



1961

SYNOPSIS

THE INSURRECTIONIST ISSUES OF LAOS

FROM 1961-63 and 1974-76



1974

Treatment: A study of stamps issued in 1961 by the “Neutralist” alternative government of the Kingdom of Laos and the 1974 separatist Communist Pathet Lao issues. This exhibit contains all Neutralist and Pathet Lao issues along with some pre-production artwork; proofs; and purported First Day Covers. Given the remote location in Northeast Laos where the stamps were intended to be used, coupled with an extremely low literacy rate and lack of economic activity, genuine personal local mail bearing these issues is non-existent. Laos was not a nation of writers and readers and covers bearing these issues that did go through the mail are almost entirely because of the efforts of foreign philatelists, without whose efforts these issues would remain practically unknown. No other exhibit of this kind is known in the US. **Laotian mail franked only with Royalist Kingdom of Laos stamps between 1961 and 1974 is NOT a part of this exhibit.**

Importance: The history of Laos since postal independence in 1950 has been constant political tension between pro-Western Royalists; Neutralists; and the Communist Pathet Lao which led to numerous attempts to form coalition governments in 1957, 1962 and 1973. These attempts all failed and twice within a quarter century, (1961 and 1974), the Kingdom of Laos witnessed the appearance of insurrectionary issues that challenged Royal authority and sovereignty. Both these Neutralist and Pathet Lao stamps were issued to make political statements about governance and control of territory.

The 1961 Neutralist issues arose in the aftermath of a military *coup d'état* conducted by Neutralists within the armed forces on 9 August 1960. Forced out of the capital Vientiane in December 1960, they fled to remote Northeast Laos where they issued eight stamps valid for use throughout the entire country. These Neutralist stamps were tolerated by the Royalist government as they still bore the name “Kingdom of Laos” and depicted the Royal flag. They were less tolerated by *The American Philatelist* where, in August 1962, David Torres wrote: “We strongly recommend . . . that catalogue editors refuse to recognize these [Neutralist] stamps and that collectors refrain from purchasing them” as it just puts money “into enemy coffers.” (Nowadays, the only money spent on these issues goes into the coffers of stamp dealers). These Neutralist (and Pathet Lao) issues were never “Black Blotted” by the APS.

From 1963 to 1975, Laos was a proxy battlefield in a war conducted by local pro-US forces and the North Vietnamese army. This gave rise to the CIA’s “Secret War” in Laos and the “not so secret” bombing campaign conducted by US airpower that made Laos “the most bombed country in the world.” Almost as secretive is any information about the insurrectionist issues of the Pathet Lao, described in philatelic literature but seldom seen. The collapse of the third attempt at a coalition government in 1973 and the growing strength and influence of the Pathet Lao, where they controlled half the population and 60 percent of the country, led to the issuance of seven Pathet Lao stamps in 1974 (and two follow-on stamps in 1975). Making no attempt to imply any allegiance to the Kingdom of Laos, any intended use was limited to areas controlled by the Pathet Lao.

Philatelic/Subject Knowledge: What little has been published on these two issues has appeared in *The Indo-China Philatelist* and the French-language *PHILAO*. Published articles were reviewed in order to separate the possible from the probable from the speculative, being especially cautious of single source items that cannot be verified by other publications. Two examples within the available literature were that the Neutralist issues were printed in Czechoslovakia (they were printed in China) or that pocket calculators were provided in exchange for examples of the last two Pathet Lao stamps not otherwise available to the public (unverifiable). This exhibitor was successful in purchasing all nine Pathet Lao stamps in the 1980’s from a dealer in Hong Kong.

Whilst Neutralist stamps were accepted within country, Thailand refused to accept them on mail and such items had to be re-franked with Royalist government issues; likewise for foreign-addressed mail unless the item went through Hanoi before entering the international mail stream. **Such re-franking was done as a public service by Royal postal authorities at no cost to the sender and postage due was not assessed.** No evidence exists that any mail with Neutralist franking was ever sent via South Vietnam given geography, distance, and the politics of the Saigon regime. Although these stamps were available in this remote, rural area of Laos, larger purchases could be made, in quantities up to 1000 in both complete and short sets and priced in pounds sterling, from the XUNHASABA Philatelic Department in Hanoi, North Vietnam's official exporter of stamps, books, and periodicals. Barely two years after issuance, **any in-county use of Neutralist issues ended by 1963, caused by both the destruction by bombing of postal stocks and the Neutralists themselves fragmenting into Pathet Lao and Royalist factions.**

No archival material from the Neutralists issue has ever been recorded by philately even though this was the first issue ever printed by the Stamp Printing Factory of China (Beijing) for a "foreign" government. Initial essays for the Pathet Lao issues, unique "one of a kind" items, were designed by the State Printing Works in Hanoi, and sought to replicate the design style of previous Royalist issues; these essays were rejected in favor of a more militant design style. Valued in Pathet Lao kip, these issues depict a complete break from the Royalist government. Unaddressed First Day Covers are occasionally seen but there is no evidence of internal postal use of Pathet Lao stamps. Neither were postage stamps required on Pathet Lao official mail ("free franking").

The Pathet Lao, for reasons unknown but most likely related to supply and distribution problems, did not even use its own stamp issues to resume postal services when the Lao People's Democratic Republic was proclaimed on 2 December 1975 but continued to use available stocks of old Royalist issues. Not until 2 December 1976 was the first set of stamps issued under the name of the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

Personal Study and Research: For the Neutralist issues, only back-stamps from transiting and receiving post offices are definitive proof that a cover went through the mails; covers without back-stamps are more likely to be "hand backs," favor cancels or had addressee's names added later to imply postal use. One such cover in the exhibitor's possession is addressed to "Tom Jones, Esq" at the British Embassy in Vientiane. Contact with the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office in February 2023, who provided a staff roster, showed no such person was ever assigned to the embassy staff in late 1961/early 1962. Existing Neutralist covers were often franked with complete sets that are close to existing 1961 postal rates if no letter was enclosed; no covers marked "postage due" have ever been reported. Whilst 1 Pathet Lao kip was worth 5 Royal kip in 1975, any knowledge of Pathet Lao postal rates is currently unknown and the limited number of covers with Pathet Lao stamps to international destinations are not useful in determining postal rates. There is little indication postal clerks in Pathet Lao-controlled areas had knowledge of existing postal rates or paid much attention to them.

I have investigated involvement of the four collectors who discovered archival items and generated the few covers available to collectors. Covers in this exhibit are all addressed to Americans or Europeans, reflecting the lack of Laotians' need for postal services in their daily lives. Allen Kerr was a specialist in psychological warfare and an advisor to US Embassies in Vientiane and Bangkok. In addition to creating a Lao-English dictionary, he traveled throughout Laos, visiting local post offices and creating covers. Theo Klewitz was a West German collector who specialized in the philately of countries in political turmoil; he had a knack of getting officials in these places to write to him even though he never traveled to Southeast Asia. Steven Carol bought, studied and sold North Vietnamese stamps and related areas from his overseas contacts back when it was illegal to have such material in the US (1975-94). Mark Isaacs likewise collected liberation movement stamps from Indo-China and visited their offices in Eastern Europe in the 1970's.

These Neutralist and Pathet Lao issues represent both change and continuity within Laotian philately. Prominent to all three regimes—Royalist, Neutralist and Pathet Lao—is the concept of "Three Ladies" who represent the three ethnic groups within the country: Lao, Hmong and Ka. The Neutralists used the design of Three Ladies in

front of the Luang Pagoda. The Pathet Lao portrayed “Three Women Fighters” shooting down a US fighter aircraft and standing on the wing of a downed USAF fighter. Preliminary unaccepted essays for Pathet Lao issues replicated the framing and design style of the Neutralist issues (which, in turn, replicated the design style of Royalist issues). The Plain of Jars in north central Laos, a strategic location for both Neutralists and the Pathet Lao, also features in both insurrectionist issues.

Scarcity: Given their intended use in the remotest, least literate and least developed parts of Laos, **internal use on personal mail of Neutralist and Pathet Lao issues was non-existent. All mail from Pathet Lao officials or the Lao People’s Liberation Army was official mail that did not require stamps.** Based upon the exhibitor’s discussions and correspondence with other collectors, the number of **genuine** extant Neutralist and Pathet Lao covers is less than a dozen. Much of this Neutralist and Pathet Lao philatelic material has been held by a single collector until sold to someone else. I have been interested in this exotic and elusive material for some time and by good fortune managed to obtain the master collection that had served as the basis for several articles listed in the reference section. All items from these two Laotian insurrectionist issues that are currently known to philately appear in this exhibit, **the first time this material has ever been displayed in exhibit form.**

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1961

THE INSURRECTIONIST ISSUES OF LAOS FROM 1961-63 AND 1974-76



1974

PURPOSE: A single frame exhibit of stamps produced by the two Laotian insurrection movements and their limited use.

BACKGROUND:

- The history of Laos since independence in 1950 was marked by constant political tension between pro-Western Royalists; Neutralists; and the Communist Pathet Lao.
- A military *coup d'état* in the administrative capital Vientiane in August 1960 put Neutralists in power. Routed by Royalist forces in December, the Neutralists fled to northeast Laos, established an alternative government, and issued eight stamps in 1961 accepted for use throughout the country.
- The Pathet Lao gained *de facto* but not *de jure* control of parts of eastern Laos after the Geneva Conferences of 1954 and 1962. By 1973, they controlled half the population and 60 percent of the country. In 1974, the Pathet Lao issued seven stamps, purportedly for use in areas solely under their control.

SCOPE: This exhibit contains all Neutralist and Pathet Lao issues (including two Pathet Lao follow-on stamps not available to the public). Neutralist issues were printed in China under obscure circumstances, and no preproduction material such as essays and proofs has ever become available to philately. The 1974 Pathet Lao issues were printed in Hanoi and some preproduction material for them is known; this exhibit contains two unique preproduction essays. Postal usage of both issues was limited, and genuine use of these stamps on mail is due to efforts of collectors with US government connections in Laos, and also foreign collectors who had access to local officials or who resided in other Socialist countries friendly to the Neutralists and Pathet Lao. Without their collective efforts, we would not have any archival items or postal history from these elusive issues.

IMPORTANCE:

- Both insurrectionist issues were making political statements about governance and control of territory.
- They add a complex chapter to the philatelic narrative of a country once viewed as the original key to halting Communist expansion in Southeast Asia.
- This exhibit contains all significant items known to philately from these two issues.



Neutralist, 1961
Armed Forces on the
Plain of Jars - Xieng Khouang



Pathet Lao, 1974
Proof with printer's guidelines
Battle of Xieng Khouang

EXHIBIT PLAN:

1. Neutralist Issues
2. Pathet Lao Issues
3. Epilogue

Key items are outlined in Red



Map courtesy of National Geographic Society
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