preference—McDermott describes the vinegar, chilies, fish sauce, sugar, and lime on every restaurant table a “seasoning machine.”<sup>71</sup> Vendors who sell papaya salad, the unofficial national dish, often have multiple sets of mortars and pestles available for their customers to mix and pound their own particular balance of flavors.

The typical Lao stove (*tao la*) is a concrete brazier with an open flame fed by wood or coals, and is used to infuse smoky and bitter undertones to help balance the heat in dishes with ever-present chilies. Vegetables are often charred over these stoves before they are pounded into complex dipping sauces called *jaeow*. There are a thousand varieties of *jaeow*, and as in many dishes, *padaek* binds the ingredients together. *Padaek*, with its deep brown color and strong flavor, is more concentrated than the golden and mellow fish sauces used in other Southeast Asian countries. As Toon says, “*padaek* is like makeup,” meaning a dish without it is incomplete, but if you overdo it, it is spoiled.<sup>72</sup> When a meal is served in Laos, many small dishes balance these flavors across the table—the heat of *jaeow* boosts plain sticky rice or mild meats, a soup settles your stomach as you reach for more, and a plate of bitter, leafy herbs is chewed in combination with a bite of *laab*, a common minced-meat salad. These leaves were often unrecognizable to me. Lao refer to these greens as *pak gap laab* (roughly “vegetables that go with *laab*”) and many are also purported to have particular

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<sup>70</sup> Jeffrey Alford and Naomi Duguid, *Hot Sour Salty Sweet: A Culinary Journey Through Southeast Asia* (New York: Artisan, 2000), 12.

<sup>71</sup> Nancie McDermott, April 18, 2014.

<sup>72</sup> Noubath Siluangkhot, May 11, 2014.

health benefits.<sup>73</sup> One morning in Vientiane, I bought as many kinds as I could for 50,000 LAK—about \$6 worth—and took them home to Bouachin Thepphanouvong and Phonglasy “Pom” Daovongphet, who cook for the US Embassy (figure 3.9). The women explained that leaves like this are typically “eaten fresh, not cooked.” Thrown into papaya salad, *laab*, or eaten with soups, “they have a strong smell, and when we eat them with spicy food, it helps make it not so spicy.”<sup>74</sup> Lao refer to this essential bitter flavor as *min*.<sup>75</sup>

Chilies and sticky rice are particularly strong markers of “Lao-ness.” *Khao* is the word for both food and rice, so *kin khao* means to eat rice and to have a meal.<sup>76</sup> Sticky or glutinous rice is the most frequently eaten food and is always present at meals and temple ceremonies, offered in a million pinched finger-fulls offered at sacred sites. It is sold in fifty-pound bags and the price varies depending on freshness and quality. The freshest rice is sweet. Meemee noted that “the 2015 rice is good” as she took some from her closet; she is attuned to rice’s subtleties even in Morganton.<sup>77</sup> Sticky rice is never wasted. When it hardens and turns stale it is formed into patties, which are fried into salty or sweet crackers (*kao khoab*). When crumbled over a hot bowl of broth, the crunch of these crackers is the perfect complement to the slurpy softness of rice noodles. Powder from raw sticky rice is used as a thickener, and cooked dried rice is smoked, ground, and used as a seasoning. Sticky rice has

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<sup>73</sup> Denise Tomecko, *Buddhist Healing in Laos: Plants of the Fragrant Forest* (Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2009).

<sup>74</sup> Bouachin Thepphanouvong, Phonglasy Daovongphet, and Salif Teas, interview by Kathryn A. Clune, Vientiane, Laos, July 21, 2014.

<sup>75</sup> Bouachin Thepphanouvong, Phonglasy Daovongphet, and Salif Teas, July 21, 2014.

<sup>76</sup> Monica Janowski and Fiona Kerlogue, eds., *Kinship and Food in Southeast Asia* (Copenhagen: Nias Press, 2007), 6.

<sup>77</sup> Meemee said this as she cooked breakfast in Morganton on February 15, 2015.



**Figure 3.8** A heavily laden table at a Phapphayboun gathering in Laos featuring fried fish and chicken, duck soup, duck *laab*, sticky rice, and a plate of *hom heua*, or fresh greens. Photo by Kathryn A. Clune.



**Figure 3.9** Many of the greens used in Laos do not have English names, such as the two included in this group. (From left to right) This red-stemmed vegetable is called morning glory, unrelated to the flowers found in the US, and it is used in stir fries; *kahtin*, these tree pods are eaten raw in papaya salad; leaves from the Moringa tree, used in soups; pumpkin vines, which are peeled and used in stir fries; *hom heua*, similar to mint, but native to Asia, and has a strong bitter flavor that is paired raw with *laab*. Photo by Kathryn A. Clune.

its own material culture, too: the shallow bowls in which it soaks, the aluminum and bamboo basket steamer, paddles used to spread it while still hot, and *thip kao*, the bamboo basket in which it is served. *Thip kao* are on the table at every meal. In Vientiane I also saw them slung on the handles of motorcycles, holding lunch for the workday. Chansamone “Ajan” Inlavongsa, the language instructor at the US Embassy, shared a saying that equates Lao with their beloved sticky rice: “Lao people stick together because they eat so much *khao neow* (sticky rice). It’s not like bread that falls apart. Rice sticks together like families stick together.”<sup>78</sup> Sitting at a table in Laos it is impossible not to forge an intimate connection with your dining companions. Pinches of rice are taken from one or two *thip kao*, and if there is soup on the table, everyone dips their spoon into the same bowl.

Without sticky rice, a meal is incomplete—and the same can be said for chilies. There are over seven different names for chili peppers in Lao.<sup>79</sup> When I eat with the Phapphaybouns, everyone watches with a sparkle in their eyes and carefully notes how much hot *jeaow* or chilies I take. They are proud when I say, “It’s not too hot!” They tease me when my cheeks turn red and my eyes water, giving me away. They playfully call me a *falang*, Lao slang for a white foreigner. Commenting on papaya salad—and the Phapphayboun version is so hot I can only enjoy it diluted with handfuls of sticky rice—Toon says, “Without the spice it is not papaya salad, it is just tossed vegetables. It’s good but it’s not *Lao*.”<sup>80</sup> I love heat, but I am out of my league when I eat with Toon. While I sit in a

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<sup>78</sup> Chansamone Inlavongsa, July 17, 2014.

<sup>79</sup> These include: *mak phet dip* (fresh green chili peppers), *mak phet deng* (fresh red chili peppers), *mak phet nyai* (large chili peppers), *mak phet kuntsi* (small chili peppers), *mak phet kinou* (tiny chili peppers), *kinou* (meaning “rat droppings”), *mak phet haeng* (dried chili peppers), and *mak phet pun* (ground chili peppers). Phia Sing, *Traditional Recipes of Laos*, trans. Phouangphet Vannithone and Boon Song Klausner, eds. Alan and Jennifer Davidson (London: Prospect Books, 1981), 34.

<sup>80</sup> Toon said this during a lunch in Ban Sikai, Vientiane, Laos, July 17, 2014.

state of joyful distress, she reaches for another raw green chili and takes a bite with her spoonful of *laab*.

Equating being Lao with eating sticky rice and chilies, *padaek* and papaya salad, demonstrates the close relationship between food and identity. Food scholar Warren Belasco claims “people use food to ‘speak’ with each other, to establish rules of behavior ‘protocols,’ and to reveal, as Brillat-Savarin said, ‘what you are.’”<sup>81</sup> Folklorist Charles Camp further argues, “food is one of the most, if not the single most, visible badges of identity.”<sup>82</sup> For immigrants, food is a particularly potent means to connect with their homeland, so much so that a flavor from home can open up worlds of memory, and in so doing, solidify a sense of belonging in new surroundings. Food and nutrition scholar Amy Trubek claims that French concept of *terroir*—the distinct flavor of a place (imbued by geography and way of life)—is so forceful that local taste is “evoked when an individual wants to remember an experience, explain a memory, or express a sense of identity.”<sup>83</sup> By opening a Lao restaurant in Morganton, the Phapphaybouns perpetuate a legacy of family cooking rooted in the soil and waters of Laos and reinterpreted in the mountains of North Carolina.

### **Food and the Phapphayboun Family**

The deep-rooted association between food and identity among the Phapphaybouns is evident in both family recipes and food’s palpable presence in their narratives of leaving Laos. Cooking was instilled in daughters by their mothers for at least three generations in the family. Noubath’s mother “was the most famous sour pork maker in her village” and her

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<sup>81</sup> Warren Belasco, *Food: The Key Concepts* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2008), 15.

<sup>82</sup> Charles Camp, *American Foodways: What, When, Why and How We Eat in America* (Atlanta: August House Publishing, 1989).

<sup>83</sup> Amy B. Trubek, “Place Matters,” in *The Taste Culture Reader: Experiencing Food and Drink*, ed. Carolyn Korsmeyer (Berg: Oxford, 2005), 268.

cured sausages, sold to people in the neighborhood or vendors who would resell them elsewhere, were always out by lunch.<sup>84</sup> Speaking of her grandmother, Toon said, “She . . . raised her children like she were a rich woman, but all the money came from pickled fish and sour pork.”<sup>85</sup> As a young mother, Noubath opened a grocery store in Vientiane and food was critical to the family’s economic survival. At age seven, Toon helped raise two pigs in the family yard. Dara did not enjoy working in the store, but still values what she learned there, especially her mother’s cooking skills. Although she never attended cooking school, Dara learned from her mother and taught herself. She explains, “most of all I like to eat and try again until it tastes right.”<sup>86</sup>

Food is a central theme in the Phapphayboun’s narratives about their difficult journeys to Morganton. Toon remembers breaking sugar cane to drink its juice as she hid during her trek to the Mekong River. When Air and Khamsi describe the refugee and re-education camp, they remember scarcity and that what food they did have was inedible. This deprivation of home cooking signified a loss of power and, in their telling of these experiences, they each use food as shorthand to express hardship. Khamsi and his fellow prisoners were fed expired war-time canned food. “It wasn’t supposed to be eaten, but there was nothing else to eat, so they had to eat it. The rice was full of insects,” described Toon, translating for her father.<sup>87</sup> Air calls the prison food “pig food.”<sup>88</sup> This deprivation symbolized the family’s trauma and how food grew to embody healing and reconciliation—a

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<sup>84</sup> Noubath Siluangkhot, March 10, 2014.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Daraphone Phrakousonh, March 10, 2014.

<sup>87</sup> Khamsi Bounkhong Siluangkhot, May 11, 2014.

<sup>88</sup> Airsikhay Ammalathithada, May 7 2014.



**Figure 3.10** Noubath making a fish dish similar to ceviche in her outdoor kitchen. Photo by Kathryn A. Clune.

**Figure 3.11** Dara (left) in the kitchen of Asian Fusion Kitchen. Photo by Kathryn A. Clune.



phenomenon chronicled in personal memoirs from across the world.<sup>89</sup> Once living in the Nong Khai camp, Air learned to cook from her aunt: “She asked me, ‘Did I learn how to cook?’ I said, ‘No, I never learned.’ ‘So from now you’re going to learn. You’re a grown up woman now.’ So it’s good for you, you have to learn to survive, how to cook to feed yourself.”<sup>90</sup> *In Memory’s Kitchen: A Legacy from the Women of Terezín* (1996) is a compendium of recipes written by undernourished women in Czechoslovakia’s Terezín concentration camp.<sup>91</sup> Writing down their recipes helped these women to recall their former lives and hope for a future in which they could cook once more. Similarly, for Air and her aunt, cooking the foods of their people was essential for both their physical and emotional survival.

In contrast to these difficult memories, the freshness and bounty of produce in Laos is near-mythic in the minds of those forced to leave by circumstance and history. Air, who loves to cook, laments that in the United States she always needs to “inspect” what she buys, whereas “in Laos, everything is fresh . . . it tastes better than over here.”<sup>92</sup> Toon fondly refers to food in Laos as seasonal and local by necessity. She was overwhelmed by the freshness of the food she ate when recently in Vientiane. Her favorite dishes to experience again were often the simplest—the dried and salted beef jerky she ate for breakfast growing up, the tart, sliced green mangos. “Perfect with the spiced salt,” she said dreamily, “And it has to come

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<sup>89</sup> There are many memoirs which discuss the comforts of food in the face of trauma and its survival, including: Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan, *A Tiger in the Kitchen: A Memoir of Food and Family* (New York: Hachette Books, 2011); Annia Ciezadlo, *Day of Honey: A Memoir of Food, Love, and War* (New York: Free Press, 2011); Lynne Kirsche Shapiro, *Food, Family and Tradition: Hungarian Kosher Family Recipes and Remembrances*, ed. Nancy Ross Ryan (The Cherry Press, LLC, 2014); Frances Osbourne, *Lilla’s Feast: One Woman’s True Story of Love and War in the Orient* (New York: Random House, 2005).

<sup>90</sup> Airsikhay Ammalathithada, September 21, 2014.

<sup>91</sup> Cara De Silva, ed., *In Memory’s Kitchen: A Legacy from the Women of Terezín* (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson Inc., 1996).

<sup>92</sup> Airsikhay Ammalathithada, May 7 2014.



from the fruit cart. Otherwise it doesn't taste the same. Nostalgia!"<sup>93</sup> This love of country permeated her palate. While Toon was back in Laos, her beloved foods were elevated to a new plane. "I noticed a difference between the aroma of the lemongrass in America and the aroma of the lemongrass in Laos. I could eat it plain, it's so tasty. There's that aroma, there's that crunch, that little hint of sweetness, lemon, and a kind of herby smell."<sup>94</sup> Grown and eaten at home, even an undressed herb is sublime.

For Lao who left their country in distress and then faced the inevitable difficulties of beginning anew, access to their beloved foods in the United States brings comfort and joy and maintains a connection to home. For Air, providing for herself is epitomized by cooking. "I have bad memories, but I can survive now . . . As long as I have rice, I know I can fix it to make dinner. I can survive without meat or whatever."<sup>95</sup> Today in Morganton, Air enjoys cooking traditional foods for her family, friends, and temple ceremonies during her days off. "If someone asks about my cooking or my food, I'm happy and I love to explain it to them. . . . When they say it's good, it makes us happy. . . . When you say, 'Air, everything is so good!' I'm happy and I never get tired. That feeling, it makes me so happy."<sup>96</sup> When La and Noubath visited France in 1970, Noubath discovered she could imitate green papaya salad by substituting shredded carrots for papaya. Toon laughed, saying, "She increased the profit of carrots for the French after Lao people learned you could make papaya salad out of carrots. In America when we first got here we used turnips, cabbage, and cranberries to substitute.

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<sup>93</sup> Toon Phapphayboun, July 28, 2014.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Airsikhay Ammalathithada, September 21, 2014.

<sup>96</sup> Airsikhay Ammalathithada, May 7 2014.

Cranberries with fresh ginger.”<sup>97</sup> When green papaya was finally available in the United States, Toon remembers a speaker at a conference on Lao culture in California crying after tasting his Lao “home” in America.<sup>98</sup>

### **Asian Fusion Kitchen: Sharing the Taste of Home**

Through her restaurant, Dara skillfully integrates her private world of food and family into a public space. In so doing, she not only reinforces her family’s identity, but also teaches her customers about Laos. For most Americans, Lao food is literally off the map—or as Dara says, “Laos never exists!” Laos is rarely mentioned in Southeast Asian cookbooks. In *The Southeast Asia Cookbook* (1990) by Ruth Law, the map of the region in the book’s preface fails to label Laos as a nation. An online search turns up only a handful of resources about Lao cuisine. This dearth of knowledge about Laos abroad can be partly attributed to the strict enforcements established by the Pathet Lao Communist Party following its 1975 takeover.<sup>99</sup> However, even within Laos, recipes are largely shared via oral tradition—and the effort to document this culinary heritage is relatively new. The first compilation of traditional Lao recipes is credited to Alan Davidson, British Ambassador to Laos in the 1970s. Davidson arranged the translation and publication of the notebooks of Phia Sing—a former master of ceremonies and chef at the Royal Palace in Luang Prabang. Reflecting on his efforts, Davidson wrote, “I was having difficulty in collecting authentic Lao recipes for fish, the written sources being almost non-existent, and oral accounts less precise than I would have wished.”<sup>100</sup> The resulting cookbook documents recipes fit for a king with names including;

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<sup>97</sup> Toon Phapphayboun, July 28, 2014.

<sup>98</sup> Toon Phapphayboun, phone interview by Kathryn A. Clune, March 23, 2015.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Phia Sing, *Traditional Recipes of Laos*, 7.

“A ‘Hot’ Dish of Small Catfish,” “Fermented Fish Mixture Grilled in Banana Leaf Container,” and “Steamed Stuffed Khae Flowers.”

With food so tightly linked to identity, Dara’s cooking and its presentation clearly reflects Richard Bauman’s foundational definition of performance. Here, cooking is the “artistic action—the doing of folklore” and serving the food is “the artistic event—the performance situation, involving performer, art form, audience, and setting.”<sup>101</sup> Breaking down the “artistic action” as such enables a close reading of the choices made by Dara at Asian Fusion Kitchen. These decisions are significant. In her work on ethnic foodways in America, folklorist Susan Kalcik posits that by studying foodways, an important aspect of traditional culture, we can better understand “the processes by which ethnic groups form, reform, and maintain themselves and how group and individual ethnic identity is communicated to in-group and out-group members by means of symbol and performance.”<sup>102</sup> The simple act of creating a traditional dish for the general public takes on broader significance in the mediation between distinct cultures across a restaurant table.

With the local community knowing so little about Laos or its food, Dara’s cooking at Asian Fusion Kitchen is a powerful portrayal of Laos—on her terms. She experiments with traditional fare out of concern for her customer’s tastes, leaving certain Lao foods off the table. The resulting menu and experience is enjoyable for both insiders and outsiders. Dara is creating a negotiated space that fosters cultural compromise and exchange. To appeal to a broad customer base, she avoided using “Lao” or “Thai” in the restaurant name, hoping to quell customers’ anxiety about the unknown or possible trepidation about spicy food. For

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<sup>101</sup> Richard Bauman, “Verbal Art as Performance,” *American Anthropologist* 77, no.2 (1975): 290.

<sup>102</sup> Susan Kalcik, “Ethnic Foodways in America: Symbol and the Performance of Identity” in *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States: The Performance of Group Identity*, Linda Keller Brown and Kay Mussel, eds. (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 46.

Dara, the concept of “fusion”—blending new with old, Lao with Thai or Chinese—is also key. She acknowledges that her menu combines aspects from these regions, but asserts her food is special because of the impeccable freshness of her ingredients—central to the spirit of cooking in Laos. While they were still operating out of the Lao Lanxang grocery, her mother Noubath prepared traditional Lao dishes for her daughter to sell. These included *kaopoon* (a beef, tomato, and noodle soup), Lao-style papaya salad made with *padaek*, sticky rice with sausages, sesame rice balls, fried dough, and fried rice crackers. Now that she is in charge of the cooking, Dara’s eleven-item menu at Asian Fusion includes only two distinctly Lao dishes: papaya salad and a Lao-style noodle dish. She explains, “My mom cooks in the real old ways, so I take her as a guideline. Nowadays people like more and different things, so I add new stuff to my Mom’s [cooking]. It is still authentic, but I can add something commercial . . . throw America and Asia together a little bit.” Her menu includes American favorites such as fried rice, *pad thai* (the bestseller), and spring rolls. Chuckling with a sparkle in her eyes, she reminded me that customers can always order any dish mild, hot, or “Lao”—if they dare.

Dara carefully eases her customers into trying new foods. She refers to her grocery as an “ingredients store” because she guides people regarding recipes, substitutions, and new dishes. When diners come to Asian Fusion Kitchen, she says, “I do encourage them [to try Lao food] but not right away. You know in this area there are not a lot of people who will open up to new culture[s], so you kind of have to be gentle, blend yourselves in a little bit . . . I don’t want to go out there and say ‘eat this, eat that.’ You need to encourage them, and see what they really want to eat.”<sup>103</sup> For the adventurous, her mother sells prepared foods next door, and there are always Lao dishes available off-menu for those who ask. For example,

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<sup>103</sup> Daraphone Phrakousonh, March 10, 2014.

Noubath's famous sour pork sausage (*som meu*) is mixed together with crunchy, fried sticky rice in *naem khao*; her sausage made with garlic, herbs, sticky rice and rice noodles (*sye oua*) is served sliced and grilled; and beef or chicken *laab* are also available. As Dara plays with her menu, she ensures that her culinary heritage flourishes in this new context. After two years in business, Dara's American visitors are expanding their tastes.

Despite the distance between the South and Laos, the native cuisines of the regions share characteristics that bring the two traditions into conversation. Both are historically agrarian societies that value thriftiness in food preparation. In a lecture addressing the food culture of the state, southern studies scholar Marcie Cohen Ferris said, "Pork is the centerpiece of the North Carolina table."<sup>104</sup> Transforming every part of a hog into food is a necessity for poor families in the South, and the origin of foods like cracklings and hogshead cheese. Cuts of meat that were discarded by people with more means were turned into delicious dishes by clever cooks. Because most of the country was historically poor, and few had regular access to meat, Lao cooking has always utilized as much of the animal—whether fish, duck, or pork—as possible. Pam Roths, an Asian Fusion Kitchen regular and now a close friend of the Phapphaybouns, identified this culinary connection. She explained, "My grandpa was a sharecropper and my mom crawled on her knees picking cotton as a kid. . . . They utilized everything. . . . One time I said, 'I like chicken hearts,' and [Toon] was surprised."<sup>105</sup> Chicken hearts and feet are also on the Lao table. Nancie McDermott acknowledges the trendiness in whole hog eating nowadays, but says, "Nose to tail eating,

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<sup>104</sup> Marcie Cohen Ferris, "Piedmont NC Food Cultures," (lecture, Carolina Cooks, Carolina Eats, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, March 27, 2015).

<sup>105</sup> Pam Roths, interview by Kathryn A. Clune, Morganton, NC, April 11, 2014.

Asia never stopped!”<sup>106</sup> As in the South, fermentation is a key way to preserve food. The sour pork and pickled fish Noubath is known for are fermented, as is *padaek*, the key marker of Lao flavor. April McGreger, author and owner for Farmer’s Daughter Preserves and Pickles, points out: “Fermentation is the foundation of southern food. It cannot be overstated. Of course, we don’t use the word fermentation. We call it ‘curing,’ ‘culturing,’ or ‘souring.’ Country ham, bacon, buttermilk, butter, fatback . . . are all cured or cultured products.”<sup>107</sup> Fermentation allows creative use of parts of vegetables that would otherwise be discarded, such as watermelon rind pickles. In Lao, there is a special word for foods which require much preparation before they can be edible: *ahan vieg* (work food).<sup>108</sup> Underneath contrasting flavors, similarities between southern and Lao cooking are easily found, and may contribute to Morgantonians’ enjoyment at Asian Fusion Kitchen.

While some of the ingredients used at the restaurant and sold in the grocery are imported through channels in Atlanta or Charlotte, Dara sources most of her produce locally. Western North Carolina is home to a great many Hmong farmers. In Hickory, twenty miles from Morganton, several Hmong families sell at a weekly Thursday morning flea market on the American Legion Fairgrounds. There one can purchase common Southeast Asian vegetables grown in North Carolina soil, including herbs, mustard greens, green onions, bamboo shoots, chilies, and bitter melon, among others. These Hmong farmers share markets space with vendors catering to Latino cooks and native southerners selling homemade jams and antiques—coming together in a compelling snapshot of the changing South.

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<sup>106</sup> Nancie McDermott, April 18, 2014.

<sup>107</sup> April McGreger, email to author, March 22, 2015.

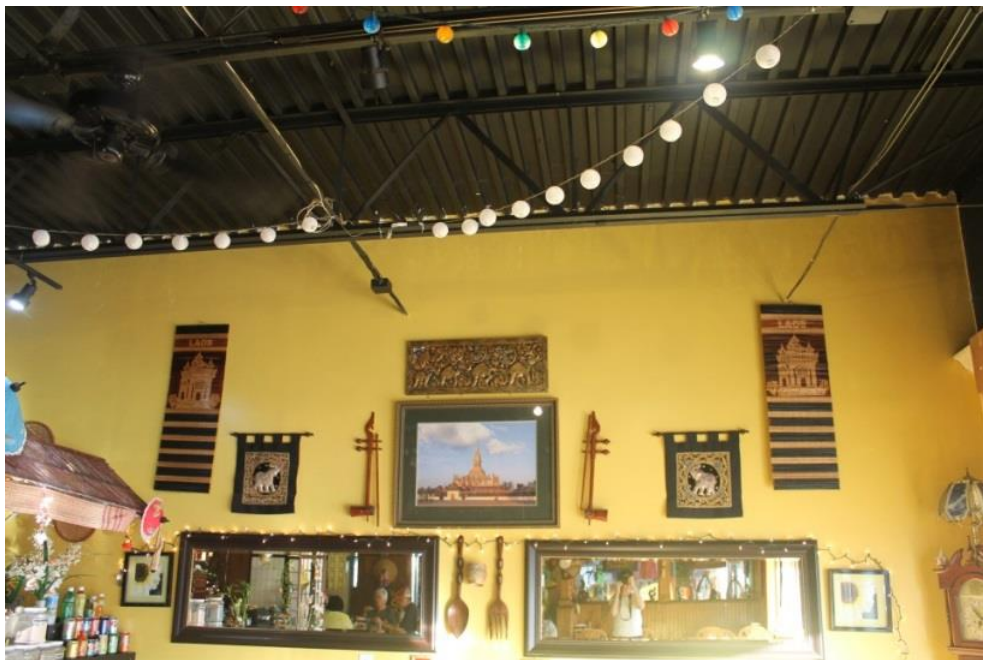
<sup>108</sup> Bouachin Thepphanouvong, Phonglasy Daovongphet, and Salif Teas, July 21, 2014.

If Dara's cooking at Asian Fusion Kitchen is a cultural performance, the restaurant's dining area is her stage. While the bland storefront gives no hint of what is inside, to step into the restaurant is to enter a world of color. The yellow-painted walls are decorated with large photos of temples in Laos, textile hangings, traditional instruments, and sticky rice baskets. The textiles have elephant motifs in reference to Laos's ancient name. At the back of the restaurant, a TV plays Lao DVDs—often popular music videos with lyrics in Lao script framing the bottom of the screen. In a niche between the TV and bar, Dara created what resembles a temple altar. Two golden Buddhas are framed by flowers, candles, and elephant figurines. There are other auspicious touches throughout the space—two golden altars affixed to the wall towards the ceiling (in the tradition of Theravada Buddhism), a plaque with the portrait of a monk and a Lao king with a wish for business success, and several laminated pictures of spiritual leaders. The tropics are evoked with orchids and colorful flowers that surround a central indoor fountain. This environment is carefully curated by Dara. “My purpose in doing that,” she explains, “is [customers] don't have to ask where I come from.”<sup>109</sup> Dara's passion and the connections she forms through food enliven these material objects to speak of a cultural world distant from Morganton, yet accessible and inviting to her customers.

The Phapphayboun's sense of self and pride in their culture is supported by this ability for self-representation at Asian Fusion Kitchen. Daily life in Morganton can be challenging. As Dara intimated in her comment “Laos never exists!” the Lao-Loum Buddhist community in Morganton are often mistaken for Hmong (who began settling there earlier) or Chinese. Pam Roths remembers when Hmong first arrived in the area in the 1970s and early 1980: “The people who had been born and raised here thought it was an invasion and they

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<sup>109</sup> Daraphone Phrakousonh, March 10, 2014.



**Figure 3.12** The walls of Asian Fusion Kitchen are full of decorations from Laos—photos of temples, textile panels, traditional instruments, and auspicious photos of monks and spiritual leaders. Photo by Kathryn A. Clune.

**Figure 3.13** At the “VIP” table Dara serves off-menu Lao dishes to those in the know. Here papaya salad, sticky rice, *naem khao*, a spicy sausage, and a simple broth soup are pictured here. Photo by Kathryn A. Clune.



had all the typical so-called beliefs about Asian people . . . if the dog disappeared they thought the Asians must have taken it. Even with the Chinese restaurants, ‘We don’t eat there because they fix cat and dog.’”<sup>110</sup> A 1994 article in *The Charlotte Observer* addressed the resentment felt by the local community as Southeast Asian families moved to Morganton and Hickory. Commenting on the rise of immigrants, Robbie Williams, chief of the Morganton Department of Public Safety, said, “This wave of immigrants is forcing people in this part of North Carolina to learn how to live with all different types of people. . . . This is happening all over the country, and it’s something we are going to have to continue to deal with for years to come.”<sup>111</sup> Williams addresses this as an unavoidable truth that must be faced—not a development to be celebrated.

Some of these tensions abated by 2014, but the fact that the Lao are a relatively small community from a country largely unknown to North Carolinians remains. Most Lao are employed in manufacturing jobs, and during the day the community is divided as they move among area factories. Work in these plants is tough: Air, who is a quality control manager for Leviton Manufacturing, works twelve-hour shifts, standing on her feet six or more consecutive days a week. She faces constant questions and prejudices from her fellow employees. One woman noticed her necklace, a small silver Buddha encased in plastic. When Air explained the charm, the woman said, “Oh! Stay away from me! You are evil!”<sup>112</sup> This ignorance of Laos and its culture grows wearisome. Yet Daniel, Dara’s brother-in-law, chuckles, the corners of his eyes crinkling in well-worn patterns. He explains how he responds when asked if he is Chinese time and time again: “I say ‘I’m just like you! I don’t

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<sup>110</sup> Pam Roths, April 11, 2014.

<sup>111</sup> Jef Feeley, “A Better Life,” *The Charlotte Observer*, October 16, 1994, 1V.

<sup>112</sup> Airsikhay Ammalathithada, May 7 2014.

know what it looks like in China! I watch the news on CNN at night and learn from that too.’ They say, ‘Oh really! Well what about your country? What about your food?’”<sup>113</sup> Asian Fusion is a space where Lao can gather, tell of their country in a hospitable context, and increase Morganton’s understanding of Laos.

No matter what time of day I visit, the tables at Asian Fusion Kitchen are full. Embarking on its third year, it is a vital business with loyal customers who appreciate its growing sense of community. While Dara estimates that roughly ninety-five percent of her customers are American, Toon claims it is slightly less, seventy percent.<sup>114</sup> As with the Phapphayboun’s family celebrations, Asian Fusion Kitchen provides a space and occasion to collapse the distance between the Lao community and recreate the extended conviviality around food that is ever-present in Laos. The restaurant also invites mingling across cultural backgrounds. The Phapphayboun family is extraordinarily welcoming, so much so that regulars are often invited to sit at the family (or “VIP”) table near the kitchen. “We’ve adopted people,” says Toon, “we have a VIP table with eight chairs and sometimes you have to pull more chairs because there are more people. It’s a gathering place for food and conversation.” Pam Roths, who first visited Asian Fusion Kitchen a year ago in search of *pho*, jokes, “I went looking for *pho* and I found family.” She is proud to see how Morgantonians come in to support Asian Fusion Kitchen. She attributes this willingness to the changing spirit of the town as people have left—either for education or in pursuit of work—and returned, to the welcoming Phapphayboun family, and Dara’s irresistible cooking. In Morganton, news still spreads primarily by word-of-mouth and Asian Fusion

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<sup>113</sup> Danil Phrakousonh, September 20, 2014.

<sup>114</sup> Daraphone Phrakousonh and Toon Phapphayboun, March 10, 2014.

Kitchen is part of the conversation. Pam is starting to hear others use the family's nickname "AFK"—a play on KFC.

The business is Dara's dream of bringing her family together made real. Here food and family are truly one. Her sister-in-law Meemee is the weekday waitress and her daughter April helps on the weekends. Her husband mans the grocery store and handles the accounting. Dara's uncle is the sous-chef. Toon and her parents are frequently at the family table. As with their home, the restaurant is an anchor for the Phapphayboun family. Dara explained, "On our day off, we can go together, eat together. . . . I did the right thing. To be very far away from home, not even born here, I think I've come a long way. . . . We have the time to work, but the time to enjoy our family, too."<sup>115</sup>

Her first year in business behind her, Dara is already planning for Asian Fusion Kitchen's future. She dreams of a day when the entire family can earn their living in the business. She would love for her waitresses to wear *sinh*, a traditional wrapped silk skirt. She imagines owning her own land and building a restaurant as you might see in Laos—in the style of a rural house with a closed dining area on the second level and open seating on the ground level. "I would put a bunch of Lao stuff in there," says Dara. "Statues, a bigger pond with a bigger Buddha statue, a bigger fountain . . . that is what I really want to do." She imagines training staff so she could feel comfortable leaving the kitchen. "I will wear more Lao clothing, I will say 'Sabaidee!'"<sup>116</sup> Toon and Dara hope to offer Lao cooking classes that focus on cuisine and heritage. As an instructor at Western Piedmont Community College, Toon believes the cooking class could be packaged as a continuing education credit and

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<sup>115</sup> Daraphone Phrakousonh, March 10, 2014.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

further develop their connection to Morgantonians. As Toon says, “That is my part of putting Laos on the map.”<sup>117</sup>

### **Adding Chilies and Sticky Rice to the Southern Table**

By opening Asian Fusion Kitchen, and balancing traditional foods with the palates of their customers, Dara and her family are bringing Laos within the borders of the American South. Scholars of southern food, including Marcie Cohen Ferris and John T. Edge, argue that this region proudly identifies itself by what is on the table. In Ferris’s words, “Southerners know who we are, in part, by the foods we eat and those we don’t” and difficult social history can be told by the “foods shared at a common table and those denied.”<sup>118</sup> John T. Edge, director of the Southern Foodways Alliance, sees immigrant foodways growing increasingly important in the South, arguing that such businesses are a “glimpse into the future” and that “new immigrants are the mom and pop restaurateurs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century South.”<sup>119</sup> In a recent essay, historian Tom Hanchett furthers this notion, describing how immigrant populations are thriving on the outskirts of cities like Charlotte, where they are transforming strip malls into busy food-related storefronts.<sup>120</sup>

I would argue that the South is embarking on a more profound change. International flavors are being actively integrated onto the southern plate. The Phapphaybouns are intimately aware of where Asian Fusion Kitchen fits within the nearby network of Asian restaurants and stores, such as Hong Kong BBQ in Charlotte, where they purchase their pig

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<sup>117</sup> Toon Phapphayboun, March 10, 2014.

<sup>118</sup> Marcie Cohen Ferris, *The Edible South: The Power of Food and the Making of an American Region* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 3.

<sup>119</sup> John T. Edge, “The New South,” (presentation, John T. Edge and Friends, Meredith College, Raleigh, NC, November 3, 2014).

<sup>120</sup> In 2000, North Carolina was among the country’s top states to see an increase in foreign-born residents. Hanchett, “A Salad Bowl City,” 174.

for Têt, or bu-ku in Raleigh, a family favorite. Located in a small mountain city, Asian Fusion Kitchen is still an outer node of this network. Yet, in larger cities divisions between immigrant populations and their foodways and native-born southerners are collapsing. Speaking at Meredith College in Raleigh, Edge described his lunch at Bida Manda, a popular “nouvelle-Lao” restaurant. He enjoyed “a rice and pork sausage that recalled *boudin*, the traditional rice and pork sausage of Cajun Louisiana.” Edge continued, “I finished with papaya salad, crowned with slices of pork neck bone meat, pork that—I might add—references and transcends the pork neck bone-flavored greens I savored as a boy.”<sup>121</sup> In this meal, Edge finds commonalities between global and native cuisines that are the basis of the region’s evolving food culture.

Food powerfully evokes place and identity, and restaurant owners like Dara and her family make a thousand choices about how to best present culinary worlds to their customers. To eat a dish at Asian Fusion Kitchen is to connect to the Phapphayboun family’s rich food heritage in forms adapted for Morgantonians. As food reinforces family bonds in Laos and at Deerfield and Clay Street houses, Asian Fusion Kitchen now serves as a public foundation for the Phapphaybouns in North Carolina. As a result, not only does the local Lao community have a gathering place and a convenient source for ingredients, Morgantonians are presented with an opportunity to experience Laos. While diners can sample *naem khao* made by the daughter of Vientiane’s best sour pork sausage maker, Dara may also recommend mild fried rice.

Perhaps it is this spirit that makes Asian Fusion Kitchen truly a Lao restaurant. As Toon describes, “The Lao way is to be humble. We do not force anything down anyone’s throat, and yet we accomplish what we want done. There are two ways, you can force the

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<sup>121</sup> Edge, “The New South,” November 3, 2014.

horse to water but it won't drink. The Lao way is to show you how to get to the river, and if you want to drink the water, that is fine—but you have found your own way there.”<sup>122</sup> The gentle diplomacy and negotiation of flavor at Asian Fusion Kitchen is increasing cross-cultural understanding in this small community. For North Carolinians, the taste of Laos may not be as far away as they think. Noubath's *padaek*, used by Dara, is fermented with fish from the nearby Catawba River and Lake James—bringing local flavor to this most Lao of dishes.

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<sup>122</sup> Toon Phapphayboun, March 10, 2014.

## CHAPTER 4: FAITH AND FOOD CARRY A WORLD

*“The continuing thread between my homes is Lao-ness.”* —Toon Phapphayboun, July 28, 2014

Noubath hands me a silver offering bowl and fills it with three small bananas, two sesame-covered fried desserts, a lunch-box sized orange juice, and a Kellogg’s Rice Krispy Treat in its crinkly blue packaging. Folding a piece of notepaper with quick movements, she transforms it into a neat cone and tucks my bills and two yellow flowers inside. In a few moments, I was ready with offerings for Pii Mai, the Lao New Year. I was sitting with Noubath, Air, and Meemee on the soft carpeted floor towards the front of the temple. We watch Khamsi excitedly help the two monks bring more flowers from the kitchen to the altar. With so many candles lit, the altar shines in a richly ornamented collage. At its base, small bowls of food, candles, and white blossoms are arranged on trays. Toon is sitting in a chair towards the back of the room, busy now and full of families filling offering bowls or paper-clipping bills to one of the three money trees. Air hands me a long, thin yellow beeswax candle and shows me how to hold it against my body and kink it in lengths corresponding to my torso, forearm, and head. We bend our candles in three and passed them towards the front, where a monk now sits at his station below the large gold Buddha at the altar’s center. Taking just a handful of our candles—there are so many on this special day—he twists them into a single mass. “It symbolizes the community of souls coming together,” Toon later explained to me.<sup>123</sup> The room grows quiet, and Khamsi and a few other men near the altar

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<sup>123</sup> Toon Phapphayboun, April 12, 2014.

begin the ceremony with words of welcome in Lao. The monk lights the mass of candles, and as the call-and-response chanting in Pali begins, he slowly turns the ever-bigger flame over a bowl of water.

Wat Lao Sayaphoum, a Lao Buddhist temple tucked into the hills roughly thirteen miles outside of Morganton, was the busiest I had even seen it. On this Saturday in April, one of the year's first warm days, the community came together in celebration and the temple was dressed to the nines. The fountain by the door was running and a table with flowers was pulled in front of Nang Torlane, "Mother Earth." This sculpture of gold-painted concrete stands in greeting outside the temple with her head crooked to the side, wringing her long ponytail into the fountain below. To her left, several gold Buddhas sat on a shelf in the sunshine, to be blessed and doused with water. Once the ceremony inside drew to a close, the celebration spilled outdoors and eventually down the hill to a stage and dancefloor.

At this temple, through the course of Pii Mai, smaller ceremonies, and mid-week visits, I began to understand how cooking and sharing traditional foods is an essential medium of Lao devotion. The rituals and aesthetics of Wat Lao Sayaphoum make visible otherwise unarticulated values that define the Lao worldview. Ceremonies at the temple bring the formalities of Theravada Buddhism to Morganton and reveal the deep ties between food and faith and how both contribute to feeling at home in the world. The offering of food is a central activity at the temple, and for the Phapphaybouns and other Lao Buddhists in Morganton, the transition from offering a dish to the altar to the family table is seamless.





**Figures 4.1–4.2** Wat Lao Sayaphoum consists of two buildings and is situated on land in the rolling countryside surrounding Morganton. Photos by Kathryn A. Clune.

## **Wat Lao Sayaphoum**

Wat Lao Sayaphoum is situated in an undeveloped, hilly landscape roughly thirteen miles from central Morganton. Led by Toon's father Khamsi, the Phapphayboun family helped establish the temple in 2003. Khamsi is regarded as a wise and experienced leader among the local Lao community. While in Bridgeport, Connecticut, he served on the management teams for both the local temple and family association. The decision to build a temple in Morganton was made in the living room of Deerfield Street house shortly after he and Noubath arrived in North Carolina. In 2003, roughly thirteen Lao families lived nearby and with their support, Khamsi and the management team transformed a rental house into a temporary temple. In 2005, with community donations, temple leadership bought the trailer and plot of land where Wat Lao Sayaphoum now stands.

The trailer includes a semi-public kitchen, a secondary altar, and private bedrooms for the temple's two monks. One monk, Somchit Sengdavone, has lived at the temple since I began visiting in 2014. Visiting monks, drawn from other temples in the US, periodically join Somchit.<sup>124</sup> The community cleared the plot of land of its trees and erected a carport next to the trailer, where the temple's main worship space is today. The sides of the carport are made of red aluminum and a covered porch was added in wood and cement. Indoors, the structure's simplicity is masked by the oranges, golds, and reds of the many Buddhist objects displayed here. The building was erected quickly, as Toon said, the community "did the Lao thing with construction—they just built it."<sup>125</sup> Temple management is now working with

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<sup>124</sup> According to Lao Buddhism, monks are required to stay at one temple for three months during Buddhist lent each year. Beyond this, they can travel to other temples. Martin Stuart-Fox and Somsanouk Mixay, *Festivals of Laos* (Chang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2010), 59.

<sup>125</sup> Khamsi Bounkhong Siluangkhot, September 21, 2014.

Burke County to ensure the space is up to code and meets the necessary requirements for public use. Wat Lao Sayaphoum, like the Buddhist temples of Laos, seems to be in a constant state of improvement.

Donating to the temple is an important act of faith, and the altar of Wat Lao Sayaphoum is covered in contributions given by Khamsi and the Phapphaybouns. At the front of that space is a gold Buddha, at least four feet tall itself and appears even larger from below the stepped altar. Khamsi purchased it from Thailand in honor of his mother for \$8,500 and Toon assisted with the complicated logistics involved in getting the sacred object to Morganton.<sup>126</sup> To the right of the Buddha is a *Pha Tai Pi Doak* library with the Siluangkhot name above its gilded glass doors. The complete teachings and philosophy of Buddhism are detailed in the many books inside. With additional community funds, the temple hired a sculptor from Laos—who was conveniently visiting his wife in nearby Hickory—to build the outside statue of Nang Torlane. Wherever there is a Buddha, there is a sculpture of the female figure of Nang Pohm Hom who beckons worshippers to the temple grounds. Worship days, or *wahn sin*, fall on every eighth and fifteenth day of the Lao Buddhist solar-lunar calendar. However, like many practices at the Morganton temple, this calendar is adapted for the United States. Humble, but with essential elements in place, the temple receives the local Lao community each Sunday morning.<sup>127</sup> Wat Lao Sayaphoum is a young institution supported by a relatively small community, and therefore does not yet have the formalized language, dance, and culture classes of other regional temples. However, the material culture and foodways at the temple fulfill an essential need for the local Lao.

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<sup>126</sup> Khamsi Bounkhong Siluangkhot, May 11, 2014.

<sup>127</sup> While the faithful will visit the temple weekly, more of the community visits on larger festival days or significant personal dates.

## Feeding the Spirit: Food and Religion in Laos

The national religion of Laos is Theravada Buddhism, which is practiced by the majority of Lao and permeates everyday life. In Donald Swearer's words, the country's religion is "a richly nuanced epic tale with many subplots."<sup>128</sup> In Laos, belief in Buddhism is woven together with an older, vernacular belief in spirits both kind and malicious. The act of offering food and money to both are important daily rituals. The spirits, or *pii*, are revered alongside Buddha and are placated with "spirit houses" and daily offerings of sticky rice, water, and other foods. Similarly, donating to the temple, or offering food to the monks, is the primary way a Buddhist can "make merit," or ensure good fortune in this life and the next. The spiritual life of the Lao is both intensely mystical (if you trip, blame a *pii*) and practical: What better way to please your ancestors, honor Buddha's teachings, and placate naughty *pii* than to offer food and money? Buddhism also demands kindness towards all living things in order to ensure good karma. The Venerable Jhiteeyanao, a monk who lived at Wat Lao Sayaphoum for three months in fall 2014, explained a central tenant of Buddhism, saying, "Be friendly with anybody, not necessarily your family, cousins, or same group of race or species. Any kind of people in the world, be friendly with them like your family."<sup>129</sup> Through being kind and making offerings to both Buddha and earthly spirits, the Lao ensure good fortune and place giving and hospitality at the very center of their worldview.

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<sup>128</sup> Donald K. Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 61.

<sup>129</sup> The Venerable Jhiteeyanao, interview by Kathryn A. Clune, Morganton, NC, September 21, 2014.





**Figure 4.3–4.4** (Left) Food is integral to Lao spiritual life. A *maak beng*, or banana leaf offering, is decorated with sticky rice. (Right) A spirit house, of the type seen all over Laos, is bedecked with the accumulation of daily offerings. Photos by Kathryn A. Clune.



**Figure 4.5–4.6** Temple ceremonies center around the offering of food. (Left) The Phapphaybouns gathered these foods together to honor their relatives in their home temple in Vientiane. (Right) Food is also given to *pii*, a practice continued in Morganton. This tray of food was offered to a tree at the 2014 Pii Maii celebration at Wat Lao Sayaphoum. Photos by Kathryn A. Clune.

For this reason, food and the spiritual world are tightly intertwined in Laos. Monks at the neighborhood temple survive on food offered by the laity. Sticky rice, pinched into neat balls, is tucked into spirit houses and pushed in the mouths of temple guardians. Before eating themselves, some Lao will offer up food for *pii*. Ajan Chansamone, my language instructor, remembers her grandmother taking a moment before family picnics to do so. As she explained, “Every place has an owner and you are a stranger there, so you feed it: water, food, just a little bit. . . . You have to respect the jungle.”<sup>130</sup> In another gesture of this pragmatic spiritualism, it is even better if you offer up foods you know the spirits, or your ancestors, will enjoy. If you wish to give the river spirits an offering, you choose something equally ancient, such as tobacco wrapped in betel leaves.<sup>131</sup> Special foods are also prepared for temple worship. As Toon explains, “Each person will call on whoever passed away in their lives to come and get their offerings. . . . That’s why many, many people, especially my mom, will say, ‘Oh, my mother really likes fish cakes!’ So you make a special dish . . . and then you take that to the temple . . . and you say ‘Come and get your fish cakes!’”<sup>132</sup> Temple ceremonies end with a community buffet. After foods brought for the monks are offered in reverence, all are welcome to fill their plates. While giving is central to Buddhism, food is central to giving—and by cooking, sharing, and eating Lao fulfill their spiritual needs.

### **Belief Made Visible at Wat Lao Sayaphoum**

Wat Lao Sayaphoum provides a space where the Lao Buddhists of Morganton can perform religious rites in a context made by Lao, for Lao. To recreate important acts of personal devotion, the temple community must reinterpret the historical traditions of Laos for

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<sup>130</sup> Chansamone Inlavongsa, July 17, 2014.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Khamssi Bounkhong Siluangkhot, May 11, 2014.





**Figure 4.7** Khamshi and Noubath take lunch to the temple's monks each Friday. Khamshi holds the lunch basket and a *thip khoa* full of sticky rice near the entrance to the monk's home. Photo by Kathryn A. Clune.

**Figure 4.9** The temple's two monks enjoy a lunch made by Noubath, and delivered by Khamshi and the author. Photo by Kathryn A. Clune.

their utility in the North Carolina foothills. By adapting everyday acts or provisions for large annual events in this manner, the Lao community willingly reinvents traditions for their present needs.<sup>133</sup> Ceremonies are held on Sundays in deference to the workweek, and large festivals, such as the Pii Mai celebration, are adapted. In Laos, secular celebrations spill out into the streets. For Pii Mai in Morganton, the temple arranges for a Lao performer, sets up a dance floor, and sells beer on its grounds to draw more people. The *tak baht* is also reinvented. Rather than walking the surrounding streets to receive daily offerings, the monks of Morganton rely on a synchronized delivery of meals by the laity. Three families bring them their lunch Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, and the larger community ensures—through donations—that there are plenty of supplies for them to cook simple meals for themselves Tuesday and Thursday. Khamsi and Noubath deliver the Friday meal. When I joined Khamsi on one of these trips, Noubath sent us with an elaborate, and very traditional, meal: fried fish, sticky rice, a stew which included chicken feet and frozen mushrooms from Laos (bought at Lao Lanxang Asian Grocery), pickled fish stir fry, and a plate of raw greens. While Noubath cooks regularly for the temple, Air and Dara enjoy doing so for special occasions. On behalf of Asian Fusion Kitchen, Dara will typically donate *pho* for the Pii Mai celebration and the proceeds from its sale support the temple. This flexibility ensures Wat Lao Sayaphoum is a vital community gathering place that is easily accommodated into life in Morganton.

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<sup>133</sup> This is an example of the reinvention of tradition defended by Handler and Linnekin, who claim “traditions thought to be preserved are created out of the conceptual needs of the present. Tradition is not handed down from the past, as a thing or collection of things: it is symbolically reinvented in an ongoing present.” Handler, Richard and Jocelyn Linnekin. “Tradition, Genuine or Spurious,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 97, no. 385 (1984): 280.





**Figure 4.9** The altar at Wat Lao Sayaphoum. Photo by Katy Clune.

**Figure 4.10** The altar at the Phapphayboun temple in Baan Sikai, Vientiane, Laos. Photo by Kathryn A. Clune.

As more people come to the temple, its meaning and significance increases. As Air explains, the temple “is part of a family, like in Laos. When we have our traditions, we go to the temple, and I feel like I’m in Laos.”<sup>134</sup> One measure of this is the altar itself. The altar, a five-foot wide platform rising in three steps covered in burgundy carpet, was sparsely decorated in the early days. “Now you can’t see the carpets,” says Toon, “Only statues.”<sup>135</sup> Surrounding the central Buddha are many smaller statues, who meditate in different positions. Along the back wall are miniature versions of the tiered umbrellas carried in Lao festival processions. Green, shiny, heart-shaped leaves make up an imitation Bodhi tree to the left of the altar’s center, and flanking each side are bunches of pink plastic lotuses in ceramic vases. At Buddha’s feet, above where the monks sit on woven pillows, is an electric candle of the sort Americans put on their windowsills at Christmastime. Various gleaming imitation cones and other plastic flowers are dispersed across its surface, and a white thread is bound around the largest Buddha and draped from left to right, figuratively tying these sacred elements together.

For the Lao who visit Wat Lao Sayaphoum, the temple and its altar are a North Carolina depiction of their neighborhood temple in Laos. The imitation plastic cones reference the freshly made banana leaf and flower originals used at home. This intimate connection honors both group and individual beliefs, and proclaims *you belong here*. As folklorist Debra Lattanzi Shutika writes, “The sense of belonging is constituted through shared meanings and . . . can include places that are physical, virtual, or imagined.” Wat Lao

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<sup>134</sup> Airsikhay Ammalathithada, September 21, 2014.

<sup>135</sup> Khamsi Bounkhong Siluangkhot, May 11, 2014.

Sayaphoum is both grounded in Morganton and part of Laos.<sup>136</sup> Anthropologist Ghassan Hage argues that feeling at home is “dependent on four feelings: “security, familiarity, community, and a sense of possibility or hope.”<sup>137</sup> At the temple, all these feelings come together and hope is nurtured. By drawing on the interconnectedness of food and faith, Lao can reaffirm their feeling of being at home in North Carolina beyond the temple through the everyday acts of cooking and eating.

Philosopher Charles Taylor uses the term “social imaginary” to refer to the “ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.”<sup>138</sup> In other words, our personal understandings of the world are built through collective acts of constructing narrative and significance. The central part of our identity and day-to-day reality, in Taylor’s words, “can never be adequately expressed in the form of explicit doctrines because of its unlimited and indefinite nature.”<sup>139</sup> Rather, material things and foods are invested with meaning and evoke whole worlds in an ever-developing “narrative of . . . becoming.”<sup>140</sup> For the Lao community in Morganton, it is sharing the foods of Laos that articulate their identity.

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<sup>136</sup> Shutika, *Beyond the Borderlands*, 15.

<sup>137</sup> Ghassan Hage, “Migration, Food, Memory, and Home-Building,” in *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, eds. Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwarz (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 418.

<sup>138</sup> Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 23.

<sup>139</sup> Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 25.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

## CONCLUSION

The study of everyday acts such as cooking and eating reveals entire worlds of understanding. This is the powerful potential of folklore: to elevate our everyday creativity to art, and in so doing, justify thoughtful analysis of how we each choose to move through our days. As folklorist Henry Glassie said, “Call it art or call it folklore, but this is what it is: a realization of human potential that enables, at once, personal expression and social consequence. . . . That inescapable complexity, the unity in being of the personal and the social, is at its peak, made sensate in creative acts that allow us to be ourselves, to communicate, to connect with others and build with them social alliances of mutual benefit. Call it art, call it folklore, but that is what it is: a momentary fulfillment of what it is to be human.”<sup>141</sup> As I enjoyed countless meals prepared and served by the Phapphaybouns, I began to understand how they embrace life and make sense of the difficult journey that brought them to North Carolina.

During one of our early interviews, Noubath interrupted her daughter’s translation, saying, “*Everything is Lao*” in emphatic English. Toon elaborated, “She doesn’t miss home at all because everything she does is Lao.”<sup>142</sup> Many months later, through my exploration of the family’s homes, Asian Fusion Kitchen, and Wat Lao Sayaphoum, the depth of what Noubath was expressing became clear to me. Lao cooking and eating are expressions of this

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<sup>141</sup> Glassie, *The Stars of Balleymenone*, 415.

<sup>142</sup> Noubath Siluangkhot, March 10, 2014.

family's cultural heritage and frame their relationship to each other, the Lao community, and local Morgantonians. However, cooking and the generosity embodied in sharing traditional foods with others taps into a Lao worldview informed by both Buddhism and the contours of daily life in Laos. Thus, enjoying a Lao meal together nourishes this family's sense of self, both intimately and infinitely.

Through the medium of food, the Phapphaybouns are also empowered to represent themselves in their new home. We can communicate across cultures more easily around a shared table, and through Asian Fusion Kitchen, Laos is made visible in Morganton. Together with their friend and loyal customer Pam Roths, Toon and Dara constantly consider ways to further increase understanding in Morganton. In the summer of 2014, Pam and two loyal restaurant customers joined the family in Vientiane. Dara and Toon would love to coordinate future restaurant-sponsored trips to Laos. Toon dreams of a Lao cooking and culture class sponsored by Western Piedmont Community College and taught at Asian Fusion Kitchen. At the local micro-brewery, Fonta Flora, the Beer Lao on sale at the restaurant inspired brewers to craft their own rice-based beer. Among an increasingly diverse population in this rural foothills community, the Phapphaybouns demonstrate how global flavors and cultures are now an integral expression of the mountain South.

## AFTERWORD

It was an exhibition at my former workplace, The Textile Museum in Washington, D.C., that first introduced me to Laos. “*Out of Southeast Asia: Art that Sustains*” featured contemporary and historical textiles paired with fieldwork photographs from the 1990s. I was enamored, but I never could have guessed that Laos would play such a large role in my life in the coming years. In summer 2013, my father Daniel Clune postponed his planned retirement and became the United States Ambassador to Laos. My parents left for Vientiane in September that year, just as I began graduate school in Chapel Hill. I began to think about how I could connect my interests in museums and material culture with the opportunity to visit Vientiane. Looking for textiles, I met the Phapphaybouns. A colleague at The Textile Museum introduced me via email to Toon, and we met at a Hmong New Year festival in Hickory. Their enthusiasm for their country and its cuisine was infectious. Over the past year, I began to feel as if we were on a shared mission: to tell the story of Laos and introduce North Carolinians to this unfamiliar country.

In the end, I have found more similarities than differences between textiles and foodways. Each art form is an indelible part of our everyday lives. Today traditional arts are challenged by difficult economic realities, but clothing and meals are ever-present forms of self-expression. We wake in the morning, dress, eat, and our day begins. By examining a weaving we can learn about a culture’s taste preferences, technological developments, the influence of trade, and social norms—and the same can be said of the foods on the dinner

table. Both humble and sublime, each art speaks of histories complex and intertwined. By seeking to understand such everyday arts, we seek to understand life itself.

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