General History
Laos has a long history of being conquered and ruled by several ancient empires (Khmer, Burmese and Siam). It was a monarchy for most of the last 700 years, ruled from the ancient capital of Luang Prabang, which is now on the UNESCO World Heritage list. Laos (along with Vietnam and Cambodia forming Indochina) came under French rule at the end of the 19th century. The French established their capital in Viang Chan, re-spelling it Vientiane.

The French system of Vietnam-centric administration with rural taxation led to resentment and small-scale rebellions. During, and following World War II a nationalist movement began, divided between three groups: pro-monarchy, pro democracy and communist. The last was known as the Pathet Lao (Land of Lao) and had links with the Indochinese Communist party founded by Ho Chi Minh in 1930. The Cold War between the Communist Soviet Union and the Western democracies also played out in Indochina. Initially France tried to retain its colonies but as the Indochina Wars (predominantly between Vietnam and France but involving Laos) demoralised and defeated the French, the United States of America (USA) entered the fray. The USA supplied millions of dollars of aid to Laos, partly with the aim of preventing the spread of Communism from China through Southeast Asia. A second Laos interim government (formed in 1958) fell after only 8 months after the USA stopped aid because the Pathet Lao were included in the government.

Laos continued to suffer during the Vietnam War because the Ho Chi Minh trail, connecting the North Vietnamese army with munitions and food, traversed Laos. The USA dropped 2,093,100 tons of bombs on to Laos in 580,944 sorties over nine years. Approximately a third of the population became internal refugees and the Pathet Lao spent much of the time camped in caves. The American government continued to deny involvement in Laos during the Vietnam War until the 1990s when they admitted to the bombings as well as training a guerilla movement of Hmong led by General Vang Pao to disrupt the Ho Chi Minh trail. After the war was over, the Hmong were persecuted by the Pathet Lao for their involvement on the American side during the war. Many thousands fled across the border into United Nations (UN) camps in Thailand. Many emigrated to the USA, Canada, Australia and France but since 1989 the UN has instituted the ‘Comprehensive Plan of Action’ to repatriate refugees in Indochina including up to 60,000 Lao refugees living in Thailand.

In April 1975, Phnom Penh, Cambodia fell to the Communist Khmer Rouge and Saigon, Vietnam to the Communist North (People’s Army and the National Liberation Front). Vientiane was peacefully liberated in August by the Pathet Lao. This ended the Pathet Lao’s ‘30-year struggle’ (1945-1975) to gain control of Laos. The Lao PDR (People’s Democratic Republic of Laos) was declared, ending 650 years of monarchy in Laos. The Pathet Lao consolidated power, sending previous royalist opposition politicians and many Hmong to re-education camps in remote areas. The economy, which previously relied heavily on USA aid, was now supported by investment from the Soviet Union and Vietnam. Agricultural reform and a large loss of population, (approximately 10% leaving to camps in Thailand, especially educated classes) led to harsh economic times. Reforms were introduced in 1986 to allow capitalism, foreign aid and investment from the West. In 1997 Laos joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Cultural references
A series of books by Colin Cotterill about Dr. Siri, the only coroner in Laos, is set just after Lao PDR was set up in 1975 and follows a succession of murder mysteries, along with some history of the Pathet Lao camped in caves (Disco for the Departed) and the Hmong (Legend of the Pogo Stick). Clint Eastwood’s 2009 film Gran Torino features a Hmong family living in Michigan, USA. The bombing of Laos, part of the ‘secret war’, features in the 2006 Werner Herzog film Rescue Down, starring Christian Bale as Lt Dieter Dengler a German-American pilot shot down over Laos and taken prisoner by the North Vietnamese and his plots for escape from a prisoner of war camp.

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References for the Main text