

# The Emergence of a New Lao Cinema: An Interview with Anysay Keola and Xaisongkham Induangchanthy

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## Introduction

When the Lao People's Democratic Republic was proclaimed in 1975, cinema came under the control of the government, all film artists had to join the Lao Patriotic Front Film Service, and, for a long time, commercial films were not produced. From 1976 to 1988, the Cinema Department of Laos imported an average of 70 films a year, but it produced only two feature films. One is *The Sound of Gunfire from the Plain of Jars*, co-directed by Laotian Somchith Pholsena and Vietnamese Pham Ky Nam, a historical war film produced in 1983. The other is *Red Lotus* (1988), set a few years prior to the establishment of the Lao PDR, tracing several thematic levels of division: within a family, within the nation, between classes, and between traditional and modern values. Directed by Som Ock Southiphonh, who had trained in filmmaking in Czechoslovakia, the film is the highest cinematic achievement of Lao cinema up to that point.

After 1988, the Cinema Department focused mainly on producing "informational" films, and in the 2000s, only the company Lao Art Media, with the support of nongovernmental organizations, produced feature-length films in the form of "edutainments," about subject matters such as human trafficking and bird flu. The moving force, which has kept Lao cinema afloat in the twenty-first century, is Anousone Sirisackda, co-producer of and director for Lao Art Media, who made *A Father's Heart* (2007) and *Only Love* (2010). It was Sirisackda who, in 2008, helped make possible the

first commercial production in Laos in 33 years by co-directing with Thai director Sakchai Deenan and co-producing with a Thai company, *Sabaidee Luang Prabang*. Several Lao-Thai co-productions have since followed.

This transnational reawakening of a Lao film industry was further buttressed by the founding in 2009 of the Vientiane International Film Festival (VIFF), initiated through a Lao-German cooperation, and the Luang Prabang Film Festival (LPFF), established by the American Gabriel Kuperman. These festivals galvanized young Lao filmmakers, who, as it turned out, were only waiting for a reason to shoot their own films. Both festivals have become the venue for independently produced short and feature-length Lao films, some amateurish and TV-like while others quite sophisticated. In 2011, the landscape of Lao cinema was altered by the arrival of Anysay Keola's *At the Horizon*, produced by a team of young and savvy filmmakers collectively known as Lao New Wave Cinema (LNWC). The film is the first crime-thriller produced in Laos, made possible by the efforts of an all-Lao cast and crew. It toured the film festival circuit, and the members of LNWC went on to produce film genres heretofore unseen in Lao screens, including *Huk aum lum* (2013) and *Vientiane in Love* (2015). Meanwhile, in 2012, Mattie Do directed the first Lao horror film, *Chanthalay*, produced by Lao Art Media.

Last year I conducted interviews with Do (published in *Plaridel* 12.2) and two of the co-founders of LNWC, Keola and Xaisongkham “Kham” Induangchanthy. Do, Keola, and Induangchanthy talked to me about Lao cinema culture from the time of the production of *At the Horizon* and *Chanthalay*. The resulting documents from these interviews I hope can provide insight into a specific historical juncture when a new cinema in Laos emerged. Prior to the interview, Keola and Induangchanthy had already produced a number of short films and documentaries, some of them shown in the VIFF and LPFF. Keola directed *Forests for Our Future* (2007), *The Day That* (2009), *The Cage* (2010), *Another Love Story* (2010), and *A Little Change* (2010), while Induangchanthy directed *Against the Tide* (2004), *Sleepless Nights* (2012), and *The Adventures of the Lao Nagas* (2013). Since the interviews, Do completed the horror film, *Dearest Sister* (2016), Keola premiered his second feature, *Above It All* (2015), and Induangchanthy finished his short film, *Those Below* (2015).

**Patrick F. Campos (PFC):** Describe Lao film culture today.

**Keola:** Film culture in Laos has been lost for almost a generation. After 1975, the film industry in Laos quickly faded until there was no commercial cinema left in operation. As a result, a new generation of Lao grew up

with no experience of going out to watch films in a cinema. When a new commercial cinema opened again sometime in 2006, young audiences didn't know how to behave in the cinema. Many audiences prefer to watch movies at home, and many middle-aged audiences rarely go out to the cinema to pursue a form of entertainment.

Watching movies at the cinema is not yet the most popular pastime, due to low quality facilities, their unhygienic and discouraging environment, and the moviegoers' ill-mannered behavior.

Beer drinking is a more popular pastime in Laos; many young and underage audiences can easily walk into a beer garden to enjoy their free time. Beer shops outnumber bookshops in Laos; this reflects the society to some degree.

The shopping mall in Vientiane is not so popular because Lao people tend to purchase household goods imported from Thailand. Many middle class families prefer shopping in Nongkai or Udon across the border.

**Induangchanthy:** Regarding movie-going culture, this culture has been absent among us for so long. It only came back about a decade ago—when many audiences were not used to sitting in a cinema to watch a movie on a big screen. Many didn't know how to behave in the theater; they would chat, talk on the phone, shout at each other, or eat loudly. This unpleasant experience prevented many Lao people, especially adults, from entering the theater. As a result, the audience members were usually kids and young people.

As of today, there are a few functioning cinema theaters: one in Champasak province (Pakse); another is in Savannakhet (Lao International Trade Exhibition and Convention Center or ITECC is just open in Savannakhet with a cinema theater; I'm not sure if the stand-alone theater run by the Department of Information and Culture is still open); and two in Vientiane, the capital (one is at Lao-ITECC and one is at Vientiane Center, a major cineplex which opened one or two months ago).

Other screening venues in Vientiane include the National Cultural Hall and the Budo Center. When filmmakers want to premiere their movies, they usually do it at the National Cultural Hall or the Budo Center because they can sell tickets at a higher price and keep most of the profit generated by ticket sales. If they premiered at Lao-ITECC, they would have to share half of their ticket sales with the theater owner.

**Keola:** The distribution channels are small.

We begin distribution by screening our films at the cinema in Vientiane—Lao-ITECC. Then we sell the movie online, via Vimeo on demand. After the online premiere, we produce the DVDs, then distribute them by ourselves.

Self-distribution is not efficient. We see ourselves as filmmakers, not as businessmen. We can't afford to lose time going door to door.

So far, there are no film distributors.

**Induangchanthy:** In terms of distribution, filmmakers are DIY-ing. That means we have to make a movie, book a venue, advertise it, sell tickets, and screen it. So far, no Lao film has been shown at a major cineplex yet. In the past, when we wanted to screen at Lao-ITECC, we had to share 50% of the ticket sales with the theater owner. In addition to this, we also travel to different provinces to screen it. Sometimes organizations pay for a private screening for their staff.

We also sell films online where people pay to watch and download. After that, we make DVDs. Some of us have started to look into releasing films on YouTube and making money from views. Some movies make it to Thailand and are subsequently aired on Thai television or Thai airlines.

Piracy is also partly to blame. In Laos, a movie ticket costs 10,000-15,000 Kip for Thai and Hollywood films, and 15,000-30,000 Kip for Lao films. A DVD (containing up to six movies) costs 5,000-10,000 Kip.

When a movie playing in cinemas is also available in the cheap (but pirated) DVD market, combined with the unpleasant experience of watching in the theater, then people don't have a reason to visit the theater. However, things may change with the recent opening of a major cineplex in the capital (they always show the latest Thai and Hollywood films; they also invite Thai directors and actors for the premiere as well). It's still early to know how a new cinema theater will change the movie landscape or attract more people to visit a theater.

**Keola:** On average, three new Lao films are produced every year since 2012. Previously, only one Lao film was produced per year, or none at all. Digital SLRs revolutionized the industry and allowed young filmmakers to shoot low-budget movies.

**Induangchanthy:** Based on my limited knowledge, ten years ago there were only two key players involved in movie production: Lao Art Media,

and the Cinema Department, under the Ministry of Information and Culture.

With the support of various non-governmental organizations, Lao Art Media sporadically created educational movies about human-trafficking or some diseases.

On the other hand, the Cinema Department made propaganda movies, sometimes in collaboration with or with the support of Vietnamese filmmakers or the Vietnamese government.

During that time, a movie would be screened at the National Cultural Hall in Vientiane.

When *Sabaidee Luang Prabang* was released in 2008, it was a big hit. Several theaters opened partly because of that movie. There were cinemas in Pakse, Savannakhet, and Vientiane, home of the only stand-alone cinema in the country.

Since 2008, Lao Art Media, who co-produced *Sabaidee Luang Prabang* with a Thai company, continued to make similar-theme movies with its Thai partners, even featuring the same actress, Khamly Philavong.

The Cinema Department also made low-budget propaganda movies and tried to screen them, but these always failed to attract audiences and make money due primarily to its poor quality.

Based on my understanding, every year, the government allocates a budget of USD 3,000-USD 5,000 (I could be wrong with this number) to the Cinema Department for film production. However, not all the staff at the Cinema Department are trained as or want to become film directors. Thus, CD often produces bad movies that no one wants to see.

**PFC:** How do people regard the Lao-Thai co-productions, including the *Red Scarf* (2012) and *Sabaidee Luang Prabang* (2008)?

**Induangchanthy:** We think they're Lao movies. Co-productions are usually written and directed by a Thai director. Apart from the first *Sabaidee Luang Prabang* movie, Lao-Thai co-produced films were not very popular. I guess the story and production quality weren't great.

Lao audiences comment on Lao Art Media's Facebook page when it promotes Lao-Thai movies. Comments reveal that they were fed up with seeing the same star.

I think Lao-Thai filmmakers working in Laos have to work under a lot of pressure from the Lao government. That means their story and content have to be in-line with government guidelines, whatever they

are.

In other words, stories can become very plain and boring. When the story is not interesting and the quality of production is poor, then people don't go and watch.

**PFC:** What are your thoughts on these co-productions?

**Induangchanthy:** I wasn't involved with any of these productions, but I think co-production can be good for local filmmakers.

We can learn from more experienced filmmakers, like the Thai filmmakers, until we can expand our market and reach an international audience.

By sharing production cost, local filmmakers will have access to better equipment.

Regarding the films you mentioned, I feel like it's a one-way street. I believe the story was from the Thai director. Crew members were mainly Thai. The film did not involve Lao filmmakers.

Co-productions with creative input from local filmmakers are preferable.

**PFC:** Describe the process that a film producer has to go through in relation to government regulation.

**Keola:** We need permission to shoot the film in Laos and permission to screen the film in Laos. The script must be submitted for approval, then we can use this document to gain access to locations. After the movie is shot and edited, we send the film for screening approval.

**Induangchanthy:** In Laos, even short film scripts are submitted to the Cinema Department for approval before we can do anything else. If the script is rejected, that is the end of the story. If it's approved, we then have to apply for a filming permit. Things become more complicated and more expensive if the production involves foreign cast or crew. Once the filming permit is granted, a government representative will be assigned to oversee the shooting. After the film is complete but before public screening, it has to be resubmitted for censorship.

Censorship affects many filmmakers. There is no clear guide for us to follow. So far, at least three scripts from Lao New Wave Cinema have been rejected. I think censorship prevents many of us, especially young filmmakers, from making movies. Many of us start to censor ourselves during our thinking process. That's not very healthy, I feel.

**PFC:** How did you get started in filmmaking?

**Keola:** After I graduated from Australia, with a degree in multimedia design, for two years I worked for an environmental organization in Bangkok, Thailand. While in Thailand, I learned that I want to be a filmmaker, so I began a master's degree in film to pursue a career in filmmaking.

**Induangchanthy:** I started to be interested in filmmaking by chance when I studied in Singapore more than a decade ago. There, I had a chance to attend a film festival. I saw films from other countries such as Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia . . . but there were none from Laos. So at that time, I told myself, I would be a movie director and make Lao movies to show overseas.

**Keola:** And then I came back to do my thesis film in Laos, *At the Horizon*, and it was the beginning of the Lao New Wave Cinema (LNWC) group—filmmakers who helped me finish the film. We saw ourselves as potential players to help develop the cinema scene in Laos.

**Induangchanthy:** LNWC is a group of emerging Lao filmmakers. Initially there were ten of us. We first gathered to make the film *At the Horizon*. After the relative success of the movie, we decided to call ourselves “Lao New Wave Cinema.” Later, we founded a company under the same name.

**Keola:** The phrase “Lao New Wave” is already quite familiar; we want audiences to differentiate our films from films that tend to be more melodramatic in the style of television soap operas. Though we didn't invent a new language for cinema like the French New Wave did, adapting the phrase “New Wave” signals to the audience that we are the new generation, so expect a new style. We don't limit ourselves to one film genre; we make films of every genre, with good production value, even under the constraints that we have in Laos.

**PFC:** What are the other activities of Lao New Wave Cinema? Who are its members?

**Induangchanthy:** In addition to making feature films (our main goal), we also make television commercials, music videos, and corporate videos. We also sometimes take on editing jobs. We occasionally hold film workshops as well. Current members include Anysay Keola as Managing

director; Vannaphone Sitthirath (Kino), the only woman in our team; Phanumad Disattha (Ton); Khamhou Phanleudeth (Tou); Amatha Ratsombath (Lao-French); Floren Duroc (French); Nin; and Ding.

We also work with three permanent freelancers outside our team, whom we trained to work as AD, AC, editor, etc.

We are filmmakers, but we also do other things to make a living. Currently, only Anysay works full time to manage the company. When there is a new project, tasks will be distributed among members. So we take turns playing different roles, although some of us often take up the same roles. Roles are assigned depending on availability. In other words, apart from Anysay, we are like freelancers who own the company.

So, Anysay can write, direct, AD, DP, and edit; Kino can write and produce. She also works with an NGO. I can write, direct, produce, AD, and edit; however: I spend most of my time doing my own projects.

Ton can write, direct; he also runs his own restaurant and cake shop. Tou can act, produce, and do graphic works; he runs his own company as well. Amatha can write, direct, edit, and do sound recording; he also teaches dance classes.

Floren is only interested in the gaffer's job. He used to run his farming business but it failed, so now he spends more time with the company. Nin is mainly interested in DP, but he also writes, directs, and edits. He used to run his own company and work with Google. While he keeps in contact with the company, he's now based in Luang Prabang. Ding can produce and manage projects; he also works for an NGO.

**PFC:** Talk about the romantic omnibus film, *Vientiane In Love* (2015). How did this project come about?

**Induangchanthy:** The idea came from Ding. Our company didn't have any feature film project in the pipeline and the movie scene in Laos was a bit quiet. So we wanted to do a quick project to keep LNWC in the scene.

Ding managed to get support from Petrotrade. Initially, six directors were supposed to direct six short films as part of an omnibus project. However, due to a limited budget and scheduling issues, only four directors stayed and finished their films.

Four directors made five short films. I wrote screenplays for two short films and directed one of them; I couldn't do both because I had to leave for the US to study. One of my short films in this project was funded by the Lao Filmmaker Fund.

The film was produced under LNWC, and all directors were from LNWC.

This project was more challenging than we initially anticipated. The budget was small. We had to wait for all directors to write their scripts, so there was some delay. Two scripts were rejected; new scripts had to be developed. We had to rush to finish the project to fulfill the deadline set by our main sponsor, Petrotrade. Both production and story quality suffered.

We did relatively okay though. We anticipated that it would not be a big hit. It opened the Luang Prabang Film Festival in 2014, screened nationwide, and was invited to a few festivals in the region.

**PFC:** Tell me about the comedy *Huk Aum lum* (2013).

**Induangchanthy:** *Huk Aum lum* was written and directed by LNWC's Ton.

*Huk* means love. If food tastes *aum lum*, it tastes just right and good. You may have a more proper English term to describe it.

There was a local investor who hired our team to make it. It was a big hit. LNWC was responsible for making this movie.

**PFC:** Coincidentally, Lao Art Media also produced *Chanthaly* at the same time as LNWC's films were produced. Were your productions concerted efforts?

**Induangchanthy:** Anysay and I knew each other via YouTube and email before we decided to work together. I was an assistant director for his debut feature film, *At the Horizon*.

We were looking for an effects specialist for some of the bloody scenes, so we approached Chris Larsen (Mattie Do's husband) for advice. That's how we met Mattie. Later, Mattie and Chris also helped us check English subtitles for the movie. But we haven't really worked together on anything major yet.

**Keola:** I would say it is not coincidental; the films were released at the time when DSLR technology became more mainstream. Any aspiring director with enough knowledge, support, and with a large enough network could pull off making a film with the new technology.

It just happened that my film finished first; if I didn't make it, Mattie would have made it any way. But I believe that the success of *At the Horizon* and Mattie's movie helped push new players into the scene. When they learned that Mattie and I both made films with the limited resources available in Laos, moviemaking was no longer about money.

**Induangchanthy:** I think our filmmaking community in Laos is very fragmented right now. It seems we just do our own thing. There are more and more aspiring filmmakers entering the scene, but they just do their own things by themselves.

There hasn't been much collaboration among Lao filmmakers yet.

**PFC:** How would you situate *Chantaly* and *At the Horizon* in Lao cinema history?

**Keola:** The movies are both landmarks in Lao cinema history. They are the first of their kind: the first Lao thriller-drama film and the first Lao horror Lao film, excluding the *Red Scarf* that was written, produced, and directed by a Thai director.

The films present the new generation's perspective after an era of revolution and propaganda. The films represent a generation of filmgoers looking inward and asking questions about social issues.

**PFC:** Did you encounter any censorship problems while producing *At the Horizon*?

**Keola:** When the script couldn't get filming permission at first, I asked for special approval, which limited my screening options to the university, and my audience to graduating students. The film would not be available for public screening. After I finished the movie, we showed it to the Cinema Department director, who allowed public viewing albeit with some censorship. We blurred the guns and removed rude words.

During filming, I was aware of possible censorship, so I wrote two versions of the sensitive scenes. I also wrote two versions of the ending: one version appeased the censorship board in Laos, while the other was true to my vision for the film.

**PFC:** What were the circumstances and inspirations that led to the production of *At the Horizon*?

**Keola:** I had to make a film as part of my thesis to earn my master's degree. The requirement didn't specify a feature film; short films were acceptable. But as I have always wanted to come back to Laos to make a Lao film, I decided to direct one for my thesis.

I wrote a script that begins with issues I want to talk about, and what I'm familiar with. I grew up in a middle class family, so I've had access to opportunities for study trips abroad. My friends come from

poor families and very rich families. I saw both worlds in our small society, so I wanted to write something about this.

An encounter between my friend and a young, spoiled, rich boy inspired me to write the character Sin. The rich boy bragged about killing nine people in a car accident. I wanted to portray this kind of mindset and the family that produced it.

**PFC:** Describe the creative process of *At the Horizon*.

**Keola:** After writing the script, I started to look for a crew in Laos, because if I bring friends and crew from Thailand, it will surely exceed my ability to find a big enough budget. At that time I didn't know anybody in the Lao filmmaking industry, so I started looking for people on YouTube and Facebook. I came back to Laos and showed them the script, knowing that I won't have any money to offer.

I ended up having around ten crew members, who were mostly strangers to each other, and who had never made a feature film before. We couldn't find people to fill roles requiring specialized skill sets, like production design, sound recording, continuity, special effects, and costume design. I even had to hire a special make-up artist from Thailand.

We were aware that we couldn't afford any props or costume, and we relied on real locations as much as possible. Costumes, though from the actors' wardrobes, were in keeping with our theme.

We couldn't afford professional actors so I chose amateurs with potential. We organized ten workshop days for preparation.

Because I found only one investor interested in Lao films when the script was under the no-public-screening condition, my family offered to invest in the movie. They were worried that if a businessman got hold of the copyright and the film screened in public somehow, I would get in trouble with authority. My parents invested around USD10,000.

**PFC:** Why a crime thriller?

**Keola:** I liked the genre, and I was interested in David Fincher movies. I had also recently discovered a Korean thriller film by Park Chan-wook.

**PFC:** What makes *At the Horizon* a Lao film?

**Keola:** Issues of inequity and a justice system that favors the rich are universal, so it can actually take place in any poor, developing country,

like Cambodia or Thailand. However, the Buddhist influence and the peacefulness of a poor Lao family are unique to Laos.

**PFC:** Describe the prospects of Lao cinema.

**Induangchanthy:** I think content from Laos—movies about Laos or movies made by Lao filmmakers—are still rare. People both in and outside the country are interested to see content from Laos. Viewers are keen to see Lao movies; funders are keen to support the Lao film industry; overseas filmmakers are keen to collaborate with Lao filmmakers. With more screening venues like cinemas and film festivals, more and more people will become interested in filmmaking.

I think the key players are Mattie; the Lao New Wave Cinema group; and some independent filmmakers, most of whom are self-taught.

There is still no film school in Laos. Some of us are educated overseas—in Thailand, Australia, the United States—and the rest are self-taught.

Lao cinema is facing very specific problems.

Censorship is a big thing for us. We have to submit everything for approval—it limits and suffocates us. Without clear guidelines, it becomes even harder for us to know what we can or cannot do.

Specialization is another issue. In other countries, people specialize in different areas of filmmaking, including direction, scriptwriting, production, and editing. In Laos, a filmmaker has to do or know a lot of things.

Then there's the lack of funding. Very little support and funding from the government are given to filmmakers.

**Keola:** As we can see from the Vientiane International Film Festival, there are many young, aspiring filmmakers. Though there is no film school in Laos yet, we have recently established the Association of Lao Film Professionals to pressure educational institutes to establish filmmaking courses. The effort is unsuccessful because the government primarily views film as only part of the entertainment industry.

We have to build an industry where professional filmmakers can make a living from making films. The industry can provide career opportunities for film school graduates.

Limited human resources are the main issue. We don't have professionals with the necessary skills in scriptwriting, DP, AC, production, gaffing, light design, and acting.

We don't have a proper studio to handle cinema standard post-

production or sound production. We do all the color grading and mastering on a PC.

We also don't have a big enough sound studio to handle Foley recording, audio mixing, and sound mastering for movies. The best we can handle for feature films is stereo.

Despite the new standard cinema, we still don't have a facility to create DCP to screen our films properly. The best format we have is Blu-ray, which makes it difficult for us to screen our films abroad.

**PFC:** What are you working on now?

**Induangchanthy:** I'm currently working on my documentary. I want to go out and look for funding overseas.

Since there is very little support, funding-wise, from the government, Lao filmmakers should consider having their films made and viewed abroad.

In Laos, we should make films not just for Lao viewers—there are so few of us, anyway—we should make films for a global audience. One way to do it is to collaborate with filmmakers in the region and beyond.

Aspiring Lao filmmakers still lack more role models who have made it big in Laos or overseas. We need more filmmakers like Mattie representing Lao film in Cannes, and the Lao New Wave Cinema group showing their work overseas. I hope we will become role models for other young filmmakers in the future.

**Keola:** I'm writing a new script to be shot in September (2015). The project is funded by OXFAM and big NGOs in Laos. It's a drama film about Hmong minority issues in Laos. This will be the first time mainstream Lao media will feature Hmong characters and their language. The film will also touch on LGBT issues lightly, since we're not allowed to make films about homosexuality and homosexuals yet.

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