

## “Friends Who Don’t Throw Each Other Away”: Friendship, Pronouns and Relations on the Edge in Luang Prabang, Laos\*

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*“As the Thai build their simple bamboo houses so that they can be readily  
modified and quickly dismantled, so too they build their groups.”*  
– Lucien M. Hanks (1972, 80)

The messaging program WhatsApp became important during the final months of my research in Luang Prabang, Laos. When I returned to the city after a break, the “group” or *kum1* of male friends (*siaw1*) with whom I was spending time had started a chat “group” (again, *kum1*) using it.<sup>1</sup> WhatsApp allowed us to effortlessly trade photos and messages. The *kum1*’s name in the app, *phùan1 bòø-thiim5 kan3* or “friends who don’t throw each other away”, referenced a then-popular Thai love song. The song’s chorus howls, “we promised not to throw each other away!”, a line that the bunch of us would often sing, drunk, late at night, and as loudly as possible.

But soon after I joined the WhatsApp group, one friend Dii sent a frustrated message. “Where did everyone go? If no one is going to chat, I am going to leave the group!” And he left. Another friend, Muu, then pasted an image of a poem—a “gift” he called it: “One good friend with worth is better than many friends who are jealous; one friend with compassion is better than many friends without heart.” The group administrator responded with the English word “*destroy*”, and

then removed almost everyone. With that, the group—a digitally crystallised social structure, a consciously constructed communicative channel—disintegrated. I joked to Dii and Muu later that the “friends who don’t throw each other away” had, in the end, thrown each other away, discarded one another into the digital heap. They laughed. It was funny because it was true.

Figure 1. The image Muu sent to the group



The men in “friends who don’t throw each other away” called one another *siaw1* (close friends of the same in age) and understood themselves as equals. In Luang Prabang, *siaw1* friendships are set-off as fundamentally different from other relationships, which like relationships across Southeast Asia tend to have a hierarchical tilt, especially legible in language (Scupin 1988; Simpson 1997;

Howard 2007; Enfield 2007b, 117). In a sea of linguistically encoded hierarchy, *siaw1* stand as self-styled egalitarian islands.

In this chapter, I track the dissolution of “friends who don’t throw each other away” to explore the “problem of peers” (Sidnell and Shohet 2013, 623) in otherwise hierarchical Laos. My argument draws a parallel between how *siaw1* relations are imagined and enacted, and ideologies surrounding the “bare” pronominal forms these men use to refer to one another and themselves. Borrowing from a classic anthropology of “loose structures”, I show that both ideas about *siaw1* relations, generally, and the bare pronouns *siaw1* employ involve a mixture of aggression and solidarity. *Siaw1* alternately represent and enact their friendships as perduring, stable, and sturdy social knots, bound “to the death”, and as delicate ties that might unexpectedly fray or snap. These ambivalent forces contradict one another, but they also work together to prove the resilience of friendships. In acting in ways that might otherwise be taken as offensive, *siaw1* make their friendships more meaningful (see, for comparison, Keane 1997 on “risk”; Stasch 2009, 206–7). The same analysis illuminates the pragmatics of the bare first- and second-person pronouns *kuu3* and *mùng2*. Many have described these (and similarly “low” pronouns cross-linguistically) as having two separate expressive forces—one intimate, the other aggressive. But in *siaw1* friendships, *kuu3* and *mùng2* serve to entangle intimacy with masculine aggression, such that “aggression” is not distinct from “solidarity” but, rather, a means for expressing it.

## The Substance of *Siaw1*

“... there is no friend without time... that is, without that which puts confidence to the test.”

– Jacques Derrida (1997, 14 and 17), paraphrasing Aristotle.

I joined the “friends who don’t throw each other away” group of *siaw1* through Dii. We first met at a money gambling *pétanque* court, where he taught me about the French game similar to bocce. After several weeks of running into each other at the court, where we would compete and drink beer, he started inviting me to join his friends elsewhere. Being a man of roughly my age, Dii called me *siaw1*; his friends followed suit, and I began to tag along with them to drink beer, attend parties, and play games.

While *siaw1* are often talked about as relationships fostered since childhood, ritually cemented in a string-tying ceremony (see Enfield 2014, 138), they frequently develop quickly and casually like this: from fleeting encounters to more enduring, citable bonds. The majority of the eight or so *siaw1* in “friends who don’t throw each other away”, for example, had begun to spend time together

recently; only a few had known each other for longer. While these men spoke generically about *siaw1* relations as if they hovered above the crassness of everyday life and, thus, outside of interaction, they always represented and forged their relations with one another in concrete interaction (Wortham 2006, 29)—during nights of competition, drinking, and acts of economic egalitarianism that mixed intimacy and hostility.

Much of what the group did involved masculine competition and concomitant social risk. Competitive games like soccer, *pétanque*, *katòò4* (a Lao form of rattan ball), draughts, cards, and snooker were the centrepiece of their activities. As they played, the men alternately emphasised both their fundamental equality of opportunity to win (Robbins 1994) and the inevitable inequality that games produced in separating winners from losers (Lévi-Strauss 1966, 32–3). These games made clear that the *siaw1* relation is both dyadic and a property of a friend group, defined by common age and status. Some pairs of friends are closer than others in the group, and some individuals are more central to the group than others.

The groupness of the group was made especially palpable during games of soccer played against other teams of *siaw1*, as the structural opposition gave the group a temporary internal cohesion and boundedness that the men sometimes stressed. But many of these games pitted them against one another, and caused tension and fractures within the group. To limit the ferocity of play and potential for hard feelings, they explicitly prohibited gambling for money (Zuckerman 2020). But they still always gambled for something, usually comestibles such as beer and grilled meats, and they treated the ban on money gambling not as a strict, Kantian rule but as a suggestive limit on competition, a mnemonic touchstone for the hope that things might be contentious yet remain within the boundaries of love and comradeship.

In line with this hope, the *siaw1* also frequently poked and prodded one another—teasing each other about missing shots in games, personality quirks, or physical characteristics (see, for comparison, Zuckerman 2016). Mostly, these otherwise inoffensive jabs were taken in stride, and when someone did take issue with a quip or gag that crossed a line, the usual response was for the offender to frame what they had done explicitly with a simple “just joking” (*vaw4 jòòk5*; see, for comparison, Haugh 2016).

Drinking was also fundamental to the substance of “friends who don’t throw each other away”, and the men often drank as competitively as they played games and teased one another. Rivalry infused their revelry. They competed over who would pay and how much they drank. Toasting was prevalent. Instead of the common polite gestures, the friends often crashed their glasses together in aggressive “diagrammatic icon[s] of solidarity” (Sidnell, this volume). Sometimes

the group would drink using a single rotating glass called a *còk5 lòp4*. The server would pass—often push—the *còk5 lòp4* to a reveller for him to down in a few gulps. In forcing everyone to drink the same quantity of beer, *còk5 lòp4* epitomised the competitive, egalitarianism of consumption among *siaw1*. While *siaw1* grumbled about this pressure at times, they were also quick to emphasise that pressuring people to eat, drink, and stay during sessions of partying were signs of “love” (*hak1 phèng2 kan3*) and fun.

Competitive drinking, constant joking, and games are not limited to *siaw1* in Laos, but these activities are core to what it means, practically and in generic abstraction, to be a part of these groups. The “friends who don’t throw each other away” tended to do these activities, furthermore, in ways that marked them as uniquely egalitarian and competitive parts of their lives. For instance, people in Luang Prabang generally talk about the substance of good relations as an accretion of iterated hosting or “feeding” activities (*liang4*; Van Esterik 1996, 33), where one person pays for the others. The “friends who don’t throw each other away” sometimes engaged in “feeding” like this, but they stressed that they only ever did so in a reciprocal and generalised way, which balanced out over time (see, for comparison, Brown 2017). Mothers “feed” children (High 2011), older brothers “feed” younger brothers, bosses “feed” employees; the first of each pair is the *phuu5 ñaj1* or “big person” to the second, congealing qualities of greater age, esteem, merit and wealth which explode the egalitarian core of any *siaw1* relation. Thus, when they drank at bars, snooker halls or *pétanque* courts, as they mostly did, they rarely “fed” each other. Nor did they pay in the style associated with “foreigners”, where one pays for whatever one ordered. Instead, they underlined their egalitarianism on the spot and split the bill evenly. This could be tricky as it sometimes yielded “leftover money” (*ngen2 lùa3*), which *siaw1* would either save for another day, ideally with the same participants, or insist on spending there and then on more beer, no matter how ready everyone was to head home.

*Siaw1* take these economic details seriously for good reason; monetary squabbles are the fault lines along which many relations break. Dii, who tried never to leave the house without money, explained that friends always say don’t worry and cover the bill, but as they “feed” you, they grow to resent you. “Paying together” precludes unbalanced feeding (*liang4*) and thus hierarchy. Paying together also has a clear effect, which people are very much attuned to: because friends pay the same amount, and because friendship is imagined in part as the product of mutual consumption, for friendships to last, for a group of *siaw1* to persist as a group that drinks and eats together, *siaw1* must be able to spend at the same level (see, for comparison, Mills 1997, 46). One night, on a motorcycle ride, Muu spelled this out for me. He told me that, before I met him, he had more money and a different group of *siaw1*, but the police confiscated his stock of ill-

harvested rare wood and he lost it all. As we rode by one of these friends' houses, giant and adjoined by a car dealership, Muu reminisced about the old group. He did not go with them anymore, he said, because it was not worth it; they spent too much money, and he was trying to save for his family.

That *siaw1* relations are among equals does not mean that, across the city, *siaw1* relations are the same. There are countless groups of *siaw1*: young and old, rich and poor, gay and straight, male and female, lay and monastic.<sup>2</sup> At the end of my fieldwork in 2016, all but one of the men in “friends who don't throw each other away” were in their late twenties or early thirties and married with children. Well-to-do for Laos generally, they were neither rich nor poor in Luang Prabang city. These traits formed their lives as masculine, urban, and aspirationally upwardly mobile young family men. So too did they mould the shape of their friendships. Their particular form of youthful, cosmopolitan masculinity was clear from the style in which they spent time together (see Kitiarsa 2005 on Thai masculinities). They played soccer on new and expensive faux grass fields rather than cheaper fields of cracked earth or mud, and they wore high-quality matching team jerseys. They drank huge volumes of Heineken from small bottles and cans, rather than Beer Lao from large bottles or cheap rice whisky, and thus tested not just their bodies' masculine capacity to metabolise alcohol, but also their wallets' capacity to keep the beer flowing.

They said that drinking with women—especially unmarried, beautiful women (*phuu5 saaw3 ngaam2*)—was more “fun” (*muan1*), and at bars they often recruited nearby women to join them and flirted with beer waitresses. They frequently spoke about extra-marital sex—about going to find “girls” (*phuu5 saaw3*) whether sex workers or not—even as they only occasionally engaged in such activities (see, for comparison, Vanlandingham et al. 1998). This talk quieted when the *siaw1* went out with their wives, who often acted as foils both to their husbands and to the women their husbands otherwise courted. The *siaw1*'s wives mostly drank less and preferred Spy brand wine coolers, a sweet, juicy, and brightly coloured drink, over beer (see, for comparison, Saengtienchai et al. 1999, 81). Kêq, the wife of one *siaw1*, is an illustrative exception: she was said to “drink beer well” (*kin3 bia3 kêng1*), and actively participated in the toasting, drinking challenges, and drunkenness. She also faced criticism for this. Muu, for example, said this was childish. His wife, Tia, in contrast, rarely went out with us and drank little when she did. Muu took this as a sign that Tia was mature and responsible, a family woman.

Often, Tia seemed to take pride in being a homebody as well. During conversations with me, most of the *siaw1*'s wives, in fact, downplayed their own friendships and fun and complained about their husbands' revelry. This does not mean that they never went out with friends or had friends over—they did—but

self-fashioning as oriented to the home, they emphasised that now that they had children, they, unlike their husbands or the groups of younger women who packed bars around the city with their own *siawI*, had little time for the frivolity and partying that friendship required. CamPaa, for instance, said that her only friends were women from her school days. One lived in China now, and they had not spoken in months, “Since I’ve started a family,” she said, laughing, “I haven’t ever had any friends.”

For their husbands, the expectations were markedly different, and the emphasis was refracted (see, for comparison, Keyes 1984; Cassaniti 2015, 103; Petit 2015, 420; Zuckerman 2018; and, for a different view, Ockey 1999). Going out with friends, drinking, and playing games competitively was core to their evolving identities as cosmopolitan young family men. But this fun was nevertheless only justifiable for them insofar as the rest of their lives were in order. They stressed that they had the means and time to support their families through work *and* to have fun ( see, for comparison, DeFillipo 2020). Their friendships were thus set apart. In these egalitarian spaces, in which they competed with and against one another, got drunk together, and, occasionally, sang loudly about not throwing each other away, they were conspicuously engaged in something more electric and socially capricious.<sup>3</sup>

### “Loose” Friendships

“How uncertain is the ground upon which all our alliances  
and friendships rest, how close at hand are icy downpours  
or stormy weather, how isolated each man is!”  
– Nietzsche (1996, 148)

One morning during my fieldwork, a man was found hanged over the riverbank in the UNESCO-protected part of Luang Prabang. A few people showed me the gruesome scene on their cellphones. Rumours swirled about what had happened. He was a young man, probably around twenty. I assumed that it was a suicide, but others suggested that he was murdered and put up there on display. But who would have killed him like that? I asked one woman. Probably, she said, it was his *siawI*. Others told me similar things: a *siawI* had killed this man.

At the time, I thought this was a bizarre inference. Even more so because of the matter-of-factness with which people said it. Why would people assume that the young man’s *siawI* would be the one to kill him? Why not a maniacal stranger? A serial killer? A bookie? Some people gave possible backstories: Maybe they were involved in a love triangle? Or Maybe his *siawI* was jealous of his money? But these

just dressed up the same premise. Many men might love the same woman, many people might be jealous of another's wealth. Why would it be a *siaw*?

I believe now that these guesses were just that, guesses. But their intuitiveness was not random, it was informed by a broader sensibility in Luang Prabang—a lurking concern that those who are close to you might do you harm. Signs of this concern are easy to find. Take a 2004 article in the *Vientiane Times* (2004), in which the editorialist dwells on the prevalence of theft through betrayal: “In some cases, thieves go to visit the family, claiming to be relatives.... Another case sees friends betraying each other.” These are the ambivalent figures that one should worry about: strangers who claim to be kin, friends who act like strangers. Or take another article (*Vientiane Times* 2009) that documents how obsessions with sports, drinking, and gambling can “cause a lack of warmth” in players’ households and lead to disputes within a family and among friends: “many sports involve gambling and there are many people who owe their friends money. Because of this, best friends sometimes become enemies.”

The idea that those who are close might turn against you resonates with an older theme in Thai studies, in which scholars argued that Thailand contrasts with the more “tightly woven” cultures of Japan and Vietnam because of its “loose social structure”, in which relationships are fleeting (Embree 1950). The idea struck a nerve when it was first introduced (for example, Evers 1969), but it has not aged well since (Silverman 1972). Bilmes (1998, 1–2) averred that “loose structure” was “little more than a hook on which to hang anecdotes and observations about Thai behavior”.

I am not interested here in defending “loose structure” as an analytic. But even if it was only a hook on which to hang curious anecdotes about Thai behaviour, many of these anecdotes resonate with what I found some sixty years later in Luang Prabang: people worry about those close to them changing—that their intimacies might be turned inside out, from relations of love to relations of distance, estrangement or, worse yet, conflict and discord. The point is not that such fissions are especially common in Laos versus anywhere else, but that they “occur frequently enough to exist as potentialities” (Phillips 1966, 30) and have become prominent in the local imagination (see High 2011, 217).

In the “loose structure literature”, some researchers stressed the fleeting quality of Thai friendship in particular. Foster (1976, 251) wrote that “Thai friendship ... is usually viewed as a sort of prototype of the loose structure which is said to characterize Thai society”; Phillips (1963, 106) observed that, “All villagers have friends of varying degrees of intimacy ... numerous gossip, drinking, and gambling groups, but these associations are notoriously unstable and involve little psychic investment”; and Piker (1968, 200) made the idea the centrepiece of his imaginative essay, “Friendship to the Death in Rural Thai society”.



Piker's piece in particular is worth reflecting on here. He begins by introducing a contrast in Thailand, which *siaw1* in Luang Prabang make as well, between "friends to the death" (*phuan1 taaj3*) and less close friends (often called "eating friends" in Luang Prabang). He depicts the former "friends to the death" as oases of warmth in an on-the-whole mutually suspicious society, where "The typical villager approaches his interpersonal world, in virtually all of its aspects, with a pervasive sense of distrust ... and, correspondingly with a degree of caution and hesitancy that makes [durable] interpersonal commitment ... unlikely" (Piker 1968, 200). In the context of this bleak, cynical depiction, "friends to the death" appear to be an anomalous kind of person, someone trustworthy, a mind one can know. And yet, Piker argues that even "friends to the death" reveal that people are ultimately suspicious of others. He argues this point with a simple fact: most pairs of "friends to the death" (61 of 70 surveyed) did not live in the same village. Piker saw this distance not as accidental, but crucial, as it allowed these friendships to sit outside the cynical distrust of others. These friendships were thus fantasies away from the realities of Thai peasant life, outside of time, vehicles for men to have relations unburdened and untested by the daily drudgeries of interacting.

Piker's essay, and the literature on "loose structure" more generally, is marred by the obsessions and pockmarks of its time—an unwavering commitment to framing life in terms of "social structure", a too-broad notion of the peasant, an exoticism—but as an account of a discursive emphasis, it fits well with what I found among the "friends who don't throw each other away". For them, friendships are often haunted by whispered reminders of the potential of failure. The true friend, the friend to the death, thus serves as a desirable but elusive figure of personhood, a horizon toward which they build, judge, and risk these friendships, testing them to see of what they are made.

### "Bare" Friendships

While in Lao interaction generally, kinterms are common, these terms automatically encode hierarchy and *siaw1* thus avoid them (see, for comparison, Sidnell and Shohet 2013). Rather, to refer to one another, they use a combination of pronouns, names, prefixes and status address terms (see Enfield 2007b, 2013). Here, I focus especially on the pronouns. In the rapidly urbanizing city of Luang Prabang, the pronominal forms *siaw1* tend to select carry an ambivalence that resonates with how people tend to imagine *siaw1* relations. In the same breath, they can both perform intimacy and signal an uncouthness and aggression that tests social relations as much as it presupposes them. While many have considered these two pragmatic forces of such "bare", non-restraint forms as inherently separate and contextually bound (see, for example, Simpson 1997, 44; see, for comparison, Brown and Gilman 1960, 278), I show that for the *siaw1*, the two

forces congeal, paralleling the masculine, affective ambivalence that characterises many *siaw1* interactions.

Cross-linguistically, address terms are often salient for speakers (see Errington 1988, 234; Simpson 1997; Agha 2007). For people in Luang Prabang, pronouns are especially so. When asked, the *siaw1* easily—if not always accurately—describe which forms they use with which people in what contexts. They, similar to most Lao speakers, readily order their pronouns into speech levels of differing degrees of “politeness” (*suphaap4*), “lowness” (*tam1*) or “intimacy” (*sinit1*).

**Table 1.** Three levels of pronouns<sup>4</sup>

	Bare	Less Bare	Even Less Bare
1st person (SG)	<i>kuu3</i>	<i>baw2</i>	<i>khòj5</i>
2nd person (SG)	<i>mùng2</i>	<i>too3</i>	<i>caw4</i>

For this chapter’s purposes, I focus most on the “bare” forms *kuu3* and *mùng2*.<sup>5</sup> Both locally and in the literature, *kuu3* and *mùng2* are said to be reserved for both the closest of relations and the angriest of moments. Both “fighting words”—“the language one loses one’s temper in” (Errington 1985a, 9; cited in Irvine 1992)—and the words you use with intimates. People also wield them metapragmatically, for example, to talk about the quality of relationships—someone might say a close pair are all “*kuu3* and *mùng2* together”—and to frame conversations as coarse or dissident—all “*kuu3 kuu3 mùng2 mùng2*” (see, for comparison, Pressman 1998, 469; Errington 1988, 105).

*Kuu3* and *mùng2* are said by locals to be similar in level to several other forms for person reference in Lao, namely the second-person plural *suu3* and the third person singular *man2*, not included in table 1, as well as the following prefixes *bak2* and *qii1*, which are used before names (see Enfield 2007b):

**Table 2.** Two levels of prefixes<sup>6</sup>

	Bare	Less Bare
Male	<i>bak2</i>	<i>thaan1</i>
Female	<i>qii1</i>	<i>naang1</i>

For their capacity to evince both intimacy and coarse, aggression, these barer terms are presumed to be used among *siaw1*. Some string-tying ceremonies that formally bind *siaw1* are reportedly even accompanied by the new *siaw1* switching to *kuu3* and *mùng2* on the spot (Enfield 2014, 138). The *siaw1* in “friends who

don't throw each other away" did, in fact, tend to use these barer forms, but they also sometimes switched to the slightly less bare pronouns *hau2/too3*. While I never heard them use *khòj5/caw4* with each other, on occasion they also used the "sweet sounding" (*siang3 vaan3*) first-person forms *khaanòj4* (associated with the temple) and *khaaphacaw4* (associated with business and the state) for jokes, which, in terms of non-bareness, are literally off-the-chart of table 1. Muu, for example, once made a bet with another *siaw1* in which the loser had to tell the winner, "I give in" or *khaanòj4 ñòòm2*. The pronoun underlined the humiliation.

Enfield (2014, 136) writes that *kuu3*, *mùng2*, and the other "bare" forms of person reference, are "the most exposing—or, more accurately, the least covering...." This metaphor, reminiscent of Geertz's (1976, 248–60) classic discussion of Javanese linguistic etiquette as a kind of wall-building around one's emotional life, captures why the bare forms are appropriate in hierarchical kinship relations—for example, in the speech from grandmother to child—as it also illuminates why they are connected to qualities of aggression and impingement.

It is this latter capacity of the bare forms to impinge on their referent that makes them appropriate for the most common insults, which literally curse the referent and addressee (*bak2 haa1 mùng2* and *qii1 haa1 mùng2*). To use these forms with unfamiliar or those deserving of respect is said to offend and enrage; the "friends who don't throw each other away" frequently hurl them at one another (see, for comparison, Haugh and Bousfield 2012). That such bare forms are associated with impingement is also evident insofar as they are at times equated with physical violence, especially blows to the head. Just as *siaw1* use bare forms with each other, so too do they proclaim and sometimes demonstrate that they can hit each other's head without offence (see, for comparison, Siegel 1993, 44). To allow someone to do this to your head—the most sacred part of the Lao body—is to expose oneself completely, to offer your throat to their knife. Accepting or giving a blow to the head are—alongside cursing at one another, making otherwise offensive jokes, and telling one another the truth, even when it is difficult—acts that convert violations and impingement into signs of intimacy. When expected or forgiven, these acts evince an ethic of mutual "nonrestraint" (see Enfield 2014, 143; Cooke 1968). When unexpected or poorly responded to, these acts can lead to argument (see Enfield 2014, 140). The ambiguity as to whether offense or intimacy is intended is yet another way in which *siaw1* relations are formed within the semiotic borderlands of friendship and enmity (Bateson 1972).

The extent to which a bare form can both track social relations and produce them is clearest in moments where people switch from one pronominal form to another, and thus "break[] or reset[] a pattern of established pair-part usage" (Silverstein 2003, 210; Friedrich 1979). I saw many such breakthroughs in Luang Prabang, and they were salient for locals as indices of anger, humour, and

drunkenness (see, for comparison, Simpson 1997, 46). Take the neat pronominal arc of one side of an argument I overheard between Muu and his wife, Tia. When it began, Muu spoke calmly and used *khòj5* and *caw4*. As his voice grew angrier and angrier, moving to a yell, he switched to *kuu3* and *mùng2*. Then, after cooling down, he began to use *khòj5* and *caw4* again, the pronouns one would expect a respectful married couple to use.

When prompted, people in Luang Prabang tend to talk about *kuu3* and *mùng2* in terms of the addressees with whom they are appropriate. In this respect, they are “addressee focused” (Irvine 1992, 256).<sup>7</sup> But this does not exhaust their (meta)pragmatics. People also recognise and treat them as indexical of the qualities of those who use them (see Silverstein 2003, *inter alia*). They debate, furthermore, how this speaker focus works. Some say that the bare forms are not inherently bad words: that it is not *if* you use them, but *how* you use them that matters. One man told me, “if [*kuu3* and *mùng2*] are used with people you really love, people you really, really love, then you can say them. [But] if ... people of different ages [are speaking to each other], then you should not use them.” He then enthusiastically described “one ethnic group” that only used *kuu3* and *mùng2*, even with strangers: “They talk to each other, saying *kuu3 kuu3* and *mùng2 mùng2* just using [the words] on each other, just speaking and using [the words] on each other.” “You have to understand where they are coming from,” he continued, these words mean they “really, really love” you. “If you don’t understand them ... haha ... there is just going to be fighting right then ... haha.”

Other people, and some of the same people at different moments, talk about the forms as indefeasibly bad words (Irvine 2011), not to be uttered because they bespeak rudeness, childishness and coarseness. For example, I was drinking with Muu outside his house when his brother-in-law and sister-in-law began to fight viciously, screaming at each other and throwing things. During the argument, their toddler son approached us pushing a bike. I asked him what he was pushing around, and he said, defensively, *khòng3 kuu3*, (It’s mine!). Before I could respond, Muu asked his nephew where he had learned the word *kuu3* and ordered the boy not to use it. I became immediately curious, Where do you think he learned it, I asked Muu, Other kids? His parents, Muu said confidently, referring to the couple intermittently screaming the word to each other a few paces away. They use it all the time. In telling his nephew not to use the word at all, rather than just with me, Muu implied *kuu3* was not just a word one should keep in reserve, but a bad word.

For the *siaw1*, whether bare pronouns were more about the people with whom they were used (addressee focused), or the people who used them (speaker focused), was a live question. Can one be “rude” (*bò-suphaap4*), aggressive, or “low” (*tam1*) to some people without also being a “rude”, childish person? The stakes of this question were infused by their concerns with appearing as responsible,

cosmopolitan family men, on the one hand, and with fashioning themselves as masculine men with close friends, on the other. Alongside playing competitive games, telling offensive jokes, and drinking beer, *kuu3* and *mùng2* were one of many small battlegrounds where these identities came into tension.

This was clear from my own experiences of stubbornly trying to use *kuu3* and *mùng2*. But, before I recount this, let me briefly reflect on one term of reference that *siaw1* use that rarely carries ambivalence: that is, the term *siaw1* itself. When not using the term to reflect generically on the substance of *siaw1* (see Zuckerman 2021a; 2021b), people use it specifically to characterise relationships (“They are *siaw1* with each other”), prefix names in title-like fashion (“*siaw1* Muu”, for Muu), refer to one another in possessive constructions (“His *siaw1*”), and grab attention (similar to other familiarisers such as *mate* or *dude*, but less ubiquitously applied; see, for comparison, Ewing, this volume). The term tends to be more restricted and warmer than similar—and encompassing—available forms for “friend” such as *muu1* and *phùan1*, which can reference company and intimates, generally (see De Young 1955, 27).<sup>8</sup> The “friends who don’t throw each other away” peppered the word *siaw1* throughout their conversations with each other. Take, for instance, how Muu told Dii to wait during a game of cards: waving his hand in Dii’s direction, he said “*faaw4 siaw1*” or “[Don’t] rush, *siaw1*”.

**Figure 2.** Using “*siaw1*”, Muu tells Dii not to rush during a card game



As I began to spend more time with the group, everyone quickly began calling me *siaw1*. They never hesitated to do so because the term has only positive connotations. While one might find it presumptuous or annoying if a younger

person called him *siaw1* (as I heard people occasionally complain), and while there are popular jokes about men getting drunk and becoming *siaw1* with their fathers-in-law (funny because of the inversion of hierarchy and decorum), the term lacks the dual capacity of *kuu3* and *mùng2*, the power to index both love and aggression. It was sometimes funny to have a foreign *siaw1*, but it was never bad.

But changes to using barer pronominals with me took much longer and happened unevenly. When the *siaw1* met other Lao men of similar age they would use *khòj5* and *caw4* only briefly (if at all), quickly shift to *haw2* and *too3*, and then, maybe, and especially if alcohol was involved, downshift again to *kuu3* and *mùng2*, like a Dodge Charger picking up speed. With me, some *siaw1* stuck for months to *khòj5* and *caw4* before using *haw2* and *too3*. They were not concerned about my feelings, but rather how they felt such uses would reflect on them. When they eventually did use *kuu3* and *mùng2* with me, overhearers would sometimes comment and laugh that a Westerner and a Lao person were “using *kuu3* and *mùng2* together” (*kuu3 mùng2 kan3*). Sii complained about this. When I pestered him for using *khòj5* and *caw4* with me in a bar, he shot back: “What would people think of me if I used *kuu3* and *mùng2* with you?” Months earlier, when I first asked Sii to use *kuu3* and *mùng2*, he was similarly hesitant. He first incredulously claimed that he never used them with other *siaw1*, and then, when I pushed him more, said he would use them with me, but not in front of women or his children. The problem was, it was *bòø-ngam2* (not beautiful), and would make him look immature, like a “child” (*dèk2 nòj4*) rather than “an adult” (*phuu5 ñaj1*). Another *siaw1*, Khêng, told me that “real *siaw1*” use *khòj5* and *caw4*. Months later, he reluctantly agreed to use *kuu3* and *mùng2* with me, but stressed that now that he was a father, he disliked using the words. The hesitance, strongest when we were out and about, came from the stigma. Publicly using the forms—especially with me—exposed the *siaw1* to judgements of being careless, coarse and unrefined with a foreigner, a class of person that the mature, cosmopolitan Luang Prabang man is expected to treat with care, as if he is representing not just himself but the nation.

My shift in pronouns with Muu, the first person in Laos with whom I used reciprocal *kuu3* and *mùng2*, is the most trackable. When we first met on 1 October 2013, he surprised me by using *haw2* and *too3* immediately. On 29 November 2013, at the end of a long night of drinking, he told me that we were really *siaw1* now. I asked him if that meant we could call one another *kuu3* and *mùng2*, and he said that those words weren’t important, what mattered was that we could always stay at each other’s houses and that we could even “hit each other on the head”. We then proceeded to slap each other’s heads just above the neck, late at night, standing in his driveway, and hard enough to remember the next morning. In early January 2014, at the end of another long night out, I asked Muu again if we could use *kuu3* and *mùng2*. His response was drastically different: he said he was

really happy I had asked because he had not been “brave” enough to ask me. We already had the strongest friendship as possible, it now made sense to use *kuu3* and *mùng2*. We did so on the spot, and I revelled in each token.

Our pronominal conversion was never entire, however. I, unaccustomed to switching pronouns, often clumsily stumbled across different forms. Muu, for his part, alternated between *kuu3* and *mùng2* and the less bare *haw2* and *too3*. While my switching was random, Muu’s was relatively systematic. He, like the rest of *siaw1*, was much more likely to use *kuu3* and *mùng2* at night when drinking.<sup>9</sup> For them, as for many young men in Luang Prabang, alcohol and late-night partying were bridges to the development of *kuu3* and *mùng2* relations, just as drinking and partying were said to be a bridge to the development of friendship generally (see, for comparison, Chirasombutti and Diller 1999, 118). “It’s all love within the drinking circle”, people say, and many drinking sessions begin at one pronominal level and conclude at another. As nights go on, as people get drunker, as the stakes in games go higher, as mock fights, and occasionally real fights happen, people make a full shift from *haw2* and *too3* to *kuu3* and *mùng2*. At a New Year’s party at Sii’s house, for example, I saw a man that I had long known from the *pétanque* court. We had always used *khòòj5* and *caw4*, but that night, loaded and heavy lidded, he used *kuu3* and *mùng2* immediately. The roughness of his pronouns fit with his affect generally: in apparent jest, he put me in a headlock or two, wrestled and swore at me. I, a bit confused and irked, returned his pronouns and literal jabs in kind.

As anyone passingly familiar with the Lao language knows, *kuu3* and *mùng2* are not exclusively tied to drinking or the rough masculinity of some *siaw1* relations. They are used in families, in schools, and among monks and novices in temples, often reflexively and without comment. But while they are used broadly, for male *siaw1* in Luang Prabang *kuu3* and *mùng2* have come to index drinking and gambling and the sometimes agonistic, unrefined, sociality that goes along with these activities. In some ways this fits with these bare forms’ more general association with rural areas rather than urban ones—in cities people are said to *vaw4 dooj3* or speak with more polite affectations (similar ideologies exist throughout mainland Southeast Asia). These indexical ties partly explain why the *siaw1* might feel uncomfortable using the forms publicly, say, to a foreigner like me on the street or in front of their wives and children. But it also explains why *siaw1* are attracted to these forms as semiotic resources generally: they can wield *kuu3* and *mùng2* in moments of rough sociality as tools, to monitor and mould their friendships, to signal closeness, but also enmity or ambivalence. They can also use these forms as metapragmatic objects for self-fashioning, topics for reflecting on themselves and the kinds of language they use, material for enacting and displaying the kind of people they hope to be and the kind of relationships they hope to have.

### Thrown Away Friendships

When “friends who don’t throw each other away” disbanded, I was invited to another WhatsApp group with most of the same people. Muu was not. Cracks in his relationship with the others had appeared long before, but one night stood out as a turning point. It began with an afternoon game of rattan ball and a trip to a bar. We then decided to play snooker. As we rode over to the snooker hall, I sat on the back of Muu’s bike, and he and Khêng, another *siauw1*, rode close and jawed about who would win. When we arrived, they convinced the group that they should start by playing a game, one-on-one, for six bottles of beer—higher

**Figure 3.** Muu and Khêng pose with a crate of beer





stakes than normal. Muu lost, but when it came time to pay, he offered less money than he owed. He argued with Khêêng and Bêê as the rest of us looked on. Back and forth they went. People occasionally told them to ‘quiet’ (*mit1*) and calm down (*caj3 jênø-jên3*), but they persisted. Muu said they were acting like ‘little kids’. Khêêng told him to pay what he owed. To cool the fire, Nòòng had Khêêng and Muu pose for pictures with a crate of beer, ritualizing the giving of the six bottles that Muu had lost.

In the picture (Figure 3), Nòòng stands on the left side of the frame, trying to get the two men to look at the camera and shake hands, to pose around the transfer of goods like the Lao Development Lottery poses around its big cheques to the nation. Khêêng offers his hand, Muu eventually takes it, but the photo-op did little to resolve the tension. After more bickering, Muu admitted that he did not have enough money, but would pay what he could. The group then decided to go to its third competition of the night: *pétanque*.

It was already late, and the *pétanque* courts were closed, but one of the *siaw1*’s family owned a court that we could use. On the way there, Muu and Khêêng again rode near one another, jawing. Muu yelled to Khêêng about the group generally, with the bare second-person plural *suu3*: “You guys (*suu3*) bicker like little kids” and “you guys (*suu3*) don’t sympathise with your friends.” Khêêng yelled back. “Who are you referring to with *suu3*,” he asked, “Do you mean *kuu3*?” Muu, furious, did not answer, and turned off the road to grab money from his house. Now alone with me on the quieter side road, he complained that Khêêng and Bêê were like children. He did not like their “characters” (*nitsaj3*) or the way that “they wanted what others had.”

Khêêng and Bêê were waiting at the *pétanque* court with a new case of beer cans. We turned on the weak court lights, and Muu continued to argue and gamble for more beer with them. They all used *kuu3* and *mùng2* throughout. I remember feeling a strange shift happening as they yelled. Rather than a “breakthrough” into a new relationship by way of a change in pronouns (Friedrich 1979), it felt as if the same pronouns shifted in meaning, from indexing the intimacy of being *siaw1* to indexing anger; they “broke through” from signalling mutual exposure and mutual nonrestraint to signalling mutual destruction. The dimly lit *pétanque* court was something like a stage, and the rest of us slipped into the darkness and watched the devolution from the benches.

Eventually, Muu won the games, and someone suggested another picture of him with his winnings. After the photo, he told Khêêng that they could either not be friends anymore or just not like each other, but still go and drink and eat together. Unphased, Khêêng chose the second option and left for home. Muu was so angry he wouldn’t be able to sleep, and he asked Dii and me to stay and drink. Dii, looking depleted, said he needed to go home. When we got back to our

neighbourhood, Muu told me that he was not actually going to spend any more time with Khêeng. I could, but he was done.

And yet, Muu did spend some more time with Khêeng. They occasionally argued with each other, or became visibly annoyed, but they often also acted as if nothing had happened, as if their relationship was never strained. Perhaps they were, like they had said, going out together without liking one another, or perhaps they had gotten past it, but it always seemed to me like the answer was simpler. They had returned to the intermediary space from which they began the argument, a mixing of unease and “love”, of jokes and serious offenses, of tension and friendship.

As Muu’s relation with Khêeng stabilised, his tensions with others in the group grew. Slowly, over the next few months, a consensus developed that Muu was selfish—that he ‘wanted what others had,’ that he was too invested in arguments, too competitive. Muu’s style of play in soccer was said to be especially symptomatic of his character. He did not look for his friends as he ran down the field; he never assisted on goals, only tried to make them. People would groan as he dribbled the ball, wave their hands wildly for him to pass. Dii took it upon himself to talk to Muu, to tell him that others had a problem with his style of play. He understood himself to be giving Muu exactly the kind of frank, “straight” talk that both tests and evinces friendship, like a hit to the head (see Zuckerman 2022). But Muu took offence, and many long nights were spent with three or four of us drinking, me sitting quietly, Muu telling Dii how the problem was that his teammates were unskilled, and Dii telling Muu that he, not them, was the problem.

Dii told me he knew that Muu wasn’t listening. Eventually, people in the group stopped inviting him to play soccer. Because he and I lived so close, they began picking me up down the road so Muu wouldn’t see us in our uniforms. When “friends that don’t throw each other away” was disbanded, I was similarly told not to tell Muu about the new group. But he clearly knew. One night when he was feeling especially upset, he asked me to come and drink with him to settle himself down. He told me that he did not have any “friends to the death” (*muu1 taaj3; siaw1 taaj3*) in Luang Prabang, only “eating friends” (*muu1 kin3; siaw1 kin3*). In the province where he was from, he had some friends to the death, he added, his real friends, but not here.

## Lasting Friendships

When I left the field a few months later, Muu’s relationship with the group had almost evaporated. As a going-away party, I asked everyone to go to a bowling alley with me. Muu arrived late with another man whom we didn’t know well. They left quickly. The others explained that Muu was scared we would beat him up: that’s why he brought the other man, for protection.

Like that, the *kum1* that seemed so solid when I arrived in Laos had been thrown away, or at least morphed into something else. Years later, when I was first writing these passages, Muu, had moved back to his home province, messaged me telling me that he (*kuu3*) “missed” me (*mùng2*) and sent me photographs of us drinking together with the *siaw1*. I sent him photographs as well, including the last from the night of the argument, in which Muu and Khêêng are shaking hands and holding the beer Muu had just won.

The picture was not out of place. Taken in the heat of an argument, it nevertheless effaced its origins. I now wonder whether that was what motivated those who took it. Even as the camerawork and poses were sloppy with drunkenness, the photo looked like many formal photos of exchanges in Laos. It purported to capture something extant, but it was fundamentally creative and hopeful. The men had organised it to rescue the relationship between Muu and Khêêng. The beer in between them, the cause of the argument, a sign of both the bond and the wedge, manifested friendship in the instant that friendship was at risk.

## Conclusion

In Luang Prabang, Laos, a place where hierarchical relations are the norm, *siaw1* relations stand apart in their presumed equality. The men in “friends who don’t throw each other away” were committed to this equality and hoped for it to endure in the form of a lasting fraternal love. They worked hard to reify their relations in photographs and team jerseys and frequent messaging and drinking together.

But as they made monuments to their lasting friendship, they also flirted with its destruction. Much of what they did to evince their strong social relations invited low levels of conflict that tested those same relations: they told one another painful truths, they joked with one another, they smacked each other’s heads, they constantly competed in games and drinking, and they either split bar bills evenly, no matter how unequally people imbibed, or they gambled for those same bills, creating asymmetries in who was forced to pay.

The *siaw1* constantly invited conflict, but conflict was never their stated goal. It was rather a means to prove the quality of their relations and thus their own qualities as emerging cosmopolitan family men with friends so close they need not worry about being thrown away. By flouting etiquette, by telling one another the undiluted truth, and by inhabiting nonrestraint (Enfield 2014, 143; Cooke 1968), they evinced the power of their relations to endure. Like all good tests, these tests of lasting fraternal love sometimes strained that love too far. Sometimes friends did care and take offense. Sometimes, they stopped being friends. The risk of lost friendship was real.

**Figure 4.** Muu, Khêng, and Muu's winnings



A parallel logic captures how the men used *kuu3* and *mùng2*. These pronouns of nonrestraint evidence relations because they test them. Both locals in Luang Prabang and scholars studying similar forms elsewhere have tended to describe such bare forms as having two separate meanings, depending on the context: one intimate, one angry. Reflecting on person reference in relatively unstable relations such as those of the “friends who don’t throw each other away” makes clear that the apparent interplay of these sharply contrasting uses is more than just an enticing paradox for analysts. In male *siaw1* relations, the anger that the use of these forms can unleash is not separate from their capacity to express intimacy. Bare forms such as *kuu3* and *mùng2* are powerful signs of intimacy because, like a slap to the head, they are construable as something else, because, in the right circumstances, they can shift in pragmatic force as quickly as “friends who don’t throw each other away” can turn on one another.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> For transliteration of Lao, I follow Enfield (2007a). All names are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> Of course, while *siaw1* relations centre on similarity, they, and especially dyadic *siaw1* relations, often also span obvious differences of sex, class, etc.

<sup>3</sup> That this is an urban way of being *siaw1* is clear from my subsequent research in the rural Nam Noi watershed (see Enfield, this volume). There, *siaw1* relations among people over 30 are dyadic and between men of different villages or towns, especially locals and outsiders. Only younger villagers, both male and female, use *siaw1* like people in Luang Prabang—a few older people told me that these practices referred to “play *siaw1*” (*siaw1 liin5*), modelled on relations in the towns and cities.

<sup>4</sup> Table 1 is a “metonymic reduction” (Agha 2007, 286), which treats the forms themselves as if they, without the help of context, did all of the pragmatic work (cf. Enfield 2014, 143–4), but it also illuminates insofar as it roughly captures how locals talk about and use the forms.

<sup>5</sup> I use “bare”, following Enfield (2007b), because the term parallels local ideas about how these forms work and avoids implying that they are *automatically* rude.

<sup>6</sup> *thaaan1* and *naang1* are used most in institutional contexts, alongside full legal names (cf. Enfield 2007b, 103).

<sup>7</sup> The third person forms *man2*, *kbaw2*, *laaw2*, in contrast, are talked about as primarily referent focused.

<sup>8</sup> *phùan1*, commonly used, feels Thai to many Lao speakers.

<sup>9</sup> I surveyed twelve recordings of Muu helping me during transcription sessions; these spanned our switch in pronouns. I marked the first time Muu referred to me or himself with a pronoun, expecting to see a clean transition from *haw2* and *too3* into *kuu3* and *mùng2*. To my surprise, in each case Muu used *haw2* or *too3*. In the less sober and serious videos I have of us drinking, in contrast, Muu frequently used *kuu3* and *mùng2*.