

Ideas about Leading Held by Lao Village Chiefs and Thai Village Headmen

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How to cite this paper: Pratt, R., Sananikone, S., & Yongvanit, S. (2024). Ideas about Leading Held by Lao Village Chiefs and Thai Village Headmen. *Open Journal of Leadership*, 13, 117-135.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/ojl.2024.132008>

Received: February 18, 2024

Accepted: April 20, 2024

Published: April 23, 2024

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Abstract

Lao Village Chiefs and Thai Village Headmen work at the community level with responsibilities ranging from poverty reduction and economic development to maintaining peace and order. This research poses questions seldom asked about leading and being a leader in rural villages. A Leadership-As-Practice perspective suggests that leading emerges from the kind of activities they engage in while Implicit Leadership Theory focuses on their ideas about it. Findings are based on interviews of 15 Village Chiefs and Assistant Chiefs in Laos and 14 Village Headmen in Thailand. We ask what defines a “leader”, what makes a leader effective, where their ideas come from, and what advice they have for others. Results show close similarities and strong differences. What is learned about their views of leading will be particularly germane if Chiefs and Headmen are given greater authority and responsibilities, which we contend is possible in each case. We also point out why this research is relevant beyond these settings.

Keywords

Local level Leadership, Lao Village Chiefs, Thai Village Headmen, Implicit Leadership Theory, Leadership-As-Practice

1. Introduction

Lao Village Chiefs and Thai Village Headmen are public officials who work at the community level with responsibilities ranging from poverty reduction and economic development to maintaining peace and order. Their work, however, is done in national settings with differing political institutions, live in cultures with historic ties, and fill roles that, while infused with ambiguity, have similar responsibilities.

This research poses questions that Chiefs and Headmen working in rural villages are seldom asked: what do they think about leading and being a leader? A Leadership-As-Practice perspective suggests many of the activities both engage in are what leading emerges from. Moreover Implicit Leadership Theory maintains that ideas about leading are shaped by the broader institutional and social landscape, culture, and the elements of specific settings.

We ask what defines a “leader”, what makes a leader effective, where their ideas come from, and what advice they have for others. Results show close similarities and strong differences. The qualities that characterize a leader overlap, but Village Chiefs are alone in citing loyalty to Party and country and place a much stronger emphasis on personal qualities. Both think a leader’s effectiveness rests in behavior that earns villager trust and respect and in thinking and solving problems. Chiefs however emphasize knowing the village and learning from villagers whereas Headmen focus on making sacrifices and being transparent. Classes and trainings, personal experience, study tours, and longer courses are shared sources of ideas about leading, but only Chiefs refer to information provided by the government. Headmen are alone in seeing experimenting and trying things as a learning source. Role models are less relevant to each, but Village Chiefs point to national-level leaders while Headmen look to local level officials. Chiefs have more advice to offer others in similar positions and emphasize “hard” issues, such as being knowledgeable. “Softer” matters, such as transparency and fairness, dominate headman advice. When restricted to just one piece of advice both recommend avoiding corruption, being transparent and having good character. Headmen are distinct in advising doing the job well.

The paper first places Village Chiefs and Headmen in the broader context of Lao and Thai institutions of governance and their decentralization-related policies. Within that contextual framing Section III summarizes the responsibilities of each and what is known about how they work in practice. Next, in Section IV leader-as-practice and implicit leadership theory are introduced as tools for interpreting how context and role responsibilities affect ideas about leading and holding a leadership perspective. Section V outlines the research design and how interviews were conducted. Section VI summarizes results that are organized into themes. Section VII discusses and interprets the results, compares them to global findings, and asserts the broader relevance of this work. The final section points out limitations and proposes directions for future research.

2. Lao Village Chiefs and Thai Village Headmen in System Context

This section describes elements of Lao and Thai national systems particularly relevant to local level governance. Not long ago all of the villages in Laos and Thailand in which interviews were conducted were part of a broad region called Isan (Keyes, 2014: Chp. 2). The common heritage found in transnational Isan was so strong that it forced Thai authorities to try and instill a clearer sense of being Thai among residents of northeast Thailand (Keyes, 2014: Chp. 4). Today

Chiefs and Headmen fill roles that are similar in many ways, both with respect to their responsibilities and their position in the formal structure of government. Yet they operate within national systems of governance whose evolution and distinctive features are factors in how they understand and undertake their work.

The Lao People's Revolutionary Party has ruled Laos since 1975. Its reach is broad and deep and the state, made up of the government and the Party, responds strongly to anything appearing to challenge its authority. In 1986 the "New Economic Mechanism" was adopted to balance ideology with economic pragmatism. The language of socialism remains strong, but some observers argue the state's power is balanced between democratic centralism and a historically pervasive system of patron-client relations (Sayalath & Creak, 2017: p. 1. 80; see also Stuart-Fox, 2005, 2006; Baird, 2018)¹.

Sustainable economic development and widespread poverty reduction, especially in rural areas, remain important national goals (c.f., Phonevilay, 2020). The path to reaching them means energizing economic activity at the local level while also maintaining central authority. It also requires addressing, "a state bureaucratic apparatus that can lurch toward incoherence, and is prone to ineffective modes of top-down decision making, target-driven policy directives and inefficient implementation" (Creak & Barney, 2018: p. 9).

The Four Breakthroughs (*Boukthalu*) and Three Builds (*Sam Sang*) emerged in March 2011. These directives reflected a sense within the Party "of an urgent need to break away from entrenched but ineffective ways of thinking and behaving" and to devolve responsibility to local authorities to foster an "active administration" (Noonan, 2013: pp. 3, 7). They also can be interpreted as an effort to strengthen, rather than reduce, state authority (Creak, 2014: p. 159).

Ambiguity about devolving authority to local levels precedes *Boukthalu* and *Sam Sang* by many years. A SIDA study published in 2003 described initiatives as two steps forward, one step backward (Hagnon & Van Gansberghe, 2003). In 2002 a Vientiane English-language newspaper summarizing government policy reported that the country expected to escape poverty by 2020, with development decentralized to villages that would act as "implementing units" (Vorakhoun, 2002; see also High, 2006).

In Thailand tensions over decentralization and their implications for local level government parallel Laos, but in a more public, disordered and conflicted form. In contrast to the "cleaner" formal structure in Laos², what evolved in Thailand is "quite intricate" (Nagai, Funatsu, & Kagoya, 2008: p. 4) and "creates confusion and tension" (Unger & Mahakanjana, 2016: p. 173).

The "intricacy" results from ambiguity in the relationship between the central administration and the system of local government and its thousands of sub districts (*tambons*) and villages (*muban*). From one perspective the Subdistrict

¹The phrase "market-Leninism" refers to market economies that formed following failures of planned economies.

²"Cleaner" is meant to convey that the system's formal structure is less complicated, not that the way things work in practice is less so.

Heads and Village Headmen are quasi agents of the central government, but from another they represent the interests of the villagers who elected them (Nagai, Kagoya, 2008: p. 6; Unger & Mahakanjana, 2016: p. 174; Chardchawarn, 2010: p. 26; Haque, 2010: p. 677). This “dual system” has been the “major characteristic of Thailand’s local government system” (Haque, 2010: p. 683)³.

During the 1990s this system tilted toward democracy and decentralization. The overturn of a military regime in 1992 was followed by an election in which decentralization played a major role. The Decentralization Plan and Procedure Act of 1999 forced the Provincial Administration to accommodate new Local Administrative Organizations composed of elected executives and council members. This new system then co-existed with the Provincial Administrative Organization (Nethipo, 2021: p. 2).

Movement toward decentralizing authority peaked in the late 1990s. Laws and regulations that “tightened the connection between central and local governments” followed a 2006 military intervention (Dufhues et al., 2015: pp. 798, 800). Actions following the military’s *coup d’état* and reclaim of power in 2014 showed even less support for decentralization (Unger & Mahakanjana, 2016: pp. 184; Nethipo, 2021: p. 3). Some foresee a gradual *recentralization* process in which “Thailand will still be the prisoner of a highly centralised local administration” (Peerasit; 2020; see also Harding & Leelapatana, 2020).

Decentralization’s inconsistency impacts local level dynamics in Thailand. Local Administrative Organizations brought competition to local “bosses”, but the 2006 and 2014 coups altered local-national linkages (Nethipo, 2021: p. 3). The contested terrain may increase the power of traditional family dynasties or create new local political elites, increase corruption as local officials accept central government inducements, re-establish patronage relationships, and contribute to rigged elections (Haque, 2010: pp. 684-686; Nethipo, 2021: pp. 17-18).

3. The Village Chief and Village Headman in Laos and Thailand

Lao Village Chiefs (*nai ban*) are Party members elected by villagers from a list approved by it. They have no government salary but receive fees for services and decide what portion supports the Chief and Vice Chiefs and which goes into the village fund⁴. Virtually every document a villager needs, including forms for taxes, marriage, business and change of address, starts at the village⁵. Vice Chiefs are given a specific area of responsibility, such as culture and education or security.

Article 86 of the 2015 constitution assigns Village Chiefs “administrative” responsibilities, in contrast to the heads of provinces, cities, districts and municipi-

³This ambiguity also can be interpreted as reflecting the paternalistic view that local authorities in rural areas are incapable of exercising autonomy (Nagai et al., 2008: p. 10). Keyes contends paternalism applies especially to Northeast Thailand, where this research was conducted (Keyes, 2014).

⁴Fees now are being standardized and posted. Villages can apply for government support, but must contribute 30% to infrastructure projects.

⁵Starting in 2019 individuals may go to a bank and send their land tax payment directly to the government.

palities who “govern”. These responsibilities are to, among other things, “lead the people towards development on social-economic, natural resources protection, create peace and order, provide education, and to enhance unity among the people creating villages with development goals” (Constitution, Article 89). Despite a constitutional restriction to two terms some are re-elected many times.

Only a few studies have included a leadership perspective. Holly High observed their “entrenched ambiguity” in an encounter between villages and the state in a village’s rejection of a program to use water pumps to support two annual rice crops (High & Petit, 2013). Jerome Whittington observed the “ambivalent institution of the village chief” caught between government policy and villagers who signed a petition rejecting changes in land use rules (Whittington, 2014: pp. 104-5). Sarinda Singh’s exploration of how state officials try to gain villager cooperation with development programs concluded, “marginalized officials often remain committed to the Lao state though they echo villagers in their private criticism.” (Singh, 2014: p. 1062).]

In Thailand, Village Headmen (*phu yai ban*) are elected for five-year terms⁶. A salary is paid by the Ministry of Interior. Historically a Headman has acted as a “government assistant” in communicating official information to villagers, implementing policies, monitoring compliance, arranging village meetings, representing villager interests and maintaining community peacefulness (Wiriyasawat, 2009; Ek-Iem, 2021: pp 466-67). Keyes study of traditional villages in north and northeast Thailand found it a challenging role. Headmen “must labor under the disabilities of being neither significant government agents nor significant local leaders...” (Keyes, 2014: p. 9). One former Headman told Moerman, “One must listen to the officials and listen to the villagers. If one says ‘no,’ the villagers scold; if one says ‘yes,’ the officials scold. One is neither a villager nor an official.” (Moerman, 1969: p. 547; on this issue also see Nagai et al., 2008: p. 1 and Unger & Mahakanjana, 2016). Some of what were once their responsibilities today has shifted to the Local Administrative Organizations, leaving them “neither a full-time civil servant nor an employee of a local government organization, in an unclear state.” (Ek-Iem, 2021: p. 467). At the same time their changing circumstances require they, “adapt and seek more roles”, emphasizing themselves as “the coordinator in bringing government policies into action as well as reflecting people’s problems to the government with efficiency and effectiveness.” (Ek-Iem, 2021: p. 476)⁷.

4. Village Chiefs and Headmen from a Leadership Perspective

The relevance of this study for Village Chiefs and Village Headmen is *not* be-

⁶Whether Headmen should be required to stand for re-election has been a recurring question. Proponents of it refer to accountability and preventing monopolization of the position. Counter arguments include not making the Headman a politician and reducing conflicts in the villages. C.f., Sataturuth, 2017).

⁷In Thailand much more than Laos it is possible to find studies looking at Village Headmen from a leadership perspective. See, for example, the *Journal of Subdistrict and Village Headmen*.

cause they are conceived of as filling positions of leadership but because their roles invite questions about leading and leadership. Leadership-as-practice and implicit leadership theory provide conceptual frameworks for this perspective.

Leadership-as-practice shifts attention from leader traits and qualities to how leading may emerge in specific settings. Its foundation is the “underlying belief that leading occurs as a practice rather than from the traits or behaviors of individuals... It is thus concerned with how leadership emerges and unfolds through day-to-day experience.” (Raelin, 2016: p. 3).

From a leadership-as-practice perspective many of the activities these Chiefs and Headmen describe themselves engaging in are the groundwork from which leading emerges. These include identifying resources, mobilizing attention on issues, building trust, giving feedback, encouraging participation and using what is learned from experience (Raelin, 2016: pp. 6-7; See also Raelin, 2019).

A leadership-as-practice perspective does not imply Chiefs and Headmen aspire or expect to be leaders. Emergence is not a function of “individual a priori intentions.” (Raelin, 2016: p. 6). “Individuals become involved in leadership practice as part of their coping with everyday activities....” (Takoeva, 2021: p. 2). Participation in activities to accomplish something is what is critical.

Implicit leadership theory draws attention to “images that everyone holds about the traits and behaviors of leaders in general.” (Schyns et al., 2011: p. 398). Implicit leadership theories, “are implicitly held assumptions about traits of leaders, with ‘theories’ referring to everyday theories of people rather than to academic theories developed by scholars.” (Vogel & Werkmeister, 2021: p. 167). The sources of ideas about leading include the broader institutional and social landscape, culture, and gender as well the specific setting, including the perceived expectations of followers (Schyns et al., 2011; Alabdulhadi et al., 2017).

Individuals may not be aware of their images. “Implicit leadership theories are, by nature, not necessarily conscious to those who hold them.” (Schyns et al., 2011: p. 398). Moreover, they may or may not match those of superordinates or followers, the subculture or the broader institutional environment (c.f., Junker & Van Dick, 2014; Vogel & Werkmeister, 2021: p. 169).

5. Research Design

This study is based on interviews of 15 Village Chiefs and Assistant Chiefs in Laos and 14 Village Headmen in Thailand, undertaken in 2018 and 2019. The interviews explore the following questions⁸.

Q1. Leader.

What do you think it means to be a “leader”?

Q2. Effectiveness.

In your opinion, what is most important for someone to lead effectively?

Q3. Sources of Learning.

Describe where and how you learned about being a leader.

⁸Other questions related to leading are not included here and will be treated in a separate paper.

Q4. Role Models.

Who are your important role models for leading?

Q5. Advice.

What advice can you give to help (Chiefs/Headmen) have a positive impact on their villages?

Q6. One Suggestion.

What is the ONE suggestion to other (Chiefs/Headmen) to be more successful?

The survey approach employed, the first we know of for Lao Village Chiefs, enables the identification of patterns in responses across settings at a point in time⁹. In Laos it was necessary to utilize a facilitating non-profit association to select villages an hour or so by car in different directions from the center of Vientiane. In Thailand villages were chosen based on being in rural areas outside the city of Khon Kaen, not having atypical socio-economic characteristics, and not being the site of a tourist attraction. Drawing a representative sample of villages was not an option. Though not ideal from a methodological perspective, it seems reasonable to expect these results reflect what would be found in rural villages with similar characteristics in Laos and Thailand.

Research in Laos, especially in social spheres, is carefully monitored. Studies asking sensitive questions are unlikely to be accepted (Creak & Barney, 2018: p. 6; Singh, 2014: pp. 10-12). The non-profit association was used to obtain needed district-level approval, which was given subject to the questions being sent ahead and not deviating from them¹⁰.

Interviews were undertaken over several days. With a couple of exceptions they were conducted where village business is transacted, either in an office or around tables in an open area¹¹. Most included just the interviewers and the Chief (or Vice Chief) or Headman. In a few instances others were in the area, and once in Laos several villagers listened attentively, not seeming to affect the Village Chief.

There were unwarranted concerns, especially for Laos, that interviewees would give scripted responses. Everyone appeared at ease and ready to talk, and responses were neither cautious nor mechanical. Village Chiefs came with notes, but none read from them. Some were referred to, others glanced at occasionally, and in two instances they were ignored.

The research team in Laos consisted of a Lao, a Thai and an English speaking Westerner. Lao Loum speak a dialect familiar to the Thai researcher from northeast Thailand. He and the Lao researcher also speak English. The Thai researcher asked questions and provided a simultaneous translation of responses into English. The second researcher typed this verbatim into a tablet, stopping to ask for clarification as needed. The process was duplicated in Thailand using the

⁹Interviews have been conducted with local level officials and INGO staff in Cambodia, Laos and Thailand.

¹⁰No prior approvals were required in Thailand and sending questions ahead wasn't warranted.

¹¹One exception, for example, was under a shaded platform adjacent to a field where the Headman was working.

Thai and Western researchers. Each interview was preceded by casual conversation and general information about the project, with clarifications given as needed. A question about the interviewee’s most important successes—not reported in this paper—served to establish a level of comfort.

In Laos there is “no equivalent word to the English term leadership, at least no term that is commonly understood and applied” (Case et al., 2017: p. 182). Rural farmer representatives viewed *phu nam*, commonly used to refer to a leader, as inappropriate since they are not Party officials. Because the Village Chief is a public official and must be a Party member, we elected to use *phu nam* to refer to “leader”, the same word used in Thailand¹². This raised no concerns.

6. Results

Table 1 summarizes age, gender, tenure in office and educational backgrounds. Ten of the 15 Lao interviewed are Village Chiefs and five Vice Chiefs. Seven of the ten Chiefs were previously Vice Chiefs. Eleven of the 14 Thai are Village Headmen and three are Subdistrict Headmen who were previously Village Headmen.

Table 1. Demographic Information.

	Village Chiefs and Vice Chiefs (15)	Village and Subdistrict Headmen (14)
Age ¹³	Mean = 54.1 Range = 63 to 36	Mean = 44.8 Range = 54 to 36
Gender	All males	11 males, 3 females
Tenure	Mean Village Chief = 9.7 years. Mean Vice Chief = 9.0 years. Range = 20 years to less than 1	Mean = 7.5 Range = 13 years to less than 1 year.
Education	3—attended or completed college. 7—attended or completed High School 4—less than High School [One is unknown.]	3—attended or completed college 1—diploma 10—attended or completed High School

The following tables are organized into themes emerging from the verbatim interview records. Themes were derived by, first, listing all of the points each respondent made to a question, eliminating clear repetitions of the same point. Next, a researcher examined all interviewee responses to that question, tentatively placing highly similar responses in the same group. Third, researchers together reviewed those groupings to reach agreement on the placements. These are the themes reported in the tables.

The tables distinguish themes made up of 7 or more Chief or Headman references. This highlights those containing half or more of interviewee responses while still allowing smaller themes to be included in the analysis. “Single Res-

¹²This is roughly translated as, “The person who takes others along.” It is different from *hua na*, which means “boss” or “director”.

¹³In a few cases it was necessary to estimate ages.

ponses” refers to statements that did not fit into a theme.

The tables can be viewed in several ways. One is for how the thematic responses of Village Chiefs and Village Headmen rank. Another view is how themes are shared. Themes are shared if researchers found the contents of Chief and Headman groupings to be highly similar. Themes *not* shared provide a third perspective. These are in italics preceded by two asterisks.

Table 2 shows three Village Chief themes with greater than 7 references. “Good Personal Qualities and Character” more than doubles the next two themes and has the most references of any theme for any question. The single Headmen theme with more than 7 references is “Listens To and Understands Villagers”.

Table 2. What does it mean to be a “leader”?

Laos—Village Chiefs (79 responses)	Thai—Village Headmen (39 responses)
I. Good Personal Qualities (15)	I. Listens to and Understands Villagers (8)
II. a. Sacrifices For The Village (7)	Themes of less than 7.
** II. b. <i>Loyal to Party and Country</i> (7)	II. a. Responsible for Solving Village Problems (6)
Themes of less than 7	II. b. Good Personal Qualities (6)
** III. a. <i>Good Implementer</i> (6)	III. Knowledge (5)
III. b. Knowledge (6)	IV. Sacrifices for the Village (4)
** IV. <i>Ability and Cleverness</i> (5)	V. a. Gets Villagers To Work Together (3)
V. a. Responsible for Solving Village Problems (4)	V. b. Good Decision Maker (3)
** V. b. <i>Gets Villagers to be Responsible and Work Hard</i> (4)	VI. a. Trusted and Respected by Villagers (2)
V. c. Good Decision Maker (4)	VI. b. Has Ideas About How to Develop the Village (2)
V. d. Listens to and Understands Villagers (4)	
VI. a. Trusted and Respected By Villagers (3)	
VI. b. Has Ideas About How To Develop The Village. (3)	
VI. c. Gets The Villagers To Work Together (3)	
** VI. d. <i>Open Minded</i> (3)	
** VI. e. <i>Good Communicator</i> (3)	
** VII. <i>Protects Common Property</i> (2)	

Table 3 shows Chiefs with three equal sized themes having seven or more responses for what helps to lead effectively. Two of these, “Behavior that Gets Respect and Trust of Villages” and “Be Able to Think and Solve Problems” are also the two largest for Headmen. The third Chief theme is “Know the Village; Learn From the Villagers”.

In **Table 4** three of the four biggest Village Chief sources of learning about leading—“Short Term Classes, Workshops and Trainings”, “Personal Experience and Observations” and “Study Tours”—are duplicated in the three Headmen themes that have seven or more responses.

For role models, “National Level Leaders” is the single Chief theme with more than 7 references, as seen in **Table 5**. No Village Headman theme has at least 7 references.

Table 3. What makes a leader effective?

Laos—Village Chiefs (55 responses)	Thai—Village Headmen (51 responses)
I. a. Behavior that Gets Respect and Trust of Villagers (11)	I. Behavior That Gets Respect and Trust of Villagers (11)
I. b. Be Able To Think and Solve Problems (11)	II. Be Able To Think and Solve Problems (8)
** I. c. Know the Village; Learn From the Villagers (11)	** III. Work With Different People (7)
Themes of less than 7.	Themes of less than 7.
II. a. Get Help From Outside the Village (5)	** IV. Sacrifice (5)
** II. b. Have and Share Knowledge (5)	** V. Transparency (4)
** III. a. Able to Make Decisions (3)	** VI. a. Teach Villagers (3)
** III. b. Work Hard and Be Responsible (3)	** VI. b. Good Implementation (3)
** III. c. Learn from Experience (3)	** VI. c. Family Support (3)
** IV. Follow the Party and the Government (2)	** VI. d. Create jobs for villagers (3)
Single Response (1)	VII. Get Help From Outside the Village (2)
	Single Responses (2)

Table 4. Sources of learning about leading.

Laos – Village Heads (47 responses)	Thai – Village Heads (37 responses)
I. a. Short Term Classes, Workshops and Trainings (10)	I. a. Short Term Classes, Workshops and Trainings (9)
I. b. Personal Experience and Observations (10)	I. b. Personal Experiences And Observations (9)
II. From Different People (8)	II. Study Tours (7)
III. a. Study Tours (7)	Theme of less than 7.
III. b. Longer Courses (7)	III. Longer Courses (5)
Theme of less than 7.	** IV. Practicing and Trying Things (4)
** IV. Information Provided By the Government (5)	VI. From Different People (3)

Table 5. Role models.

Laos—Village Heads (27 responses)	Thailand—Village Heads (20 responses)
I. National Level Leaders (8)	Themes of less than 7.
Themes of less than 7.	I. People in the Village—Elderly and Others (5)
II. People in the Village—Elderly and Others (4)	II. Other Village Headmen (4)
** III. a. People Known or Observed (3)	III. a. National Level leaders (3)
** III. b. Government and Party Officials (3)	** III. b. No role models (3)
** III. c. Type of Person Who Is A Good Example (3)	** IV. a. Local Level Officials (2)
IV. a. Parents and Family (2)	IV. b. Parents and Family (2)
IV. b. Other Village Chiefs (2)	Single Response (1)
Single Responses (2)	

Table 6 shows the Chiefs' most frequent piece of advice is "Have Knowledge and Ability", followed by "Communication and Open Mind." The most mentioned for Headmen is "Be Committed to the Village/Have a Big Heart."

Table 6. Advice to others.

Lao Village Heads (51 responses)	Thai Village Heads (36 responses)
** I. Have Knowledge and Ability (9)	I. Be Committed to Village/Have a Big Heart (9)
II. Communication and Open Mind (7)	**II <i>Be Transparent</i> (7)
Themes of Less than 7.	Themes of less than 7.
III a. Work Hard and Sacrifice (6)	III. a. Be Ethical and Fair (6)
** III b. Follow Official Policy and Leaders (6)	** III. b. Have or Develop
IV. Be Committed to village/Have a Big Heart (5)	Important Personal Qualities (6)
V. Be Ethical and Fair (4)	IV. Communication and Open
** VI. a. Have support of family and village (3)	Mind (4)
**VI. b. No Corruption (3)	V. Work Hard and Sacrifice (2)
** VI. c. Not possible to give advice (3)	<u>Single Responses (2)</u>
** VI. d. Be responsible (3)	
** VII. Be sincere (2)	

Table 7 summarizes responses when restricted to one piece of advice for others to be more successful¹⁴. “No Corruption And Good Character,” is the largest Village Chief theme and “Do the Job Well” is the largest for Headman. Almost one-third of advice given by Chiefs does not fit into a theme.

Table 7. One piece of advice.

Laos Village Chiefs (15 responses)	Thai Village Heads (14 responses)
I. No Corruption and Good Character (4)	** I. <i>Do the Job Well</i> (5)
** II. <i>Listen To Others</i> (3)	II. No Corruption and Good
III. a. Work Hard. (2)	Character (4)
III. b. Be Sincere With Villagers (2)	III. Be Sincere With Villagers (3)
<u>Single Responses (4)</u>	IV. Work Hard (2)
-- Make decisions.	
-- Do better than the previous village chief.	
-- Learn by coming up through the steps.	
-- Know who is high or low in position, rich or poor.	

7. Discussion

Based on responses to the first question, how are Chiefs and Headmen understandings of “leader” similar or different? There is substantial overlap. Two of the three characteristics most noted by Chiefs—personal qualities and sacrifice—are also cited by Headman, though less often. The quality most mentioned by Headman—listening to villagers—is referred to by Chiefs, also less often. Altogether nine qualities are shared.

There are also important differences. Loyalty to Party and country is only cited by Chiefs, not surprising given political system differences. Less expected, Village Chiefs assign much greater importance to personal qualities in defining a leader. This is the largest theme for any question. In addition, there are five other characteristics that overlap with personal qualities: ability and cleverness; listens to understand villagers; open minded; good communicator; and trusted and respected by villagers. Together these comprise 33 of 79 Chief responses. In con-

¹⁴Because this gives each response more weight the content of single responses is included.

trast, Headmen only cite personal qualities six times, and only one other—being trusted—is related to it.

This strong difference likely reflects what the Party deems necessary to gain its approval to be a Chief and then is reinforced in education and training. In contrast, the Headman's image of a leader is more evenly spread across practical knowledge, being able to solve diverse problems, and working closely with villagers, as well as having good personal qualities. This might be interpreted as Chiefs having a more "moralistic" framing of a leader (i.e., a good person) while Headmen hold a more pragmatic view (i.e., someone who can get things done.)

It is noteworthy that asking what it means to be a leader is one of two questions that produced almost twice as many Village Chief responses¹⁵. Two things might account for this, both reflections of system differences.

First, Village Chiefs can more easily draw on what they learned in required government or Party sponsored education and training. Headmen participate in parallel activities, but more voluntarily, less frequently and with less uniformity of messaging.

Second, Village Chiefs' identity as Party members, which qualifies them as public officials, may produce more self-confidence on the topic of leading (e.g., "You've come to the right person."). A Headman, in contrast, receives no pre-certification and the role's place in the Thai system is unclear.

Responses to what makes a leader effective also produced agreement and difference. For both, effectiveness is strongly supported by behavior that earns villager trust and respect, and by the ability to think and solve problems. The biggest difference is the importance of the relationship to villagers. Chiefs emphasize knowing the village and learning from villagers. They also name two other sources—sharing knowledge with villagers and learning from experience. Headmen cite none of these and don't find effectiveness in the connection to villagers. Instead it comes from working with other people, not just the villagers, by making sacrifices, and by being transparent.

There are other differences over effectiveness. Chiefs more often than Headmen point to getting help from outside the village. Whereas Village Chiefs cite working hard and being responsible, Headmen use the stronger and more dramatic phrase "sacrifice." Unexpectedly, only Headmen cite the importance of family support for effectiveness.

Finally, only two Chiefs thought following the Party and the government contributed to effectiveness. This might mean Party and government are so pervasive that their importance is taken for granted. It also may be that Party and government are viewed as less relevant for the day-to-day problems Chiefs face. This interpretation is supported by the absence of mention of Party as a source of learning.

There is extensive agreement about sources of ideas about leading. Both emphasize shorter-term classes and trainings, personal experience and observation,

¹⁵Overall Village Chiefs produced more responses to four of the five questions, excluding the sixth and last which limited them to one.

study tours, and longer courses.

Here too though are some noteworthy differences. First, only Chiefs cite information provided by the government. This likely reflects more classes, trainings and longer courses being requirements organized by the Party and different levels of government. Headmen participate in similar endeavors but in a less centrally controlled system, sometimes making use of sources outside of government. Second, reflective of a less structured learning environment, only Headmen mention experimenting and trying things as a source of learning. This is consistent with how leaders are defined by each, with Chiefs focusing on good personal qualities and Headman giving equal importance to practical knowledge, being a problem solver and working closely with villagers.

While classes, trainings, etc. are primary sources of learning for both Chiefs and Headmen, only two pointed to content directly addressing leading. The topics most often identified in the interviews—village management, how to get the elderly to participate the village, or using the law to solve conflicts—may of course be related to leading but they are not framed as components of it.

Finally, only one—a Headman—referenced a website as a resource for leading. Sites such as Facebook and You Tube undoubtedly are used, but not for this. It is a resource that easily can provide access to a range of perspectives on leading, but will they continue to ignore it?

Responses to who they follow or copy as an example of leading converge but have a difference. Both show a smaller number of responses. The total number for Chiefs is one-third of what defined a leader (27 vs. 79) and one-half for Headmen (20 vs. 39).

Within these fewer responses Chiefs and Headmen both highlight individuals they know or at least can observe. These are villagers, especially the elderly; other village Chiefs; and parents and family. Chiefs also cite people known or observed (e.g., a boss in a private company and a former teacher, and a general type of person who is a leader). Headmen point to local level officials (e.g., district and subdistrict Heads).

The difference is in the number references to national and other higher-level officials. Eight Village Chiefs refer to national-level leaders. Five of these are from Laos and three from Thailand and Vietnam, with the remaining three in higher government and Party positions. Headmen, in contrast, point to only three national-level figures—two to the King and one to a woman formerly the Thai prime minister, the only female role model for either Chiefs or Headmen.

Only one Chief refers to unnamed higher Party officials and just two Headmen name the King, at that time a highly respected figure. These figures may be so distant with such different responsibilities that they are not identified as models. It is, however, consistent with low mention by Chiefs of the Party in defining a leader or a source of effectiveness. Despite the Party's pervasiveness, they do not identify its leaders to emulate in their own work.

The final two questions ask for advice to help others be successful. The first does not limit responses and Village Chiefs had substantially more advice to of-

fer (51 to 36). This once again may reflect more confidence that, because they are pre-approved, they have more to give. Their advice clusters around “hard” issues—having knowledge, hard work and following official policy—which is consistent with their views of what supports effectiveness. Together these make up almost half their responses. Good personal qualities, so important in defining a leader, are not included.

Headman advice goes in a different direction, also largely consistent with their ideas about effectiveness. It is dominated by “softer” elements. Strong commitments to villagers, transparency, being fair, developing good personal qualities and open mindedness comprise 32 of 36 total responses. The single exception is hard work and sacrifice.

References to “transparency”, in contrast to “corruption”, differ. Three Chiefs advise avoiding corruption and none refer to transparency, while seven Headmen advise transparency and only one refers to corruption. Transparency connotes a practice or policy that applies across settings to open up processes (e.g., budgets, meetings, fee setting). Avoiding corruption, in contrast, emphasizes an individual’s action in specific situations (e.g., don’t appropriate common property; don’t siphon off village funds; don’t favor your family). While a commitment to transparency will not prevent acts of corruption, calling for it suggests hope for movement in a direction that will result in less hidden, illegal acts. Urging “no corruption” may affect an individual’s actions, but doesn’t promote processes that could make engaging in it more difficult.

The second request for advice allows only one response. Chiefs and Headmen similarly emphasize avoiding corruption, being transparent and having good character. Being sincere with villagers is shared although less important. Headmen are distinctive in prioritizing doing the job well (e.g., loving and understanding it, doing everything that is expected). Finally, Village Chiefs agree less in their advice. Four of fifteen gave unique responses (e.g., doing better than the previous Chief; learning by coming up through the steps).

It is useful to compare Village Chief and Headman ideas about leading with more widely held views. Results from the GLOBE Project’s study of leadership across cultures provide a good reference point (c.f., House et al., 2002). **Table 8** shows the five most important leader qualities for middle managers in 61 countries next to what is most frequently cited in defining a leader by Chiefs and Headmen (Hoppe, 2007: p. 3).

Table 8. Comparing chief and headman ideas with the GLOBE study.

Village Chiefs	Village Headmen	Globe Study
Personal Qualities	Works Closely with Villagers	Integrity
Sacrifice	Responsible for Problem Solving	Inspirational
Loyalty	Personal Qualities	Visionary
Implementation	Knowledge	Performance-oriented
Knowledge	Sacrifice	Team-Integrator

Turning first to similarities, Globe's "Integrity" is consistent with the "Personal Qualities", referenced by both Chiefs and Headmen, that emphasize sincerity, fairness, and honesty. These also are for Village Chiefs by far most important in defining a leader.

Globe's "Team-Integrator" is found in Village Headmen's "Works Closely With Villagers". This focuses on good working relations with villagers, listening and learning from them, and understanding their needs. It is less important to Chiefs in defining a leader¹⁶. Both Lao and Thai cultures, however, emphasize the group and consensus-making. Here system differences may outweigh cultural similarities. Village Headmen are required to hold public hearings where they face critical feedback and complaints, especially from those opposed to their election. This makes listening and seeking cooperation critical. Village Chiefs too must hold regular meetings, but in a setting where the focus is on communicating information and ensuring policies are understood¹⁷.

There are however also clear differences with GLOBE results. "Inspirational" and "Visionary" are not leader qualities for either Chiefs or Headmen. These virtually always appear in other studies when, for example, "leader" is compared with "manager". Chiefs and Headmen refer to them only indirectly in smaller themes centered around being able to make decisions, thinking and solving problems, and possessing an open mind.

It is not surprising individuals in middle management positions, like those in the GLOBE study, include inspiration and vision. Chiefs and Headmen are further down in their system's hierarchies. The almost complete absence of any language for these qualities, however, indicates little in their institutional or cultural environments that encourages individuals to go beyond being implementers of the priorities and guidelines they are given.

Finally, two qualities emphasized by Chiefs and Headmen are less referenced or absent in the Globe findings. One is "Sacrifice". This refers to putting aside personal and business interests to give more time and energy to the village¹⁸. It may be approximated by GLOBE'S "Performance-oriented", although this infers an emphasis on results more than what is required to attain them. "Knowledge" also does not appear in the Globe results. GLOBE middle managers may believe this more relevant to the tasks of subordinates than the broader responsibilities of a leader.

8. Conclusion

The relevance of this research extends beyond the two settings in which these interviews were conducted. People everywhere occupy positions at the bottom of

¹⁶Seven headmen refer to community building and working together as a source of effectiveness. There are none for Chiefs.

¹⁷Lao Village Chiefs consult with village committees in part, at least, to spread responsibility for decisions made (Pratt, Sanakorn & Yongvanit, 2023: p. 15.).

¹⁸Headmen, and especially Chiefs, employ the word "sacrifice" in contrast to, for example, "work hard." Its repeated use suggests the need to communicate to others how dedicated they are.

hierarchies that give them significant responsibilities for accomplishing tasks on behalf of the larger organization. Commonly they are viewed primarily as receptacles for information sent by those above. Chiefs and Headmen are only one example of this.

The purpose is not to challenge authority but to focus on which elements of leadership may be an asset to individuals at the bottom of systems. What these are can only be determined by acknowledging what is not being incorporated into their roles. How much more successful could individuals be in positions like those held by Village Chiefs and Village Headmen if their implicit ideas of leading were recognized and then built upon?

In the current study this question's importance increases if the government and Party in Laos find an acceptable balance between maintaining authority and encouraging greater local initiative. It also increases if Thai politics again moves toward a decentralization, or deconcentration, that assigns more local responsibility and resources. Under these circumstances the hierarchy may support the incorporation of elements of leading, such as visioning, facilitation and consensus building, as a gain rather than a threat.

The findings reported here have two primary limitations, both a function of the conditions under which the research was conducted. One is that interviews were not drawn randomly or in large enough numbers to be representative samples. The other is the absence of questions that probe responses. For example, why did Village Chiefs not mention government and Party as sources of effectiveness, and what did it mean when a Headmen referred to "transparency"?

Future research will benefit from moving in two directions. Within systems, Chief and Headman ideas about leading can be compared with higher level positions as well as with the ideas held by villagers. Are provincial/district officials and villager expectations compatible with ideas of leading held by Chiefs or Headmen? This essentially proposes analysis in terms of an "ecology of leadership", asking about this ecology means for leading in these lowest level roles.

The other direction is research that broadens what is undertaken in this study. It would compare implicit ideas of leading held by those in low-level roles across diverse settings. What differences do we find between, for instance, systems that emphasize decentralized practices versus those with greater central guidance, or public versus private settings?

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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