

The Role of Southeast Asians in the Secret War in Laos (SSST Laos)

Why Laos?

The following quote came from an article on the CIA website on "CIA Air Operations in Laos, 1955-1974." On December 29, 1960 after the Soviets began supporting Kong Le, a Neutralist who was being supported by the communist Pathet Lao, Admiral Felt cabled the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

*"With full realization of the seriousness of the decision to intervene, I believe strongly that we must intervene now or give up northern Laos. **If we lose Laos we will probably lose Thailand and the rest of Southeast Asia.** We will have demonstrated to the world that we cannot or will not stand when challenged. The effect will soon then be felt throughout Asia, Latin America, and Africa."*

The *SSST Laos* will be organized to help participants better understand and contextualize the Secret War and why, as Admiral Felt stated, the U.S. felt in the early 60's that **Laos was the key cold war domino** in Southeast Asia, not Vietnam.

Laos and Southeast Asia are important because they include geologically and ecologically diverse areas of study, are the starting place of many new immigrants to the U.S., offer an opportunity to introduce students to the issues of developing nations in a concrete way, and are politically diverse and culturally and religiously rich.

Additionally, research and pedagogical practice show that if educators are disconnected from the home-family-community identities and contexts of the students they teach, especially those who are immigrants, then they can neither reach them in meaningful ways, nor tap their rich, sociocultural knowledge to share with others in the classroom (Kiang, 1997; Trueba, Rodriguez, Zou, & Cintron, 1993). Yet, most educators in the U.S. have had little exposure to authentic

Southeast Asian perspectives through our formal education and professional development. Without opportunities for focused travel/study, the awareness of and knowledge base in these areas is typically constrained by media images and personal experience. The *SSST Laos* addresses this important need.

Laos and Southeast Asia's history are one of "syncretism", that is, of peoples synthesizing different cultural/religious/ philosophical forms and values into new, unique and enduring patterns of life. Situated at a crossroads position between the world of China and India and on major trade routes taken by Muslim merchants, SEA peoples have responded historically by integrating new religious ideas and values, foods, arts, industries and other cultural practices into their own to create some of the most fascinating lifestyles to be found anywhere in the world. For our students, the example of peoples working through a system based less on assimilation into the majority and more on incorporating new and valuable ideas while maintaining people's core identities, is a valuable one to consider.

During the *SSST Laos* participants will have the opportunity to learn through seminar sessions that incorporate 'authentic voices.' Then, in addition to the immediate gripping "dramatic moments" provided by being on the study tour, SEAIF will honor the academic and use these highly motivating encounters to propel participants into seeking information that will allow them to expand their insights and make important connections. Otherwise, it would be too easy to allow the Southeast Asian countries SEAIF tours to become commodified (typical tourist experience) and trivialized – a mere producer of cultural products, such as food, dance, and art, for our consumption.

It is the *SEAIF team's* belief that this typical "tourist" approach robs both teachers and consequently their students of the chance to gain significant cross-cultural understanding. In post tour sessions participants will have the opportunity to distil their experiences and examine how their experiences and documentation might be translated into real teaching in their classrooms and shared through digital projects. As all participants will have documented their experiences through digital photography and video, they will then be able to easily

incorporated content collected into their digital projects to be shared with fellow staff and made available for access through the Internet.

In the seminar series and on the study tour we will explore how the following ten topics impact Southeast Countries, and specifically Laos and Laotians today, providing us with a broader international dimension that could then be extended to looking at other countries.

- Conflict and Its Control: Violence/Terrorism/War
- Economic Systems: International Trade/Aid/Investment
- Global Belief Systems: Ideologies/Religions/Philosophies
- Human Rights and Social Justice/Human Needs and Quality of Life
- Planet Management: Resources/Energy /Environment
- Political Systems: International Structures/Institutions
- Population: Demographic Growth/Patterns/Movements/Trends
- Race and Ethnicity: Human Commonality and Diversity
- The Technocratic Revolution: Science/Technology/Communications
- Sustainable Development: Political/Economic/Social

These discussions will include reflecting on the need for students to know and understand that global issues and challenges exist and affect their lives. Southeast Asia provides excellent examples on how global issues and challenges are interrelated, complex, and changing and we will seek out primary sources and develop criteria for discriminating, evaluation, selecting and responding to useful and relevant data in the international environment.

At the core of all contemporary international and global studies are two concepts, change and interdependence. The metaphor of a spider's web applies well to today's global problems and challenges. Touch the web anywhere and it vibrates everywhere. Similarly, if one "touches" any global problem, one *can* realize its connectedness or interdependence with another. As University of Chicago psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi states, "It is imperative to begin thinking about a truly integrative, global education that takes seriously the actual interconnections of causes and effects." SEAIF is designed to do just that.