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Books for review should be sent to:

Justin McDaniel, JLS Editor
223 Claudia Cohen Hall
249 S. 36th Street
University of Pennsylvania
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Announcements:

Call for Article Submissions for the JLS:

The study of Laos and the Lao has grown significantly over the past decade. With the opening up of some historical and manuscript archives, the improvement of communication and transportation, and the launching of joint Lao-foreign research projects, Laos has attracted a number of new scholars in diverse fields of expertise. The *Journal of Lao Studies* (JLS) is an exciting new scholarly project which is expected to become the first and most prestigious venue for researchers who work on Laos.

We are now accepting submissions of articles, book review suggestions, review articles (extended reviews of major publications, trends in the field, or of political, social, or economic events). These submissions can cover studies on Laos, the Lao diaspora (Northeast Thailand, Europe, the Americas, Australia, and so on), or studies in regards to ethnic groups found in Laos (Hmong, Akha, Khmu, among others).

Language: Lao and English are the main languages, other languages are welcomed. Please check with the editors first before submitting articles in other languages not listed here.

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A Study of *Mo Yao* Healers: Traditional health care of ethnic Phutai in Northeast Thailand

Thanyalak Chaiyasuk Mollerup, and Preeyawan Kanwittayee
(Khao Wong Hospital, Kalasin province, Thailand)

Abstract

Phutai is a Tai-Kadai ethnic group, closely related to Thai and Lao, living only in northeast Thailand and central Laos. *Mo yao*¹ (หมอเพช) is a traditional healer: a *mo* provides health care using a method called *yao*. This study was conducted by nurses at Khao Wong Hospital, Kalasin, in collaboration with local community leaders and a group of *mo yao* in a study area covering 16 villages. The study includes the following: (1) The *yao* method: the *mo yao* generally consist of female ‘shamans’ who cure by drumming, dancing and singing, and using ceremonial methods and utensils. (2) The relationship between *mo yao* and the local community: the *mo yao* are highly respected local people, mostly farmers, who mediate between the spirit-world and the mundane. (3) Factors and conditions that determine how the *mo yao* have survived until today: belief in local spirits (*phi*), community participation in regulated spirit ceremonies, and a strong social network among the *mo yao* groups in the area. (4) How to maintain and strengthen the local wisdom preserved in the *yao* method by making local villagers confident in their *mo yao* heritage, and by making modern doctors realize that the methods of the *mo yao* can be incorporated into modern governmental health care in a holistic way. A future project of the hospital aims to utilize both traditional and modern medicine.

Keywords: health care, healing, shamanism, *mo yao*, Phutai

Introduction

The ethnic Phutai have many types of traditional health treatment – the most important being the *yao* healing. *Yao* healing is ritual healing performed by a group of female *mo yao* healers through poetic speech, chanting, drumming and dancing. The Phutai community in general still adheres to *yao* healing, but the majority of the younger generations do not recognize any value or importance of traditional healing. *Yao* is a

¹ For the transcriptions used in this paper we have followed the guidelines prescribed by the Royal Thai Institute. Because this system is not fully consistent, we have furthermore added the Thai word written in Thai script in parenthesis. For the ease of the Thai reader, the terms are spelled in Thai, not Phutai – for example, *mueang* (เมือง) in Thai is pronounced *moeng* (เมือง) in Phutai; likewise, *kraduk* (กระดุก) versus *du* (ดู). Terms that are explicitly Phutai are written following Phutai pronunciation, for example, *yao* (เพช). The spelling follows the Thai tonal system.

process of healing closely associated with Phutai lifestyle. If *yao* healing declines, then traditional Phutai ethnic lifestyle and identity will decline as well.

Objectives

- (1) To study the past and present situation of traditional Phutai health care.
- (2) To study the factors and conditions determining why *yao* healing has survived until today.
- (3) To study the relationship between the *mo yao* healers and the local community.
- (4) To study methods on how to maintain and strengthen local wisdom as preserved in *yao* healing.

Methodology

This qualitative research has been conducted with community participation (community-based research). The study team consisted of nurses, leaders of the community, *mo yao* healers, health volunteers, and local government officials. The methods used were interviews, team observation and group process including *mo yao* healers, *mo yao* clients, community leaders, local resource persons, and youths from 16 villages.

Modern versus traditional treatment

A related project about Phutai health care, conducted by a medical team from Khao Wong Hospital in 2009, concluded that the patients admitted to Khao Wong Hospital could be divided into two groups. One group was solely treated by modern (Western) methods (46%). The other was treated with a combination of modern medicine and traditional medicine and accounted for 54% of the study population. The traditional medicine was roughly divided into *mo yao* (26%), *mo pao* and herbal medicine (22%), *mo thamma* (dharma) and *mo song* (20%), 'ceremonial arrangements' (20 %), and sundry (16 %).

Short outline of Phutai culture, language and history

Phutai culture differs in many respects from the surrounding ethnic Lao culture, e.g., wedding and cremation ceremonies and *mo yao* healing, the latter is a Phutai variation of ancient Tai religious, spiritual and political life. Phutai is part of a continuum of the Tai language as found spoken in northwestern Vietnam, all belonging to the Tai-Kadai language stock, which originates from Guangxi, southern China. Phutai is related to the surrounding Lao language, but the two languages are not mutually intelligible; a Phutai will understand Lao, but a younger Lao speaker will not completely understand an elder Phutai because many vocabulary terms as well as the tonal system are different².

Historically, the Phutai originate from the eastern part of Savannakhet and Khammouane provinces of Laos, from where they were forcefully relocated during the

² See: ภาษาผู้ไทเพื่อสุขภาพ (Phasa phuthai phuea sukkhaphap): 'Phutai Language for Health'. In Thai.

first part of the 19th century as part of a Siamese depopulation policy in Lao territories. The elder Phutai in eastern Isan still recall names as Mueang Bok and Mueang Wang in the Lao hinterlands. Phutai history before the 19th century is disputed and obscured in ancient myths informing us that the cradle of the Phutai was in Dien Bien Phu, Northern Vietnam, from where all humans allegedly descended from the sky.

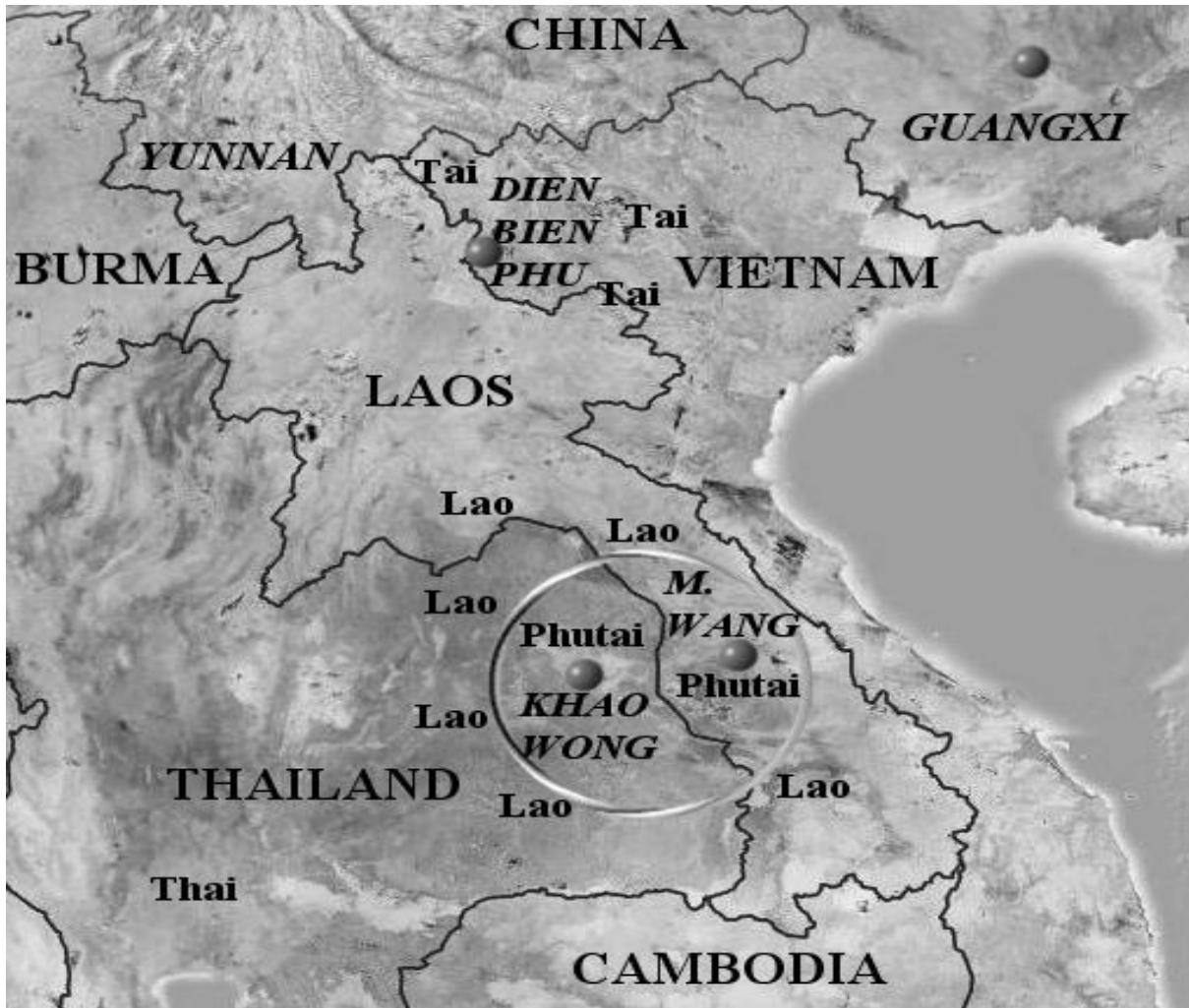


Figure 1: Map showing Khao Wong City and approximate location of ethnic Phutai and neighboring ethnic groups.

Yao health care - then and now

In the past *yao* healing was an integrated part of Phutai lifestyle, framing life from birth to death. The members of the community strictly adhered to beliefs in various spirits, maybe even more profoundly than in the later added Buddhist beliefs. *Yao* healing was a sacred ritual, highly valued by the community.

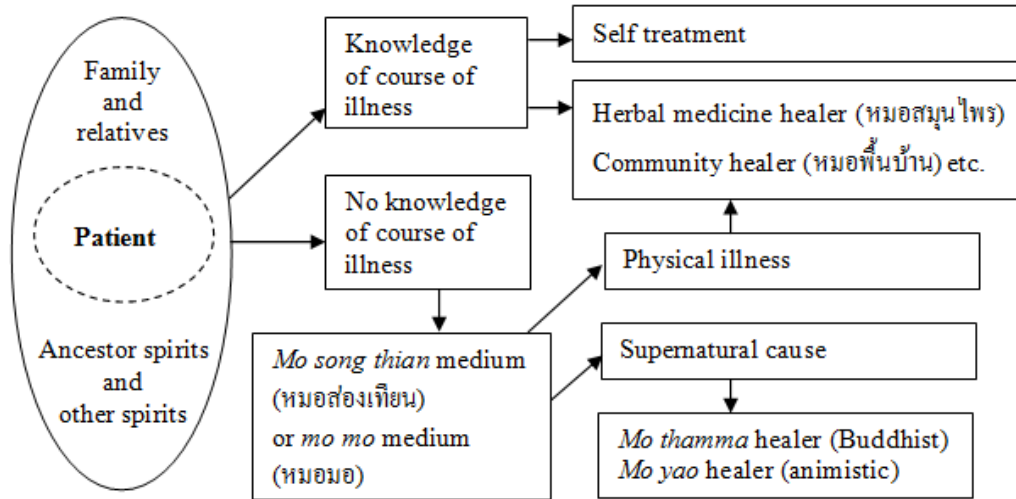


Figure 2. Health care in the past.

Nowadays modern (Western) development has been added to the traditional ways of life, affecting the basic values and concepts of life in the community. One result is a decrease in the use of traditional *yao* healing. Another result is that some types of *yao* – for example, *yao kuang sao kuang bao* – has become extinct.

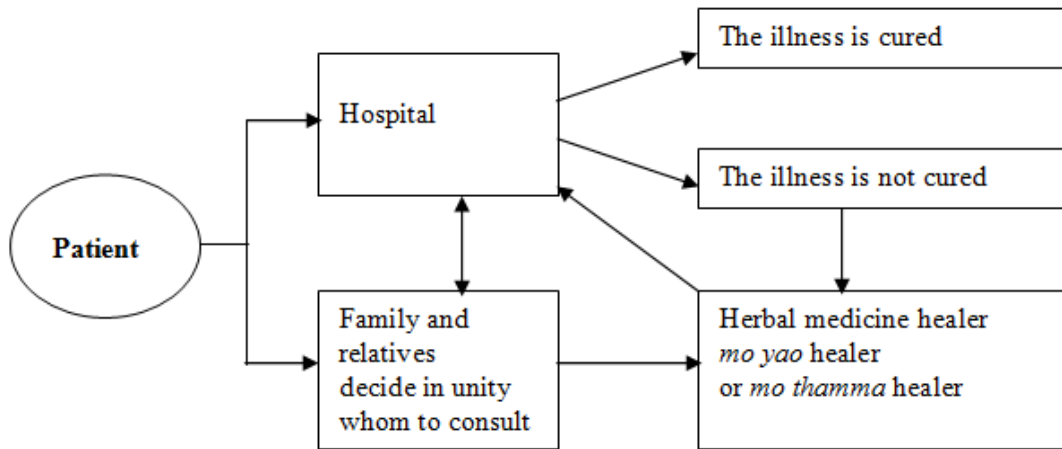


Figure 3. Present-day health care.

The Phutai have a range of choices for traditional medical care. If the patient does not know the cause of his/her problem, the elders of the family will consult a *song thian* (หมอ-song-thien) or a *mo mo* (หมอมอ) medium, both of them only doing diagnostics, but using different methods. In case of physical illness, the next to be consulted is one of various community healers, *mo phuen ban* (หมอเพื่อนบ้าน), such as the herbal-medicine

healer, *mo samunphrai* (หมอสมุนไพร), the *mo chot kraduk* (หมอจอตกระดุก), or the *mo pau* (หมอป่า). If the illness is not clearly physical the cause of the problem will be considered to be caused by spirits and the Buddhist *mo thamma* (หมอธรรมะ) or the *mo yao* will be consulted. Nowadays the hospital system will be consulted as well – maybe before consulting the traditional health system, maybe after.

Yao healing

Yao healing is ritual treatment improving health through a medium (*mae mueang*), who acts as an intermediary between the human and the spiritual world. *Mae mueang* cures through poetic speech and chanting using an authentic and archaic Phutai language in accompaniment with musical instruments and ritual utensils.



Figure 4. *Luk Mueang* and *mae mueang*.

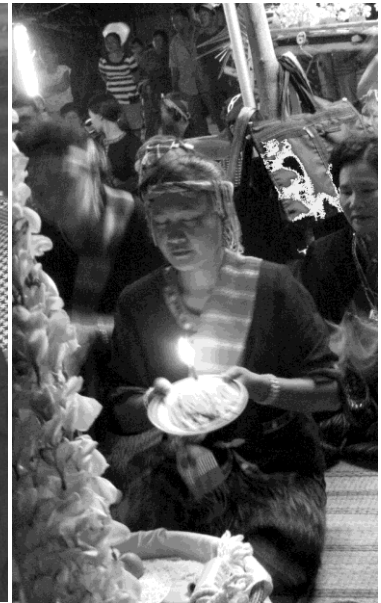


Figure 5. Medium in trance.

Mo yao healers can be split into two levels. (1) *Mo yao mae mueang* ('healer *yao* mother community') is the medium performing the *yao* healing ceremony. (2) *Mo yao luk mueang* ('healer *yao* children community') are *mo yao* members who still do not have the spiritual power to perform the *yao* healing ceremony. The roles of the *luk mueang* are to assist *mae mueang* in making utensils and to give mental support to the patient and his/her family. The *mae mueang* will perform healing ceremonies together with a group of *luk mueang*. The social bond between the *mo yao* is like that of an extended family whereby the *mae mueang* and the *luk mueang* have a mother–daughter relationship, and the *luk mueang* feel like siblings.

According to traditional belief problems – from day-to-day minor problems as headaches to major disasters – exceed the capability of ordinary people to change because they are believed to have a super-natural cause. Animistic (spirit) and Buddhist

(karma) beliefs coexist in the home of the *yao* healer, who will have two separate shelves for worshipping: *hing mo yao* and *hing pha*.

Before the development of the modern hospital system the community members consulted the various kinds of *mo* healers. Now, the governmental health system has reached every village through its health stations, providing another option from whom the villagers may consult. For some diseases, the villager will start consultation with the hospital and if it is not successful then they consult the various kinds of traditional healers, *mo yao* being one of them. Some diseases – mostly ‘mental’ (psycho-somatic) – the villagers relate to spirits and will start consulting the traditional health system.

Social levels of mo yao

The duties of the *mo yao* healers are performed at the communal level as well as at the individual. On the communal level the *mo yao* will be leading the annual *phi-thala*³ worshipping ceremonies in every district⁴ of the Phutai area. The *mo yao* will also lead the annual worshipping of the *phi pu ta* (spirit of the elders) at the village level. Every Phutai and Lao village in Northeast Thailand has a *san pu ta* (ancestral spirit house), which is mostly consulted for family matters. A third important communal task for the *mo yao* is during a drought, pleading for rain. At the individual level the *mo yao* provides support when sickness occurs, when villagers perform *tham khwan* ceremonies, when babies are crying continuously without apparent reason, during pregnancy, and when people are dying. A last and now extinct task for the *mo yao* was to *khuang sao khuang bao* (หลวงสาวควงบ่าว), where the ‘patient’ is an un-married teenager and the cure is pseudo engagement.

Reasons for becoming a mo yao healer

Several reasons were given for a *mo yao* to have chosen to become a *mo yao* healer, or rather why a spirit has chosen a person to become a healer. One occasion can be during personal sickness when a patient of a spirit may be confronted with the option of being cured if the patient becomes a *luk mueang*. A similar instance could happen when curing a member of the family, whereby a spirit can choose a participating member of the family to become *luk mueang*. The same spirit-choosing of a new *luk mueang* could happen while watching a *yao* ritual (regardless of why the locals formerly seldom attended *yao* rituals). Occasionally and very seldomly the spirit can choose a person who has never attended a *yao* ceremony or a *yao* healing. The aspiring *mo yao* will show ability in speech, dance, and utensil making without having been trained, and become a *mae mueang* directly.

³ The *thala* spirit is an ancestral spirit, who died in defense of the Phutai, allegedly during the era of Mueang Vang in Laos. *Phi-Thala* is still highly revered among the Phutai in Northeast Thailand.

⁴ Present-day Thai administration system: a province (*chang-wat*) is divided into districts (*amphoe*) and sub-districts (*tambon*), which again consists of a number of villages (*mu-ban*). Before the construction of modern nations, the Tais were structured in independent *ban-mueang* polities, where the *chao-mueang* (lord of the polity) ruled in close association with the leading *mo-yao* priest, and the *mae-mueang* (the mother of the polity).



Figure 6. *Mo yao* ritual dance.



Figure 7. Ceremonial utensils.

Steps in the yao healing ceremony

A Phutai is not an isolated individual, but an integrated part of a family, and when sick, the first to be consulted will be the elders of the family, who, in collaboration, will decide which solutions to choose. If *mo yao* is chosen, then *mae mueang* will be consulted and she will, assisted by her *luk mueang* and the family, prepare the required utensils for the *yao* ceremony in the home of the patient. In the initial phase of the *yao* ceremony the *mae mueang* will be sitting in front of the utensils inviting ancestral spirits to join for guidance and consultancy. When the spirit is present, the *mae mueang* will ask – using poetic speech and archaic Phutai language – what has caused the disease, simultaneously sprinkling rice on raw eggs (see **figure 7**). The answer from the spirit is interpreted by *mae mueang* by the way the rice has fallen on top of the eggs. The illness is mostly caused by another spirit that has been offended by the patient. *Mae mueang* will then invite the offended spirit to join the ceremony. When present, the spirit will be asked for the reason of offense and how to solve the problem. During bargaining with the spirit the *mo yao* will dance in a circle. If the spirit requires the patient to become a *luk mueang* the patient will attend the dance. But mostly the conflict is solved by offering food, alcohol, cigarettes, betel, sweets etc., to the spirits at their habitat in nature or the village. If the patient is cured within a month, then the session is over. If the patient is not cured within a month, then the *mae mueang* will repeat the ceremony. If it is still not successful at a third attempt, another *mae mueang* will be invited.

Types of spirits

Traditional concepts of spirit belief in the researched area count a wide range of spirits. Some spirits are malicious and feared, such as the *phi bob* (ผีโปบ) and the *phi tai hong* (ผีตายโหง). But the Tai⁵ spirits (ผีไท) – *mun* or *chuea* spirits (ผีมูน ผีเชื้อ), *mon* spirits (ผีมนต์), *far* spirits (ผีฟ้า), *nang Manora* spirits (ผีนางมโนราห์), *nang Ai* spirits (ผีนางไอ), *nong han nong khai* spirits (ผีหนองหานหนองคาย), *kaeo* or *kup* spirits (ผีแก้ว กุบ), *pu ta* spirits (ผีปู่ตา), *thala*

⁵ Not the nationalistic term Thai; note the different spelling and pronunciation.

spirits (ผีตลกา) – are all friendly and beneficial to humans if treated correctly; if not treated correctly, then they turn malicious and can cause illness.

Utensils

The utensils used by the *mo yao* are numerous. The *yao* healing ceremony requires 21 items. For example, ‘kantoke’ table, rice, raw eggs, alcohol, cigarettes, betel, three kinds of candles, sword, perfume, *champa* flowers, six one-bath coins, three pieces of silver, cloth, etc. The annual spirit ceremony requires an additional 34 items.

Musical instruments related to yao rites

Instruments used during *yao* rites include traditional musical instruments such as the string instrument, the *vina* (พิณ), the reed organ or the bamboo flute (แคน), and cymbals (ฆ้อง). Also implemented is the *mo kapip* (หม้อกะปิ๊บ), which is a cooking pot used as a drum.

Mo yao internal rites

Once a week, following the lunar calendar, the *mo yao* will perform offerings to the spirits at home on a pedestal, which consists of a shelf, the *hing mo yao*, located above eye level. Every new-moon and full-moon, the *luk mueang* will visit the *mae mueang*, presenting white flowers as a sign of respect. Once a year, during the ascending part of the lunar month in March or April,⁶ all *mae mueang* and *luk mueang* will gather for a two-day, one-night spirit worshipping. The main features include monotonous music and dance as a tool to get into trance, simultaneous with invitations to be possessed by the beneficial spirits listed above.

Mo yao and shamanism

Shamanism is a western term being brought to our attention after completing our report on *mo yao*. Literature studies indicate that *mo yao* is a kind of shamanism: “Shamanism can be described as a group of techniques by which its practitioners enter the “spirit world,” purportedly obtaining information that is used to help and to heal members of their social group.”⁷ Krippner also notes that, “any society may have one or more types of shamanic practitioners”.⁸ The role of women as shamans are often overlooked and we hope that our reporting on *mo yao* will provide other researchers with knowledge about this type of hitherto overlooked shamans.

Other parallels between *mo yao* and shamanism are monotonous chanting and drumming, ritual performances, and the use of symbolic ritual utensils. Shamans are widely known for their travelling to ‘the other world.’ The *mo yao* call the spirits to travel to ‘this world.’ Actually *mo yao* cosmology does not operate within ‘worlds’ – spirits live in this world together with us.

⁶ Except half-moon and full-moon days, which are Buddhist holy days.

⁷ Stanley Krippner, “The Epistemology and Technologies of Shamanic States of Consciousness,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 7, no. 11-12 (2000): 93.

⁸ Stanley Krippner, “Humanity’s first healers: Psychological and psychiatric stances on shamans and shamanism,” *Revista de Psiquiatria Clinica* 34, no. 1 (2007): 16.

We agree with Chilson and Knecht's suggestion that, "in treating psychosomatic disorders, shamans are capable of acting as mediators between humans and spirits".⁹ And, finally, we miss literature describing practical experiments integrating traditional wisdom (shamanism) with modern health care.

Discussion and conclusions

In this study *yao* healing is perceived holistically as a part of the Phutai health care system and critical to Phutai lifestyle and ethnicity. In the past *yao* healing was involved in every step of life; presently, *yao* healing is mainly for adults and the elderly. This study has therefore focused on how to teach the young generation to appreciate the wisdom of *yao*.

The Phutai community is rural, and the relationship among relatives is very strong. The young obey the elders, and the members of the community rely on one another. These are the main factors resulting in the fact that the *mo yao* healing tradition has survived at the village level, unlike in larger urban societies as seen, for example, in the Khao Wong municipality where people rely on themselves as individuals, not as part of a group. In the modern urban context, traditional knowledge transmission and learning from the elder generations to the younger generations has changed, resulting in a decline of, for example, *yao* healing. For a revival and continuation of the traditional Phutai health care system among the young generations, we propose the local governmental bodies to support the various kinds of *mo* healers morally, legally, and economically. We also propose that the government provide a new health care policy, integrating the traditional and modern health care systems. Otherwise, this and other crucial aspects of Phutai ethnicity will become extinct in the present era of globalization.

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Introducing Multilingual Thai-Isan-English Signage in a Thai University

John Draper, Khon Kaen University

Abstract

This article documents the introduction of multilingual signage in the regional university for Northeast Thailand (Isan), Khon Kaen University. Northeast Thailand is home to Thailand's largest minority, the Isan (Lao), who no longer have a written form of their language in the area. The introduction of Thai-English-Isan signage in an official Thai government institution is therefore important for the semiotic implications. The article begins with a short note on the importance of a sign and then reviews background information on the region, the language, and the University, together with the program responsible for maintaining and revitalizing the language. The importance of the mother tongue in education is then discussed. The article then reviews how the program can be situated within linguistic landscape theory before presenting an account of the design and installation of the signage, which comprised three multilingual Thai-Isan-English signs and employed an archaic Lao (and Isan) orthography, *Tai Noi*. Student attitude was assessed using an attitude survey through convenience sampling of students. Student attitude towards the tripartite nature of the signs and national identity was investigated using linguistic landscape theory, and a figure for the overall level of student support for the multilingual signage was obtained.

Keywords: mother tongue education, multilingualism, language attitudes, Northeast Thailand, Isan, language minorities, linguistic landscape

Background

The Significance of a Sign

This paragraph seeks to explain the significance of the signage in the study reported herein and is based on Chandler,¹ who provides an excellent entry into the world of semiotics. Briefly, the signs described in this article are the first Thai-Isan-English signs ever to be installed in an official Thai government institution, i.e., the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Khon Kaen University. In fact, they may be the first Thai-Isan-English signs ever to be created. At a very simple level, a sign signifies something. For example, a picture of a red Ferrari *denotes* (or shows) a red Ferrari. However, the *connotations* (or implications) of a picture (or video – the modality in this case not mattering much) of a red Ferrari are many: speed, luxury, wealth, a playboy type, a show off, etc. In the case of the signs reported in this article, in many cases the audience did not understand either the denotations or connotations of the Isan (using

¹ Daniel Chandler. *Semiotics: The basics*. (Florence, Kentucky: Routledge, 2001).

the *Tai Noi* orthography) in the signs. Many students did not understand what the script was and how to read it, or why it was there. The majority of young Isan people do not know they had a literacy before the Thai hegemony expanded to include the whole of the Khorat Plateau.² However, it could be interpreted that the multilingual signs had connotations of an 'imagined reality' or 'proposed world' in which Isan had a formal place in the education system and in the administration of public institutions. And, in fact, this is what has begun to happen. Perhaps because of the very high approval ratings for the multilingual signage, in mid 2011 the Khon Kaen University Office of Culture also introduced multilingual signs around its offices using *Tai Noi*. In March 2012, a major 540,000 Euro, four-year program of research-based pilot studies – 90% funded by the European Union and housed at the College of Local Administration at KKU – began with three of its four aims being the introduction of oral and written Isan (using *Tai Noi*) in Khon Kaen primary schools (aided by the Faculties of Education and of Humanities and Social Sciences at KKU), the creation of multimedia Isan-language listening materials (using *Tai Noi* for transcription), and the development of more multilingual signs throughout selected municipalities in Khon Kaen Province. After all, the connotations concomitant with the development of such signage imply readers, writers – and potentially the revitalization of an entire ethnolinguistic culture in a plurality-based education system which could see both the studying of historical manuscripts and the writing of new Isan epic poetry and literature. Right now, there are plans to adapt the main KKU North and South Gates' signs by adding Isan. Such signage could imply Isan becoming a mandatory university subject. The article therefore documents the very beginnings of what currently appears to be the nexus of a successful linguistic and cultural revival of Isan in Khon Kaen, one that could spread throughout relevant provinces in Northeast Thailand. The author believes it is therefore worth documenting.

A Brief Socio-Political History of Northeast Thailand

Isan, meaning 'Northeast', is the Thai (Sanskrit-derived) word for Northeast Thailand, the 20 provinces on the Khorat Plateau, a highly contested area which was for several centuries fought over by Myanmar, Khmer, Thai and Laotian kingdoms.³ Throughout the historical period, Isan for the most part formed part of a Lao Northeastern polity separate from Central Thai kingdoms such as Sukothai and Ayudhaya. Both the present Lao People's Democratic Republic and Isan once formed part of Lan Xang, a massive Tai/Dai polity created as a Khmer vassal state in the 14th century which achieved independence and temporarily incorporated the Tai/Dai kingdom of Lanna (Northern Thailand) in the 16th century.⁴ However, by the 18th century, after periods of subservience to Myanmar, the Lan Xang hegemony had splintered into the three kingdoms of Vientiane, Luang Prabang, and Champasak. After an abortive raid on Bangkok by King (or Prince, depending on the perspective)

² John Draper. "Inferring ethnolinguistic vitality in a community of Northeast Thailand". *Journal of Multilingual & Multicultural Development* 31, no. 2 (2010): 135-147.

³ Peter Rogers. *Northeast Thailand from prehistoric to modern times* (Bangkok: Suk Soongswang, 1996).

⁴ Nicholas Tarling, ed. *The Cambridge history of Southeast Asia* (Vol. 1, Part 2). (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Anouvong in 1826-27, the sack of Vientiane in 1828-29 saw the beginning of the end of the independence of these three Laotian kingdoms. By the end of the 19th century, all three were vassal states of Siam, though not directly administered outer provinces.⁵ Isan formed part of the kingdoms of Vientiane and Champasak until all territory west of the Mekhong was finally ceded to Siam in Franco-Siamese treaties in 1893 and 1907.⁶

Siamese influence in the Northeast since the early Ayudhaya period is testified to by the presence of certain Central Thai-style Buddha images, but Lao influence due to ethnic Lao population influx since the 14th century seems to have been greater.⁷ Central Thai bureaucratic influence did not extend beyond Khorat until the end of the eighteenth century, and then only in the form of tribute or protection to local rulers, who were allowed to use Thai gubernatorial titles.⁸ This situation continued until the annexation of the Northeast by Siam. The extension of Siamese influence encountered opposition within the Northeast. This includes two 17th century Khorat rebellions;⁹ apparent Isan acquiescence in the 1826 Lao uprising by King Anouvong of Vientiane;¹⁰ the Holy Man's Rebellion of 1902;¹¹ rebellions in 1924, 1936 and 1939;¹² and armed Communist Party of Thailand insurrection in the pre-World War II period.¹³

While the present political geography of Isan was achieved only after the Second World War, the Thai Rama dynasty was successful in establishing a kingdom resembling a nation state that included the Northeast in theory by the end of King Rama V.^{14,15} Then in the 20th century a combination of the education system and the bureaucracy were deployed in order to educate the regions in Thai political thinking oriented around the Monarchy, the Nation and Religion.^{16,17} This was generally successful in minimizing internal unrest in the areas in the Northeast bordering Lao, some of which became heavily involved in the ongoing communist rebellion in the 1960s, later incorporating student armed insurrection against the Central Thai government in the 1970s and 1980s.^{18,19} At the same time, Thailand began opening up to and interfacing with the world at large, partly due to the Vietnam War,²⁰ which brought with it a substantial US

⁵ Rogers, *Northeast Thailand*.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 205-6.

⁷ Vallibhotama 1990, cited in Rogers, 162.

⁸ Rogers, 190-1.

⁹ Rogers, 176-7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 194-6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 196-8.

¹² *Ibid.*, 211.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 212-3.

¹⁴ David K. Wyatt, ed. *Studies in Thai history*. (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 1994).

¹⁵ Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit. *A history of Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹⁶ Charles F. Keyes, "The proposed world of the school: Thai villagers' entry into a bureaucratic state system," in *Reshaping local worlds: Formal education and cultural change in rural Southeast Asia*, ed. Charles F. Keyes (Newhaven, CT: Yale University, 1991): 89-130.

¹⁷ Chayan Vaddhanaputi, "Social and ideological reproduction in rural Northern Thai schools," in *Reshaping local worlds: Formal education and cultural change in rural Southeast Asia*, ed. Charles F. Keyes, (Newhaven, CT: Yale University, 1991): 153-173.

¹⁸ Rogers, 215-20.

¹⁹ Tarling, *The Cambridge history of Southeast Asia*.

²⁰ Niels Mulder. *Inside Thai society* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2000).

military presence in the Northeast.²¹ The communist rebellion in the area reached its apex in the 1970s and had petered out by 1990.²² Nevertheless, in the late 20th century, Isan NGO opposition to perceived Central Thai corruption and abuse of human rights continued,²³ and from 1995, members of the Assembly of the Poor, an influential NGO originating in Isan, can be seen as having continued the conflict with central government bodies over local issues such as land, forests and rivers.^{24,25}

The last 15 years of Thai history have again brought tumultuous change, again centering on or directly involving Isan. The rise²⁶ and fall of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his *Thai Rak Thai* party and its successors²⁷ have been tied to populist policies successful in uniting the rural (and north/northeastern) regional polities behind a charismatic and shrewd modern businessman,²⁸ the apogee of Thailand's opening up to a full market economy. The 2008-2010 crisis is well documented and saw multiple governments fall while a 'red-shirt' movement based in the Northeast and the North established itself as a political movement loyal to former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, and a minority of the movement have apparently been prepared to both live and die by the sword, setting fire to buildings in Bangkok and provincial buildings in the Northeast (e.g., Khon Kaen Provincial Hall on May 19th) and incurring 85 dead and hundreds injured in the May 2010 street protests.²⁹ New elections in 2011 brought Thaksin Shinawatra's sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, to power along with *Thai Rak Thai's* replacement, *Peua Thai*, on a similar raft of populist policies to her brother's. The United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship or 'red shirt' movement that enabled this assumption of power is broadening to encompass whole political districts in what seems to be an attempt to create a long-term powerbase,^{30,31} though its ideological foundations, beyond poverty reduction and reduced taxation for middle income earners, are unclear. However, some of its leaders, such as Thida Thavornseth, are both former fighters for democracy and Communist Party of Thailand members, thus raising the specter of transboundary 'interactions' with neighboring communist countries – a specter not diminished by former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra holding a

²¹ Rogers, 216.

²² Baker and Phongpaichit, 197.

²³ Peter Vandergeest, "Constructing Thailand: Regulation, everyday resistance, and citizenship," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 35, no. 1 (1993): 133-158.

²⁴ Chris Baker, "Thailand's Assembly of the Poor: Background, drama, reaction". *South East Asia Research* 8, no. 1 (2000): 5-29.

²⁵ Bruce D. Missingham. *The Assembly of the Poor in Thailand: From local struggles to national protest movement* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2003).

²⁶ Baker and Phongpaichit, 258-260.

²⁷ James Ockey, "Thailand's 'professional soldiers' and coup making: The coup of 2006," *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 19, no.1 (2007): 95-127.

²⁸ James Ockey, "Introduction: Alternative explanations for the 2006 coup," *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 19, no.1 (2007): 5-19.

²⁹ King-Oua Laohong, Pradit Ruangdit, and Subin Kheunkaew, "Full investigation promised into riots," May 22 2010. *Bangkok Post*, p.1.

³⁰ *Isaan Record*, "In Udon, red villages grow into red districts," 19 November 2011. <<http://isaanrecord.com/2011/11/19/in-udon-red-villages-grow-into-red-districts/>> (18 June 2012).

³¹ *Isaan Record*, "One thousand red villages open in Isaan," 21 February 2011. <<http://isaanrecord.com/2012/02/21/one-thousand-red-villages-open-in-isaan/>> (18 June 2012).

meeting with Peua Thai MPs on April 11, 2012 in the Lao PDR,³² thus perilously coming close to closing the circle in Enfield's position³³ that linguistic differences between Lao, Thai and Isan identities are mostly subjective conceived differences, with Isan varying at times along an imagined line of continuity between Thai and Lao which at time appears to cause genuine cognitive dissonance, especially in Isan youth.³⁴

The Isan Language

Isan is the largest minority dialect or language in Thailand, with a population of around fifteen to twenty million ethnically Lao speakers.³⁵ It is described in more detail in Li³⁶, and Brown³⁷ describes three major dialects of Lao in Isan, Luang Phrabang, Vientiane and Sakon Nakhon. Jantao,³⁸ Akharawatthanakun³⁹ and Sansamak⁴⁰ have found clear language shift in the direction of Thai. Dictionaries for Isan, mainly by amateurs, also exist (for example by Phinthong⁴¹ 1989; Khon Kaen University and Sahawittayalai Isan⁴² 1989, and Mollerup⁴³). In terms of sociolinguistic attitudinal differences, matched guise tests by Chanyam⁴⁴ and Palikupt⁴⁵ found the Isan guise scored lowest in terms of factors such as beautiful and educated (where Standard Thai scored highest or second highest after Northern Thai) and highest in typically rural aspects such as hard-working and naïve.⁴⁶ In addition, Draper⁴⁷ found that a sample of Isan people saw themselves portrayed in the media as hard-working innocent comedians.

Isan has been written in a number of ways, often, but not always, decided by the subject matter. A good basic reference on the origins of Isan literature is Dhawat

³² Amy Sawitta Lefevre, "Exiled Thaksin inches closer to return to Thailand," 11 April 2012. *Reuters*. <http://af.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idAFBRE83A0XR20120411?sp=true>, (18 June 2012).

³³ Nick J. Enfield, "How to define 'Lao', 'Thai' and 'Isan' language. A view from linguistic science," *Tai Culture* 7 no.1 (2002): 62-67.

³⁴ Duncan McCargo and Krisadawan Hongladarom, "Contesting Isan-ness: Discourses of politics and identity in Northeast Thailand," *Asian Ethnicity*, 5 no. 2 (2004): 219-234.

³⁵ Martin P. Lewis, ed., *Ethnologue: Languages of the world*. 16th ed. (Dallas, Texas: SIL International, 2009).

³⁶ Fang-kuei Li, *A handbook of comparative Thai* (Hawaii: University Press of Hawaii, 1977).

³⁷ James Marvin Brown, *From ancient Thai to modern dialects* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1985), especially 90-1.

³⁸ Rattana Jantao, "Code-mixing between Central Thai and Northeastern Thai of the students in Khon Kaen province" Master's thesis, Faculty of Graduate Studies, Mahidol University, Bangkok, 2002).

³⁹ Phinnarat Akharawatthanaku, "Tonal variations and changes in a language mixture area: A case study of Northeastern Thailand (Isan)," In Thai. *Manusya* 5, no. 2 (2002): 30-51.

⁴⁰ Natthaya Sansamak, "A sociolinguistic study of address system in the Northeastern Thai dialect system in Muang District, Ubonratchathani Province" (Master's thesis, Faculty of Graduate Studies, Mahidol University, Bangkok, 2002).

⁴¹ Preecha Phinthong, *Isan-Thai-English Dictionary* (Ubol Ratchathani, Thailand: Siritham Press, 1989).

⁴² Khon Kaen University and Sahawittayalai Isan, *The Isan - Central Thai dictionary*. (Khon Kaen, Thailand: Siripan Offset, 1989).

⁴³ Asger Mollerup, *Thai - Isan - Lao phrasebook* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2001).

⁴⁴ Niramol Chanyam, "A study of language attitude toward Thai dialects and their speakers: A case study of four campuses of Rajamangala Institute of Technology" (Master's thesis, Faculty of Graduate Studies, Mahidol University, 2002).

⁴⁵ Deeyoo Palikupt. 1983. "Central Thai and Northeastern Thai: A linguistic and attitudinal study" (Ph.D.-diss., The University of Texas at Austin, 1983).

⁴⁶ Draper, 135-6.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 140.

Poonotoke.⁴⁸ Regarding the orthography, five main scripts that emerged from the migrations of the Southwestern branch of the *Tai-Kadai* ethnolinguistic group into the area of the present Lao PDR, the Khorat Plateau and Thailand in general were known as (a) *Vattellutu* (an ancient South Indian script from which aspects of *Mon* and *Khom* were derived); (b) *Tai Tham* (or Dharma script, a simplified script derived from ancient *Mon* for Buddhist religious material originally in *Pali*, perhaps using *Vattellutu*), with two main branches developing into the *Yuan*, or *Tua Muang* of Lanna, and the *Tham* of Isan;⁴⁹ (c) *Tai Yai*, representing the *Shan* language subgroup in Myanmar; (d) *Khom* – old Cambodian – which served a role in incantations, rituals and magic after the fall of the Khmer Empire and continues to do so in the modern era; and (e) *Tai Noi*, which appears to be a Sukhotai-period script “adapted from the fonts of King Ramkhamhaeng”⁵⁰ together with an influence from the *Fuk Kham* orthography of Lanna, itself possibly introduced to Lanna by a religious mission from Sukothai.⁵¹ All five scripts have been found on stone inscriptions as well as on palm leaf manuscripts.

Ronnakiat⁵² states with some confidence that *Tai Noi* derives from the time of the Sukhothai period King Lithai (r. 1347-1368) and notes that the earliest *Tai Noi* engraving was found on an inscription dated 1510. A paleography of *Tai Noi* and its spread from the Sukhothai sphere of influence to the Lan Xang hegemony, including the Khorat Plateau, was conducted by Poonotoke.⁵³ Apparently, *Tai Noi* was popular throughout the Sukhothai area of influence, throughout the area of the Lan Xang empire and its successors and in the more northern provinces of the Khorat Plateau right into the 1900s. It was mainly used for more secular purposes than *Tai Tham* such as stone carvings and for the writing of epic poetry such as *Pa Daeng*, *Nang Ai* and *Phayakhankhak*, as well as folk tales such as those of the trickster figure *Xieng Mieng* and Southeast Asian versions of Aesop’s *Fables*, although many of these stories were integrated into Buddhist religious literature.

Five characteristics of Isan literature evolving from the early literary period have been detected.⁵⁴ First, religion rather than the monarchy appear to have been responsible for spreading significant chronicles and didactic literature such as *Urangkathat* and *Khun Borom*, respectively, and for transforming local folk tales into Jataka religious tales and incorporating these into the *Pali* canon. Secondly, temples rather than the monarchy appear to have been responsible for creating an epic literature, such as *Sang Sinsai* and *Pu Son Lan*. In addition, rather than a code of laws, which the Thai kingdom of Ayutthaya was developing, it appears that traditional

⁴⁸ Dhawat Poonotoke. 1995. “A comparative study of Isan and Lanna Thai literature,” in *Thai literary traditions*, ed. Manas Chitakasem (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University), 248-264.

⁴⁹ Poonotoke, 1995, 253.

⁵⁰ Somchai Lamduan, Songkoon Chantachon, and Sittisak Jambadaeng, “The development of the alphabet, characters and orthography in the stone inscriptions of Isan,” *European Journal of Social Sciences* 22, no. 4 (2011): 531-535.

⁵¹ Poonotoke, 1995, 253-4.

⁵² Nantana Ronnakiat, 1992. “Evidence of the Thai Noi alphabet found in inscriptions,” in *The Third International Symposium on Language and Linguistics, Bangkok, Thailand*. (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, 1992), 1326-1334.

⁵³ Dhawaj Poonotoke, 1979. *Thai Noi paleography*. In Thai. (MA thesis, Department of Oriental Languages, Silapakorn University, Thailand, 1979).

⁵⁴ Poonotoke, 1995, 254-260.

seasonal customs such as *Hit Sip Song Khong Sip Si* and *Khong Khun Borom* dominated: 'Religious and didactic literature performed the role of societal control'.⁵⁵ Thirdly, non-religious literature such as *Khunlu Nang Ua* were effectively absorbed into Buddhist non-canonical materials such as apocryphal Jataka tales and, unlike Central Thai equivalents, did not stress a relationship with the monarchy. Fourthly, Isan literature such as *Sang Sinsai* served as a body of literature for chanted public performances at funerals, known as *Ngan Hua n Di*, and these were both entertainment and moral teacher. Finally, didactic religious-related literature typically chanted by monks taught societal beliefs and roles, including the role of the monarchy, for example *Thammada Son Lok*, in a more direct way than in central Thai works:

Didactic works in Isan such as *Kala Nap Mu Suai* teach people to fear the disappearance of Buddhism from the world. Other works in Isan include: *Pu Son Lan*, *Lan Son Pu*, *Inthiyan Son Luk* (which teaches women's behavior) *Phraya Kham Kong Son Phrai* (which teaches how various classes should interact in society), *Siri Canthowat Kham Son* (which chooses how to choose a proper mate) etc.⁵⁶

To conclude, following Poonotoke, we can see that Isan literature formed a temple-based system of oral and written literacy that included area-specific philosophical literature governing such issues as how evildoers, even of high status, can be overcome by supernaturally protected heroes; separation from the home due to inherited bad karma and overcoming this hindrance; and the blending of reality and the supernatural, such as *Phayakhankhak* and *Thaw Khathanam*. Finally, the Isan hero figure possesses specific abilities such as intelligence, a concern for the public weal and high moral values rather than good looks, the latter being feature of central Thai literature.

Returning to the issue of orthography, King Photsisarath of Lan Xang (r. 1520-1547) is credited with developing scripts that likely included *Tai Noi* in the direction of old Laotian (pre Lao PDR reforms),⁵⁷ King Narai's (r. 1656-1688) work on a Thai orthography⁵⁸ developed aspects of *Tai Noi* together with other scripts into a visually distinct orthography which eventually became modern Thai. Thus, the *Tai Noi* orthography is close in form to modern Laotian but generally lacks tone markers; it is comprehensible as an alphabet to a contemporary Lao citizen. However, modern Thai readers find the *Tai Noi* alphabet only partially comprehensible. Ronnakiat notes that *Tai Noi* was being used in Northeastern schools until the 1871 Primary School Act imposed Standard Thai,⁵⁹ and later reforms under King Chulalongkorn (r. 1868-1910) reinforced a standardized Thai script as part of monastic reforms in 1898.⁶⁰ *Tai Noi* was thus one of the last widespread orthographies of an Isan education system that was

⁵⁵ Ibid., 255.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 259-60.

⁵⁷ Lamduan, Chantachon, and Jambadaeng, 531.

⁵⁸ Ronnakiat, 1326.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 1326-7.

⁶⁰ Paisal Visalo, "Buddhism for the next century," not dated, <<http://www.visalo.org/englishArticles/nextcentury.htm>>, (19 June 2012).

temple based (but integrating secular folktales and epic poems) before the modern Thai nation state evolved.

Multilingualism in Khon Kaen

The study reported herein sought to investigate student attitudes towards multilingual Thai-Isan-English signage at the Faculty of Humanities at Khon Kaen University (hereafter KKU) in Khon Kaen City, the capital of Northeast Thailand. As of 2011, KKU provided 31 International programs and 11 English programs for approximately 34,000 Thai and foreign students.⁶¹ Thus, KKU is an international university with a large number of international students and faculties. KKU places a heavy emphasis on the promotion of Thai, English, and Isan. The promotion of Thai can be seen in the emphasis on a “national development-based university,” while the promotion of Isan can be seen in the emphasis on “strengthen the community and society,” “wisdom,” and “the arts, culture and heritage.” Finally, the promotion of English can be seen in the emphasis on “global development,” which assumes a university able to undertake international research in English, Thailand's first foreign language. However, according to anecdotal evidence, foreign visitors (e.g., academics, exchange students, casual visitors) and foreign faculty who come to visit KKU have problems in reading the signs within the campus because most of the signage is only in Thai.

In particular, this study represents the first time that a written form of the Isan language has been used in an official central government educational institution for over a century and publicly affirms a policy in favor of multilingualism and plurality, replacing Thai-only signage. This was anticipated to result in secondary effects both within KKU and the wider community, particularly in Khon Kaen City, in terms of centralized planning in favor of multilingualism and more attention on the Thai-Isan-English linguistic environment. For example, based on the study reported herein and on previous studies, the four municipal authorities of Khon Kaen Province – Ban Phai, Chum Phae, Phon, and Khon Kaen City – together with the College of Local Administration at KKU, have successfully sought 540,000 Euro in funding from the European Union for the installation of multilingual signage in their municipalities, for the revitalization of traditional cultural performances and weaving, and also for the revitalization of mother tongue Isan (Lao) literacy in the form of mother tongue education in municipal schools. The study reported herein was part of a wider program supporting such initiatives, the Isan Languages Maintenance and Revitalization Program (hereafter ILMRP), which began in 2003 and was affiliated with the Center for Research on Plurality in the Mekong Region based at KKU, before transforming into the Isan Culture Maintenance and Revitalization Program on March 1, 2012 upon reception of the European Union grant. The ILMRP previously conducted a survey of 300 inhabitants of a peri-urban community in 2007 as to whether they wanted the introduction of multilingual signage. This previous study found 86% approval.⁶²

However, determining the level of student support for multilingual signage was deemed critical before advancing the ILMRP further because, while the preceding study

⁶¹ Khon Kaen University, “Vision and mission,” not dated, <<http://www.news.kku.ac.th/eng/news/content/view/79/45/>>, (18 July 2011).

⁶² Draper, 141.

suggests a high level of support from a peri-urban community, basically composed of farmers, a knowledge of student opinion in particular was lacking due to systematic absenteeism on the part of students in the previous study. The ILMRP recognized that the attitude of the speakers, especially of the students and teachers of the languages, is crucial and worthy of academic study.⁶³ This is because the students of the languages constitute the most dynamic sector of the population and the future of those languages, while the influence of teachers on those students can be profound due to psychological effects. Huguet and Lasagabaster⁶⁴ note that the European Commission⁶⁵ sees the role of teachers as exponents of the principles of “openness to others, tolerance of differences and willingness to communicate.”⁶⁶ Teachers are therefore powerful mediators of the linguistic environment for students. Hence, studying the attitudes of students and teachers to the introduction of multilingual Thai-Isan-English signs in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at KKU was fundamental in order to discover how and whether official multilingualism could develop in the Thai context. Thus, student and teacher opinion was sought both to fill this gap in the literature and as an active part of planning for and effecting official multilingualism. It is anticipated that a similar study will be conducted in the future using an urban sample to complete the triangulation of the issue. In the present article, only the attitudes of students are reported. A short report concerning the attitudes of members of the Faculty can be obtained from the author.

Based on this rationale, four research questions were asked:

- (1) How do Thai students see the position of the Thai language within tripartite multilingual signage in which priority is given to Thai?
- (2) What is the attitude of the students to the English language on the signage and do they think it can help them to study English?
- (3) What is the attitude of the students to the Isan language on the signage and do they think it can help to preserve the local language, Isan?
- (4) What is the level of student support for multilingual signage?

The Issue of Mother Tongue Literacy

While the general international position is that mother tongue education is best, at least in the early years,^{67,68,69} the difficulties in acquiring literacy in the Isan language

⁶³ David Lasagabaster, “Language use and language attitudes in the Basque Country,” in *Multilingualism in European bilingual contexts*, ed. David Lasagabaster (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2006), 65-89.

⁶⁴ Ángel Huguet and David Lasagabaster, “The linguistic issue in some European bilingual contexts: Some final considerations,” in *Multilingualism in European bilingual contexts*, ed. David Lasagabaster (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2006), 234-251.

⁶⁵ European Commission, “Promoting language learning and linguistic diversity: An action plan 2004-2006,” 2003, <http://ec.europa.eu/education/doc/official/keydoc/actlang/act_lang_en.pdf>, (3 October 2007).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁶⁷ UNESCO, *The use of vernacular languages in education. Monographs on Fundamental Education* (Paris: UNESCO, 1953).

⁶⁸ UNESCO, *First language first: Community-based literacy programs for minority language contexts in Asia* (Bangkok: Author, 2005).

⁶⁹ UNESCO, *Mother tongue-based literacy programs: Case studies of good practice in Asia* (Bangkok: Author, 2007).

are quite apparent. The lack of a suitable living alphabet is one problem, resulting in a current L1 literacy rate of close to zero, the exception being some elderly monks and former monks. Nevertheless, there are very good reasons for supposing that the legitimization of Isan will increase general literacy levels. Siegel^{70,71} notes UNESCO's⁷² support for vernacular as a language of literacy and academic development, drawing on research demonstrating a link between literacy and cognitive development (such as the ability to reason critically) and first language instruction. As regards literacy in Thai, while the overall country rate is around 89%,⁷³ it is generally recognized that literacy rates outside urbanized areas in Isan are unsatisfactory. Legitimizing the vernacular through the introduction of a suitable orthography appears to be a valid method of increasing literacy rates. Notably, Siegel⁷⁴ and Boggs⁷⁵ found that the benefits of L1 primary education also extended to literacy in L2. In the Isan context, Isan now only exists as an oral language and so is only used in micro settings. This is despite the fact that the region of Isan itself is a multilingual setting where approximately 14 languages are spoken.⁷⁶ However, in formal written contexts Isan schools only use the L2 as there is no L1 literacy, and schools pay little attention even to developing oral skills in L1 as Isan is not a school subject. This, together with poverty and the lack of basic nutrition, may be at the root of Isan students' poor academic performance in formal written (L2) academic tests and low educational attainment.^{77,78,79} To sum up, the implication is that Isan children who were taught initial literacy in Isan, and who then studied Thai, would outperform Isan children taught only in Thai. Theoretically, this improvement would also transfer to subsequent languages, such as English. This provides one theoretical basis for expanding Isan literacy; others include the fact that students are likely to be more knowledgeable about their own history and culture.

Understanding the Relevance of the Linguistic Landscape to the ILMRP

The ILMRP, at the time responsible for erecting the multilingual signage within the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at KKU except for the main Faculty sign, which was installed by the Dean's Committee, operated (and continues to operate as the

⁷⁰ Jeff Siegel, "Creoles and minority dialects in education: An overview," *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 20, no. 6 (1999): 508-529.

⁷¹ Jeff Siegel, "Pidgins and creoles," in *The Oxford Handbook of Applied Linguistics*, ed. Robert B. Kaplan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002): 335-351.

⁷² UNESCO, 1953.

⁷³ Lewis.

⁷⁴ Jeff Siegel, "Mixing, levelling and pidgin/creole development," in *The structure and status of pidgins and creoles*, ed. Arthur K. Spears and Donald Winford (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1997), 111-149.

⁷⁵ 1985, cited in Angela Bartens, "The rocky road to education in creole," *Estudios de Sociolingüística* 2, no. 2 (2001): 27-56.

⁷⁶ Lewis.

⁷⁷ Pennapa Hongthong and Sirinart Sirisunthorn, 11 January, 2002, "Children IQ tests reflect regional divide," *The Nation*, <<http://www.nationmultimedia.com/home/CHILDREN-IQ-tests-reflect-regional-divide-54014.html>>, (18 May, 2011).

⁷⁸ UNDP, *Thailand Human Development Report 2003* (Bangkok: Author, 2003).

⁷⁹ *The Nation*, "Isaan being failed by inequalities in education system," July 28 2011, <<http://www.nationmultimedia.com/2011/07/28/opinion/Isaan-being-failed-by-inequalities-in-education-sy-30161350.html>> (29 July 2011).

ICMRP) within a language planning framework provided by Hornberger,⁸⁰ based on previous work by Harrmann,⁸¹ Haugen⁸² and others. The study reported herein can be seen within this framework as “status planning,” much as Backhaus⁸³ refers to status and corpus planning in the cases of the “linguistic landscapes” (LL) of Quebec and Tokyo. The ILMRP has also made use of Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory,^{84,85} for surveying and analyzing a large corpus of data.⁸⁶ However, given the increasing theoretical attention being given to what can be seen as a sub-discipline of branches of social sciences, cultural anthropology and linguistics,^{87,88} the author would be remiss not to consider how the present article can be situated within LL theory. The linguistic landscape is commonly defined as:

The language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration. It is the dynamic physical and social context in which people interact through language.⁸⁹

However, Coulmas⁹⁰ and Spolsky⁹¹ both appear to favor the use of “cityscape,” seeing the LL as an urban phenomenon, and Ben-Rafael, who sees the LL as a central, public focus of language facts (derived from “social facts”⁹²) containing crowds who create a public space, also apparently sees the LL as an urban phenomenon, influenced by

⁸⁰ Nancy H. Hornberger. 1994. “Literacy and language planning,” in *Sustaining local literacies*, ed. David Barton (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1994), 75-86.

⁸¹ Harald Harrmann, “Language planning in the light of a general theory of language: A methodological framework,” *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 86 (1990), 103-126.

⁸² Einar Haugen, “The implementation of corpus planning: theory and practice,” in *Progress in language planning: International perspectives*, ed. Juan Cobarrubias and Joshua A. Fishman (Berlin: Mouton, 1983), 269-290.

⁸³ Peter Backhaus, “Rules and regulations in linguistic landscaping: A comparative perspective,” in *Linguistic landscape: Expanding the scenery*, ed. Elana Shohamy and Durk Gorter (London: Routledge, 2009), 157-172.

⁸⁴ Real Allard and Rodrigue Landry, “Ethnolinguistic Vitality Beliefs and language maintenance and loss,” in *Maintenance and loss of minority languages*, ed. Willem Fase, Koen Jaspaert, and Sjaak Kroon (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1992), 171-195.

⁸⁵ Real Allard and Rodrigue Landry, “Subjective Ethnolinguistic Vitality: A comparison of two measures,” *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 108 (1994), 117-144.

⁸⁶ Draper, 2010.

⁸⁷ Durk Gorter, ed., *Linguistic landscape: A new approach to multilingualism* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2006).

⁸⁸ Elana Shohamy and Durk Gorter, eds., *Linguistic landscapes: Expanding the scenery*. (London: Routledge, 2009).

⁸⁹ Rodrigue Landry and Richard Y. Bourhis, “Linguistic landscape and ethnolinguistic vitality: An empirical study,” *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 16 (1997): 23-49; quote is from 25.

⁹⁰ Florian Coulmas, “Linguistic landscaping and the seed of the public sphere,” in *Linguistic landscape: Expanding the scenery*, ed. Elana Shohamy and Durk Gorter (London: Routledge, 2009), 13-24.

⁹¹ Bernard Spolsky, “Prolegomena to a sociolinguistic theory of public signage. In *Linguistic landscape: Expanding the scenery*,” ed. Elana Shohamy and Durk Gorter (New York: Routledge, 2009), 25-39.

⁹² Durkheim 1964/1895, cited on 43 in Elizer Ben-Rafael, “A sociological approach to the study of linguistic landscapes,” in *Linguistic landscape: Expanding the scenery*, ed. Elana Shohamy and Durk Gorter (London: Routledge, 2009), 40-54.

cosmopolitization via globalization. It is therefore interesting that the actual impetus for the installation of the signs at KKU derived from a survey of a semi-rural Thai community, which indicated an 86% approval rating for multilingual signs to be established in the community. This was similar to the percentage in the same study who wanted formal Thai-English-Isan multilingualism established in the local school. In fact, even in very rural areas of Thailand, in areas that are still developing, signage, both permanent and temporary, is quite evident in the form of sometimes quite massive signage both at the front of public agencies, including schools, and within them, and also in more temporary forms as roadside advertising hoardings and political billboards. Small village shops may bear advertising awnings, and temples also sometimes carry signs. This would support the position of Malinowski,⁹³ who notes that there is “a growing body of literature in modern-day media studies, cultural anthropology, language and literacy acquisition, and other venues that suggests that *all* communication needs to be understood as multimodal.” Thus, a traditional structuralist approach to the linguistic landscape is doomed unless it can account for language participants who may be concentrated in cities but who interact with and are interacted with by those in more rural areas in the form of networks. This may be particularly the case in developing countries where the barrier between urban landscape and rural landscape is porous due to both extended and disparate family groupings, and seasonal urban migration, as in the case of Thailand. In addition, televisions, SMS messaging and even the use of the Internet have penetrated many rural Thai villages, and text messaging has become widespread in political maneuverings.⁹⁴

Unlike in Backhaus' accounts,^{95,96} in the present study the authority in the *top-down* process^{97,98} is the Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at KKU, who is also the Head of the Center for Research on Plurality in the Mekong Region, the funding body for the ILMRP. Thus, the locus for the physical start of a maintenance and revitalization program is a university faculty. Turning to Backhaus' two subjects, in the case of Quebec, a government *Commission de toponymie* is responsible for implementing relevant pro-French legislation on signage⁹⁹ and for Tokyo local administrations, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, and the national government have issued a variety of instructions for languages on signage, including Japanese, romanized Japanese, English, Chinese, Korean and the Furigana Japanese orthography.¹⁰⁰ The dean mentioned above is also part of a network that includes the Dean of the College of Local Administration

⁹³ David Malinowski, “Authorship in the linguistic landscape: A multimodal performative view,” in *Linguistic landscape: Expanding the scenery*, ed. Elena Shohamy and Durk Gorter (London: Routledge, 2009), 107-125. Malinowski cites Finnegan (2002), Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), and Lemke (1998) in support of his position.

⁹⁴ Heike Hermanns, “Mobile democracy: Mobile phones as democratic tools,” *Politics* 28, no. 2 (2008), 74-82.

⁹⁵ Peter Backhaus, “Multilingualism in Tokyo: A look into the linguistic landscape,” *International Journal of Multilingualism* 31 (2006), 52-66.

⁹⁶ Backhaus, 2009.

⁹⁷ Elizer Ben-Rafael, Elana Shohamy, Muhammad Hasan Amara, and Nira Trumper-Hecht, “Linguistic landscape as symbolic of the public space: The case of Israel,” in *Linguistic landscape: A new approach to multilingualism*, ed. Durk Gorter (London: Routledge, 2006), 7-30, especially 10.

⁹⁸ Ben-Rafael, 49.

⁹⁹ Backhaus, 160.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 164-165

and the mayor of Khon Kaen city, both of whom are backing, together with other Khon Kaen Province mayors, the Isan Culture Maintenance and Revitalization Program, the successor program to the ILMRP. Thus, a very small network of influential figures is responsible for endorsing an inherently true *social fact*,¹⁰¹ i.e., that Isan people want both multilingual Thai-Isan-English signage and education, which has grown into what one branch of sociology would deem a *social field* in itself.¹⁰² In both the Quebequois and Japanese contexts, and in other LL contexts, it would be interesting to trace which committees headed by which individuals made the key decisions: “we seldom look at the process by which a particular sign is produced...What we need are more studies that will trace the decision back to the sign initiator; failing which we are risking speculation based on our own prejudices.”¹⁰³ The present study attempts to rectify that by making all decision making as open and transparent as possible.

However, in doing so it is drawn to Ben-Rafael's sociological approach, which in a post-structuralist approach views the LL as a gestalt or semiotic aggregate that is greater than the component of its parts. While the LL can be simply described in terms of symbolic and informational meaning, Ben-Rafael sees the LL as a structuration process in its own right, at first glance undefinable because of its a priori definition from each individual's own will, but in fact measurable both as a psychological *habitus* and as a sociopsychological *field* along the lines of Bourdieu. In other words, Ben-Rafael notes certain sociological principles can be applied to an LL item at a macro level. Ben-Rafael's first principle,¹⁰⁴ is “presentation of self,” which basically sees the actor behind an LL item or aggregate of LL items as competing with others in the public space. A second principle is the “good reasons” principle, a tendency for convergence that derives from the fact that those creating LL items to influence people necessarily are appealing to social classes' existing tastes.¹⁰⁵ The third principle is “collective identity”, which results from globalization, and accounts for how actors assert themselves (or not) in terms of forms of multiculturalism. The fourth principle is “power relations”, which refers to how one group of people may be able to assert themselves over another, and “may come about through the stronger party's imposition on weaker actors of a given language, or kinds of wordings or styles, thereby limiting the weaker in their use of linguistic resources of their own”.¹⁰⁶ We shall return to these principles later in the light of the results of the present study. For a micro level, we see 'nexus analysis' as in Hult's¹⁰⁷ reading of Scollon and Scollon¹⁰⁸ not as a theory of explanation but as a theory of description that can then be linked to Ben-Rafael's principles, as capable of

¹⁰¹ Ben-Rafael, 43, citing Durkheim 1964/1895.

¹⁰² Ben-Rafael, Shohamy, Amara and Nira; and Ben-Rafael, both citing Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinsky*, 31. *social critique of the judgment of taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

¹⁰³ Spolsky, 31.

¹⁰⁴ Derived from Erving Goffman, *Behavior in public* Bourdieu.

York: Routledge, 1963) and Erving Goffman, *Forms of talk* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981).

¹⁰⁵ Bourdieu.

¹⁰⁶ Ben-Rafael, 47.

¹⁰⁷ Francis M. Hult, Language ecology and linguistic landscape analysis. In *Linguistic landscape: Expanding the scenery*, ed. Elena Shohamy and Durk Gorter (New York: Routledge, 2009), 88-104.

¹⁰⁸ Ron Scollon and Suzie Wong Scollon, *Discourse in place: Language in the material world* (London: Routledge, 2003).

describing the physical details of the look of a place. Thus, nexus analysis is applied in this study where possible.

Finally, in the Thai context, the importance of the linguistic landscape is already well recognized. For example, Smalley,¹⁰⁹ in a large study of signs on the Charansanitwong, Yawarat, and Sukhumwit Roads, noted that Chinese store signs were particularly common on the Yawarat Road in Bangkok, with bilingual Chinese and English, Thai and English, and Chinese and Thai signs in evidence on all three roads. Huebner¹¹⁰ similarly investigated the multilingual landscape in Bangkok, finding a preference for the use of more English as a symbol of internationalization near and in sky train stations. Huebner¹¹¹ also noted there is a constraint on what signage can be constructed in the form of a piece of legislation that penalizes the omission of the Thai language on foreign language signs. Also, it appears to be a *presentation of self* principle¹¹² that Thai be prominent on official municipal, provincial and central government buildings, even in areas where the Central Thai language is a minority presence, for reasons of national ideology linked to the promotion of the national language from around 1909 onwards^{113,114} and cemented in position under the authority of a Buddhist King who is at the very 'top'¹¹⁵ of all Thai *social facts*, real (i.e., in the form of billboards of the King on overhead bridges) or unreal (in the form of a public sign). This King-Religion-Nation *social fact* is made more concrete by the creation of Thai as the national language by Prime Minister Field Marshal Pibul Songgram after his taking office in 1939 in his 9th *Rattaniyon* (dictat),¹¹⁶ which effectively doomed other orthographies except for Pali and Sanskrit, used for religious purposes. It thereby effectively sounded the death knell for the written Isan language.

Methodology

The research consisted of a mixed methodology research project that made use of three instruments. First, there was a custom survey (see **appendix 1**), partially derived from Draper,¹¹⁷ which was administered to 300 participants through the use of convenience sampling in and around the canteen of the Faculty of Humanities and Social

¹⁰⁹ William A. Smalley, *Linguistic diversity and national unity: Language ecology in Thailand* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994).

¹¹⁰ Thom Huebner, "Bangkok's linguistic landscapes: Environmental print, codemixing, and language change," in *Linguistic landscape: A new approach to multilingualism*, ed. Durk Gorter (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2006), 31-51.

¹¹¹ Huebner, 2006 and Thom Huebner, "A framework for the linguistic analysis of linguistic landscapes," in *Linguistic landscape: Expanding the scenery*, ed. Elena Shohamy and Durk Gorter (New York: Routledge, 2009), 70-87.

¹¹² Ben-Rafael, 2009, 45.

¹¹³ David K. Wyatt, "Education and the modernization of Thai society," in *Studies in Thai history*, ed. David K. Wyatt (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books 1994), 219-244, especially 242.

¹¹⁴ Charles F. Keyes, "The politics of language in Thailand and Lao," in *Fighting words: Language policy and ethnic relations in Asia*, ed. Michael E. Brown and Šumit Ganguly (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2003), 177-210.

¹¹⁵ Mulder, 110.

¹¹⁶ Keyes, 191.

¹¹⁷ John Draper, *The Isan languages maintenance and revitalization program attitude survey report*. (Khon Kaen, Thailand: Center for Research on Plurality in the Mekong Region, 2007).

Sciences. The survey was piloted in July 2009 and conducted in June 2010. The survey consists of 18 questions. The first five establish basic demographic data. Questions six to 12 address the ethnicity of the respondent. Question 13 asks if the respondent recognizes the Isan language component of the signage. Question 14 asks if the respondent is aware that there used to be an Isan literacy. Question 15 asks if the respondent would like to see more multilingual signage. If the respondent responds negatively or with a 'don't know' to Question 15, the respondent is shown pictures of multilingual signage at Chiang Mai University, the regional university for Northern Thailand, and re-asked Question 15 as Question 16. Question 17 asks how the respondent feels to see each linguistic component of the signage, while Question 18 asks if the respondent has any questions.

Secondly, there was an interview protocol for the senior members of the faculty (not included), and thirdly there was an observation protocol (not included).¹¹⁸ The field of research is an interdisciplinary one covering education planning (language education), anthropology (semiotics) and sociology (sociolinguistics).

Design of Signs

The design of the signs for the main study was facilitated by the Dean of the Humanities and Social Sciences deciding to replace the existing monolingual Thai sign of the faculty with a multilingual sign similar to the ones for the study. This led to two roughly parallel design processes with two different commissioning authorities, the ILMRP and the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences itself. While some of the design processes overlapped, the result was two different design paths. As can be seen from **table 1** below and the pictures of the signs themselves in **appendix 2**, the two different design paths resulted in two different sets of signs, which can be described in terms of two different *preferred codes*,¹¹⁹ or preferred ways to see the signs.

In the case of signs for the Student Union and canteen signs, pragmatic convenience influenced the choice of the sign material, i.e., wood, although the president of the Student Union, the designer, and the author's research assistant, also a Thai, strongly endorsed the use of wood as a 'natural' and 'warm' material that was more suitable for the canteen and for the Student Union. It is, however, terminologically a more *temporal* (less permanent) material.¹²⁰ The designer also rejected sharp angling, which is why both signs are irregularly shaped. The golden wood color of the sign and the white font were chosen as presenting a good contrast, and the golden color of the wood was seen as a warm color. The use of gold or red for the font or sign color was rejected during the design stage as being too 'Chinese'. That the Thai language was placed centrally was due to the fact that it was seen as needing more prominence, i.e., to maximize the indexicality of the preferred code, as can be seen in Kress and Van Leeuwen's triptych¹²¹ or in other words, an acceptance of the supremacy of the Thai nation state. The choice of the font as Angsana New, a quasi-official Thai font, was for

¹¹⁸ Based on Scollon and Scollon, 45-81.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 116-28.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹²¹ Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, *Reading images: The grammar of visual design*. 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2006), 197.

the same reason. English was placed above, and Isan below, the Thai in order to signify a peripheral code of modernity and tradition, respectively. These fonts were slightly adapted to appear somewhat similar to the Thai font during the engraving stage for purely aesthetic reasons.

The faculty sign presents a very dissimilar picture. Thai is again clearly the preferred code, as it is both larger than and above the other two languages, with Isan on the left and English on the right, again presenting an ideology portraying Isan as traditional with English as modern. However, the Thai font strongly resembles the Isan font in what may be a design feature intended to signify ideological unity. Also, the size and materials of the installation (metallic silver, chrome and marble), and even the arrow-like design of the sign, together with Isan to the left and English to the right, suggest a geopolitical ideology with roots in tradition but fully embracing modernity.¹²² Notably, the installation completion date for this sign was only three days before the Graduation Ceremony for the university, meaning that all students returning for graduation saw the sign, and anecdotal evidence suggests that many had their photographs taken in front of it.

Table 1: Design of the three multilingual faculty signs.

	CANTEEN SIGN	ST. UNION SIGN	FACULTY SIGN
Commissioning authority	ILMRP	ILMRP	Faculty Committee
Prestige level	Low	Medium	High
Location	<i>public space</i> above passage in <i>special use space</i> (canteen)	<i>public space</i> in passage in front of <i>special use space</i> (Student Union)	<i>public space</i> in front of main entrance to <i>special use space</i> (Faculty)
Approval for spelling / vocab	Faculty Thai Dept., the Venerable Suthep (July 24, 2009)	Faculty Thai Dept., the Venerable Suthep (July 24, 2009)	Faculty Thai / History Depts., the Venerable Suthep (July 24, 2009)
Design owner	Student Union	Student Union	Faculty of Architecture
Design approved	August 6, 2009	August 6, 2009	Design process given to Fac. of Archit. following August 11, 2009 meeting
Inscription (English)	“Please clear away your dishes after eating”	“Student Union of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences”	“Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences”
- English font	based on <i>Times New Roman</i>	based on <i>Times New Roman</i>	unknown
- Thai font	based on <i>Angsana New</i>	based on <i>Angsana New</i>	based on Isan font
- Isan font	<i>Tai Noi</i>	<i>Tai Noi</i>	<i>Tai Noi</i>
- Font color	white	white	metallic silver
- Font effect	engraved	engraved	embossed (raised)
- Font material	paint	paint	metal
- Sign color	golden brown	golden brown	grey
- Sign material	wood	wood	grey marble; metallic chrome adjunct (poles)
- Layers; other?	none; double sided	flowers at base	national / royal flags

¹²² Following Scollon and Scollon’s framework.

			(March, 2010)
Code (language) preference	Thai (larger, centered)	Thai (larger, centered)	Thai (larger, above other languages)
Secondary languages	English above, Isan below	English above, Isan below	Isan à English (left to right)
Installation date	September 3, 2009	August 27, 2009	December 18, 2009
Installation type	suspended from beam	suspended from cradle frame	free standing; on marble plinth
Approximate dimensions	35cm high x 1.2m wide; 2.75m above ground	frame: 1.7m high x 2.1m wide; sign: 35cm high x 1.8m wide	3.15m tall (w/o flags) + 35cm plinth x 6.07m wide
Approximate shape	irregular oval	irregular rectangle	trapezoid

Installation

The student union sign (appendix 2, **figure A**) was installed on the evening of Thursday, 27 August 2009, and the canteen sign (appendix 2, **figure B**) was installed on the evening of Thursday, 3 September 2009. Installation of the main faculty sign began on 17th November 2009 and was completed on Friday, 18 December 2009. Each sign was observed by discretely situated trained teams of student assistants using an Observation Protocol for a period of three hours the morning following the installation of the sign. The protocol was designed to capture the movement of social actors past the signs and to identify social interaction events. To this end, the number of social actors ('single' or 'with'), the gender of the social actor, the occupation of the social actor, the vector of action, the nature of interaction and any oral performances were recorded by hand on sheets of paper. This data was then entered into a spreadsheet and analyzed. Results are not reported herein due to the word length but are available from the author.

The student union sign (appendix 2, **figure A**) was installed outside and, if facing it, to the left of the Student Union. This area is an open passageway linking classroom buildings with the canteen of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. Following Scollon and Scollon's framework, the installation of the sign was therefore in a frontstage (or public) passage-style semiotic space between two special use semiotic spaces. It was also outside (and referencing) a public semiotic space from the point of view of students, but one that is also used for social purposes and is not commonly entered by teachers except with permission, thus possessing private characteristics. The sign reads "Student Union of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences" in English, Thai and Isan.

The canteen sign (appendix 2, **figure B**) was installed in a covered passageway directly connecting the drinks purchasing facility and the food ordering facility in the canteen at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. The canteen is a major hub for students and educators both from the Faculty and from other faculties. Following Scollon and Scollon's framework, the installation of the sign was therefore in a frontstage (or public) passage-style semiotic space between two special use semiotic spaces. The sign reads "Please clear your dishes away after eating" in English, Thai and Isan.

The main faculty sign (appendix 2, **figure C**) was installed on a grass verge between the Department of Sociology and Anthropology and the main entrance to the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. Following Scollon and Scollon's framework, the installation of the sign was therefore in a frontstage (or public) passage-style semiotic space between two special use semiotic spaces. The sign reads "Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences" in English, Thai and Isan. The Thai is at the top and in a larger font, with Isan below to the left, and English below to the right. The Isan font was based on an existing Isan font, and the Thai font was customized to match the Isan font to demonstrate unity. The letters are metallic silver raised on grey marble. The sign is approximately six meters long and is approximately 3.15 meters tall, atop a 35 cm red marble plinth, supported by posts.

Results of the Student Attitude Survey

Accidental (convenience) sampling was employed because of the difficulties posed by random sampling. In order to improve the reliability of the sampling, a large sample of 300 was elicited, and sampling took place from the 7th June 2010 to 14th June 2010 in and around the environs of the canteen of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. Student survey administrators who had previously been trained as part of a pilot study phase were employed. There were 247 female respondents (82%) and 53 male respondents (18%), from 35 different provinces throughout Thailand, but mainly from the major population centers of the Northeast. The respondents had a mean age of 20, which is to be expected from students in four-year degree programs. The respondents came from thirteen different majors in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. Post hoc testing using the figures for four years of student enrollment from 2007-2010 indicated that the representativeness of the sample was sufficient.

Ethnicity

In terms of ethnicity, the majority of respondents self identified themselves as Isan (63%), possibly meaning Lao Isan, though a significant number identified themselves as Thai (15%), perhaps meaning Central Thai, and 10% of respondents were Thai Chinese. Smaller ethno-linguistic groups including Thai Vietnamese (4%), Korat, a creole based in Nakon Ratchasima (1%), and Pu Thai (1%), a Tai language, were also represented, though in much smaller numbers.

As self reported ethnicity does not indicate exactly how Isan someone is, 'Isanness' was constructed as a composite measure of Lao identity, using a 10-point rating scale from 0-9. This scale was composed of: (a) self-identification as Isan, a psychological marker; (b) identification of Isan as the parental language when the student was absent, referring to the domain of the home; (c) the number of Isan grandparents (also home domain); (d) the use of Isan for dreaming, a psychological marker; (e) the use of Isan for thinking (cognitive domain), and whether or not Isan was reported as the language of the close friends of the respondent. The majority of the scale components had previously been tested by Draper and found to be satisfactory in terms of reliability.

Figure 1 (below) shows the frequency by response for this composite measure, and the mean for this value was 3.8, indicating that the average respondent probably

saw themselves as middling Lao. Similarly, while the mode was 6, indicating that a large number of respondents saw themselves as quite Isan, the second most common value was 0, reflecting the Central Thai, Thai Chinese, Thai Vietnamese and other minorities noted above.

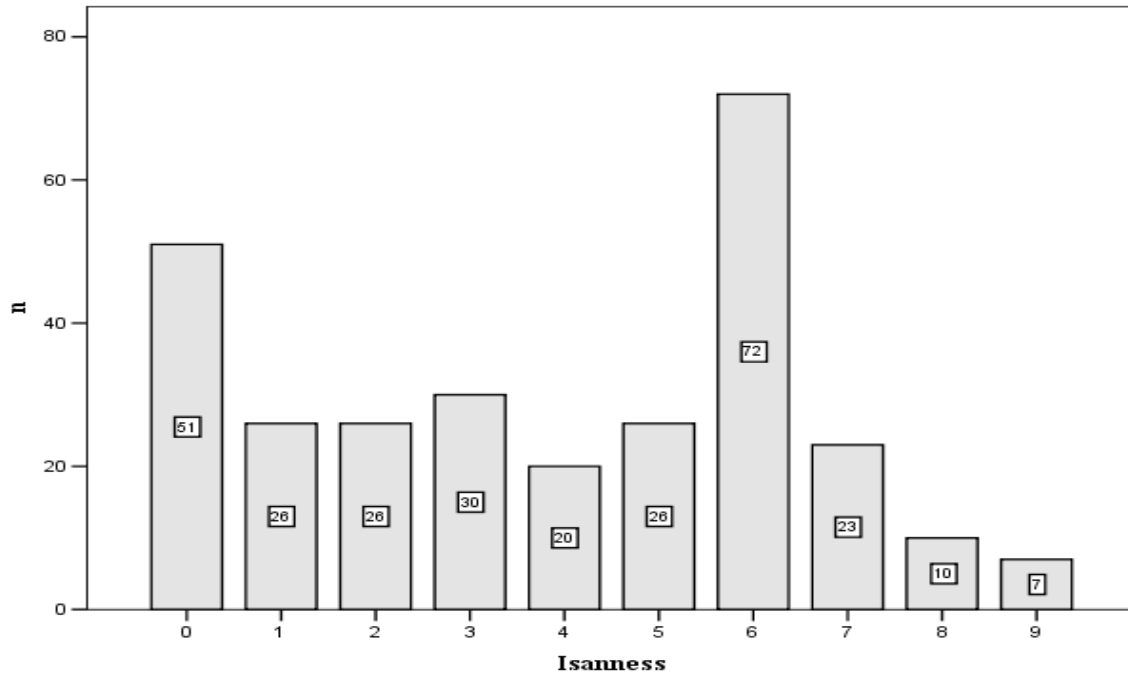


Figure 1: Isanness of respondents.

Recognition of the Language

Turning to recognition of the third language of the signs, i.e., Isan (Lao), using the *Tai Noi* orthography, 39 respondents who stated Thai, English or who gave no response were discounted. It was then found that the majority of the sample (83%) correctly identified the language or the orthography as either Lao, the Isan variant of Lao, or *Tai Noi*. It should be noted that this figure may be higher than in other locations as Laotian, Isan history and to some extent the Isan language are studied in the faculty.

Awareness of a Historical Isan Language

Turning to awareness of a historical Isan language, 219 respondents (73%) stated that they had not known that an orthography was used in Isan before Thai had been introduced into the region, while 79 respondents (26%) professed a knowledge of a pre-Thai orthography in the region, and two did not respond (1%). Even within a 'high Isanness' (Isanness ≥ 5) subset of the sample, only 25 respondents (18%) replied positively, thus indicating that the majority of Isan students had no understanding of

their own history in this area. The lack of knowledge confirms previous research findings suggesting that the younger generation is not aware of a previous literacy.¹²³

Receptiveness towards More Multilingual Signs

Moving to receptiveness towards the signs, in an initial response, 254 respondents (85%) indicated that they would like to see more multilingual signs, while 12 (4%) said that they would not like to see more signs, and 34 (11%) professed no idea. At this point, those who had responded negatively or neutrally were shown three multilingual Thai-Kammuang-English signs of Chiang Mai University, the regional university for Northern Thailand, where multilingual signage has already been introduced, and asked to reconsider. Following this step, 272 respondents (91%) stated that they would like to see more multilingual signs, while 11 (4%) replied negatively, and 17 (6%) replied neutrally. Thus, while only one respondent previously identified as negative switched opinion, 17 undecided respondents switched to a positive one, a total conversion rate of 39%. Thus, the provision of information showing that other regions are implementing multilingualism has an effect on opinion. In general, this high level of endorsement of Thai-English-Isan signage confirms previous research in a peri-urban setting, which found 86% approval when participants were informed of the Chiang Mai University signage.¹²⁴

Attitude towards the Multilingual Signs

Respondents were then asked about their opinion on the multilingual signs as well as on the individual languages on the signs. Two hundred and eighty five respondents commented on the multilingual sign, consisting of 267 who had expressed a desire for more signs and 18 who had expressed no idea or were against more multilingual signs. In both cases, while some comments were simple, others contained multiple semantic constructs. These semantic constructs were counted, and for the 12 most common constructs, the results are shown below in **figure 2**. In order of most expressed comment, 37% of respondents (n = 300) noted that the signs were good, or that they liked the signage, or so on. It is noteworthy that one frequently expressed sentiment (15%) made reference to the fact that the signs were preserving language, culture, or both. This concept of preserving local knowledge based systems was endorsed by official Thai discourse in 1997, as the *Eighth National Socio-economic Development Plan* which endorsed cultural pluralism rather than the previous model of assimilation,¹²⁵ with the Thai words *ekkalak* and *pahulak* representing these two concepts of assimilation and plurality.

¹²³ Ibid., 2007, 66.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 2010, 141.

¹²⁵ Theraphan Luangthongkum, "The positions of non-Thai languages in Thailand," In *Language, nation and development in Southeast Asia*, ed. Lee Hock Guan & Leo Suryadinata (Singapore: ISEAS, 2007), 181-194.

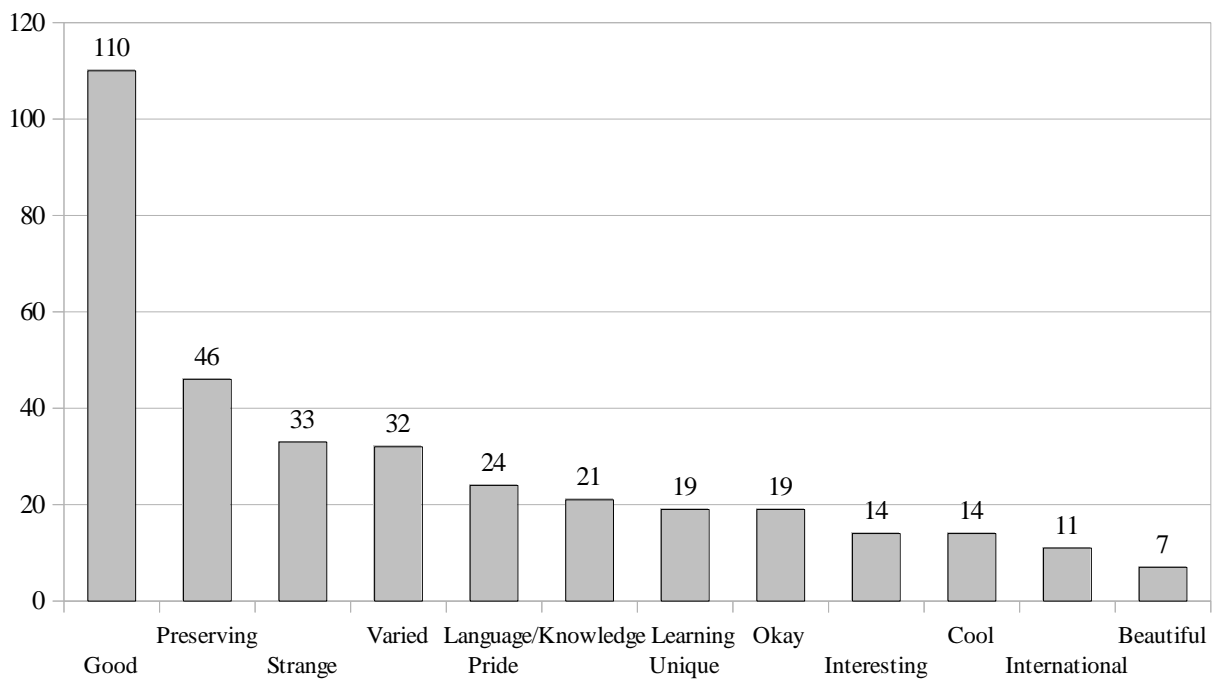


Figure 2: Comments on multilingual signs by respondents answering 'Yes' to more signs by semantic construct.

In addition, the *National Education Act of 1999*, in Section 7, refers to 'local wisdom', basically indigenous knowledge systems, in terms of developing a 'sound awareness' of it.¹²⁶ Indigenous knowledge systems generally refer to knowledge about the environment but can also refer to the linguistic environment, and it received special focus in *Agenda 21*,¹²⁷ developed out of the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development ('Earth Summit'), and strongly endorsed as a concept in Thailand.

Also of note, 11% of respondents noted that the signage showed variety or diversity in the form of many languages. Again, for reasons described above, the concept that diversity (*pahulak*) is worthwhile has been promoted in Thailand in recent years. Next, 8% of respondents stated that the signage made them feel proud, most obviously of being Isan. Pride in local languages is a natural result of promoting a discourse of diversity. Turning to the next construct, 7% of respondents stated that the signage aided in teaching them language (both Isan and English) or otherwise provided knowledge. This is noteworthy as this concept of using language to promote language learning is one of the perceived benefits of wider implementation of multilingual signage. This is also noteworthy, for as Shohamy and Gorter remark, "...not very much attention has been given to the effect of language displayed in public texts as sources for language learning. At the same time, it is very clear that little children start noticing signs in the public space at a very early age."¹²⁸ This study raises the possibility that language students at the university level may also benefit from multilingual public signage. Finally, and remarkably, only 4% noted the international component of the sign in this question. In this context, Thai concepts of modernity typically (but not always) stress

¹²⁶ Thai Ministry of Education, *National Education Act of 1999* (Bangkok, Author, 1999).

¹²⁷ UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *Agenda 21* (New York: Author, 1992).

¹²⁸ Shohamy and Gorter, 3.

that whatever is international is modern and therefore good.^{129,130,131} Finally, turning to those 18 who expressed negative or neutral comments to implementing more multilingual signage, even with these respondents four commented that the signs were 'good', while eight stated that they were 'okay'. A further two each stated that the signs were 'simple' or 'strange'.

Attitude towards the Thai in the Signs

In general, comments addressed the language rather than the orthography or design aspects of the sign. Of the total number of respondents (n = 300), 30% essentially stated that the Thai was good, while 12% expressed pride in being Thai. This sense of pride in being Thai is a common artifact of the Thai educational system.¹³² Of note, another 7% stated it was the national or official language. A further 6% noted that the sign expressed Thai uniqueness or identity. Another 5% noted that Thai was beautiful, while 4% noted that Thai sounded beautiful, both common sentiments about prestige languages.¹³³ Next, 3% noted that Thai was difficult, and that Isan people find Thai difficult has been reported on previously¹³⁴ and is evident in national test scores.^{135,136} Finally, 3% noted that Thai should be used correctly or lamented the fact that it was not being used correctly at present, probably a reflection of an ongoing Thai discourse focusing on the importance of the Thai language¹³⁷.

¹²⁹ Huebner, 2006, 33.

¹³⁰ Mulder, 5.

¹³¹ Vandergeest, 141.

¹³² Keyes, 1991, 2003.

¹³³ For examples of the Thai context see Chanyam and Palikupt.

¹³⁴ Draper, 2010, 142.

¹³⁵ National Institute of Educational Testing Service, "O-NET [English] Results of Year 2006 by Province" [ผลการทดสอบทางการศึกษาระดับชาติด้านพื้นฐาน (O-NET) ปีการศึกษา 2549 ระดับจังหวัด], not dated, <<http://www.dekchalad.com/fckeditor/editor/filemanager/browser/default/connectors/php/images/file/O-NET2548/O-NET2459/Test%20Result%20by%20Province/provinceEng.pdf>>, (18 December 2009).

¹³⁶ National Institute of Educational Testing Service, "Basic Statistics for the O-NET Results for Mattayom Six Students by Province for Year 2010," [ค่าสถิติพื้นฐานผลการทดสอบทางการศึกษาระดับชาติ (O-NET) ช่วงชั้นที่ 4 (ม.6) ปีการศึกษา 2553 จำแนกตามเขตจังหวัด] (Bangkok: Author, 2011). <<http://www.niets.or.th/upload-files/uploadfile/9/40faf7edfb767401bd0b85a4fb44cabf.pdf>>, (July 29 2011).

¹³⁷ For example, see *The Nation*, "Prem: Love Thai language," July 26 2007, <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/2007/07/26/national/national_30042558.php>, (18 July 18 2011).

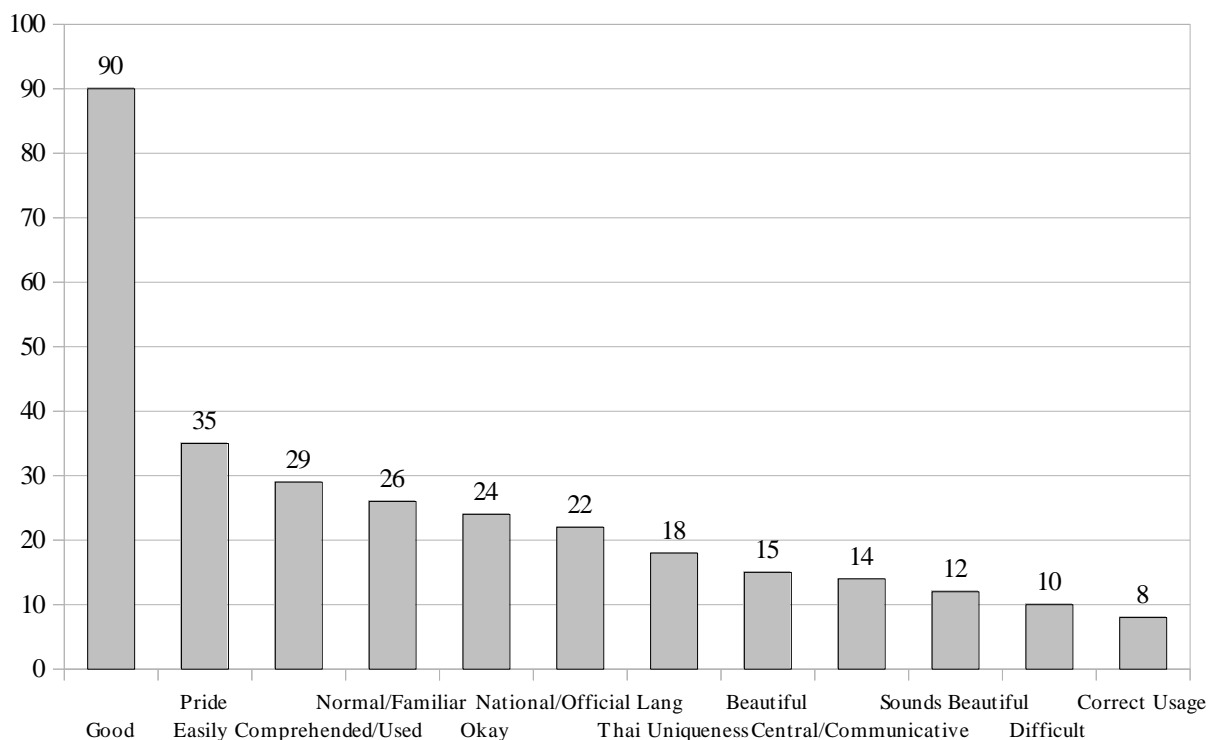


Figure 3: Respondents' comments on Thai by semantic construct.

Attitude towards the Isan in the Signs

Of the respondents, 285 commented on the Isan language, and a histogram of the 12 most common expressions is presented in **figure 4** below. As can be seen, 24% of respondents ($n = 300$) basically stated that they thought the Isan language was good, and a further 10% stated that they were proud of the Isan language; 9% stated that it was worth preserving, while 9% simply noted that it was the local language; 8% commented on the uniqueness of Isan, while 7% noted that it looked strange; 4% stated that it was interesting, while a similar percentage noted that it represents Isan. A further 3% each noted that it was 'fun' or 'funny' to speak or listen to, and in this context Draper found that Isan people saw themselves as frequently portrayed as comedians in the media,¹³⁸ a common perceived role for lower prestige language speakers.¹³⁹ Interestingly, a further 3% noted that the language was 'cute', a concept that may be related to the previous two but possibly more positive. Even more positive, another 3% stated that the language sounded beautiful. Compared to 5% for Thai, these two figures are surprisingly similar given the different statuses of the languages.

¹³⁸ Draper, 2010, 140.

¹³⁹ For example, see Tony Mitchell, Wogs still out of work: Australian television comedy as colonial discourse. *Australasian Drama Studies* 20, (1992):119-133.

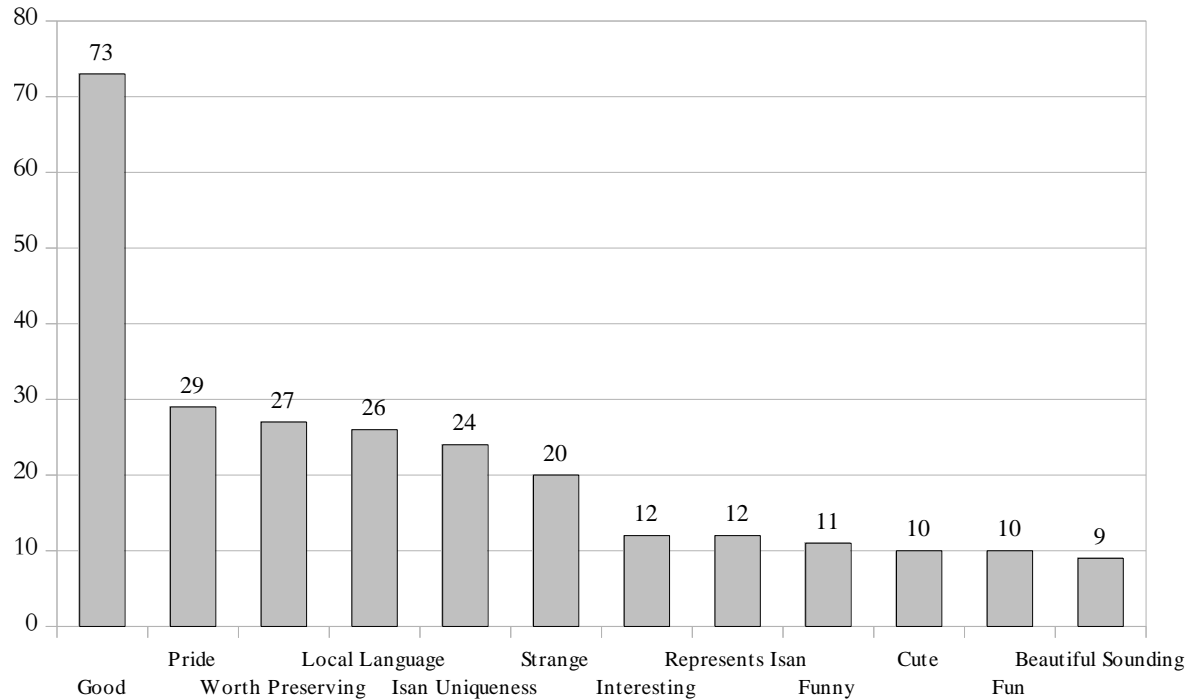


Figure 4: Respondents' comments on Isan by semantic construct.

Attitude towards the English in the Signs

Two hundred and eighty-one respondents commented on the English, and a histogram of the 12 most common expressions is presented in Figure 5 below. As can be seen in **figure 5**, 26% of respondents ($n = 300$) basically stated that the sign was good, while another 26% commented on the international nature of English; 8% noted that English should or had to be known, a reference to the fact that it is now a compulsory course in Thai high schools and universities, while 7% each stated that English was OK or noted that English was difficult; 4% noted that English provided knowledge or access to knowledge, while 3% noted that English was a language of communication; 3% each also noted that English was normal or that it would help foreigners, i.e., by helping them with identifying their location; 2% each stated that English sounded beautiful or was a second or other language, similar to the 'international language' construct. Finally, 2% also expressed the aspiration that they improve at English.

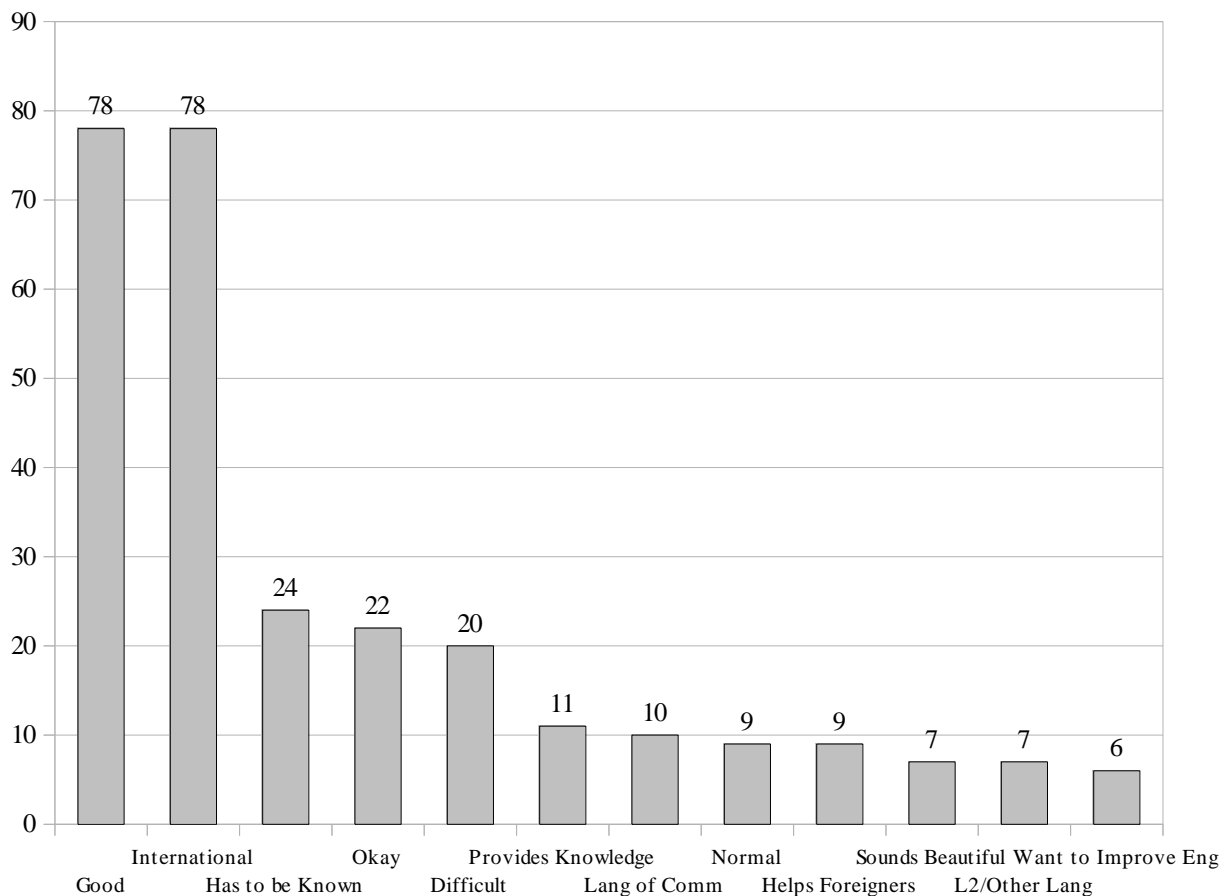


Figure 5: Respondents' comments on English by semantic construct.

Significant Effects

All initial 'no' or 'no idea' responses were recoded to 'not yes' and Pearson's chi square tests were performed, which found that neither gender nor ethnicity were significant indicators of response. Thus, other than two qualitative comments noting that the use of Isan was not official, it is not clear why some respondents did not want multilingual signage.

Discussion

Recalling the purpose of the study, the four research questions considered in this study were:

- (1) How do Thai students see the position of the Thai language within tripartite multilingual signage in which priority is given to Thai?
- (2) What is the attitude of the students to the English language on the signage and do they think it can help them to study English?

- (3) What is the attitude of the students to the Isan language on the signage and do they think it can help to preserve the local language, Isan?
 (4) What is the level of student support for multilingual signage?

These research questions are considered both in terms of Ben-Rafael's four principles¹⁴⁰ and with reference to Hult's nexus analysis, essentially the "discourses in place" (current discourses in society), "interaction order" (potential interpretations of signage from various perspectives) and "historical body" (the totality of individual experience).¹⁴¹ In answering the first research questions, the study clearly illuminated the fact that students valued the Thai language on the sign highly. The sample assigned it positive semantic values by expressing the sentiment that it was intrinsically 'good,' by expressing pride, and by expressing further sentiments along the lines that it was the *de facto* standard for communication, normal, or easily used. Some respondents explicitly stated that it was the official or national language, and others praised it for its aesthetic values, including uniqueness or beauty. In terms of nexus analysis, the signage was therefore successful in continuing or reinforcing individuals' conceptions of a state-backed discourse of the Thai language representing Thai identity, though on this occasion within a multilingual framework. In other words, it appears that sufficient respect was paid to Ben-Rafael's "collective identity" principle,¹⁴² i.e., that all the actors both creating, consuming and commenting on the sign were Thai citizens, as well as the "power-relations" principle,¹⁴³ as the primacy of Thai as a language was not challenged due to its prominence. Finally, those who stated that the Thai on the signs was beautiful may have been comparing the Thai to the other languages on the same signs or to other Thai signs in the University; in this case, the force of the "presentation of self principle" is unclear.¹⁴⁴ In terms of the "good-reasons" principle,¹⁴⁵ the Thai on the sign invokes a shared consensual patriotism through the King-Religion-Nation association discussed above.

Turning to the second question, interpreting the English aspect of the signage poses a complex issue. With reference to nexus analysis, many students saw it as intrinsically good, and others saw it as international, a positive interpretation of the sign reflecting Thai people's view of Western-derived modernity as generally positive or as a language of communication, a similar sentiment. Thus, it seems likely that the installation of the signage added to the creation of the discourse of Khon Kaen University being an 'international' environment. This interpretation is compatible with Ben-Rafael's "presentation of self" principle in that both the actors and the consumers of the sign appear to want to be seen as part of a globalized world that includes English, though whether as a status symbol or in this case as a means to acquire English is unclear. Stressing the international nature of the faculty, which is home to the Department of Foreign Languages (including English), may also highlight the faculty

¹⁴⁰ Ben-Rafael, 44-8.

¹⁴¹ Hult, 90-5.

¹⁴² Ben-Rafael, 46-7.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 47

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

being in competition with other faculties with bilingual or multilingual signs for student applicants. The “good-reasons” principle may also apply as within the last five years, a predominance of bilingual Thai-English signs have appeared in the University both to mark the location of faculties, other university buildings and road signs. Thus, the faculty sign may be seen as 'joining' for good reasons these other bilingual signs throughout the university. The “collective identity” principle is seen at work as the signs' designers, the faculties and the University itself all want to be seen as international, as referred to earlier. The “power relations” principle is evident in the design of the signage, with English being less prominent, but it is somewhat remarkable in that the students' comments on the English on the signage appear to be at least as positive as for the Thai.

It is also noteworthy that relatively small numbers of students volunteered statements indicating that the signage would help with learning. Nevertheless, the fact that some students did state that the English language provided knowledge or that the signage made them want to improve their English does provide some support for the hypothesis that the provision of multilingual signage could enhance English language ability through the provision of vocabulary. This relationship between the linguistic environment and language acquisition, including attitudes towards it, is worth further investigation.¹⁴⁶

Considering the third research question, some respondents clearly expressed sentiments indicating a belief or discourse that the signage in some ways represented Isan, including its unique nature, and the belief was also expressed by some students that the Isan language is worth preserving. Pride was also expressed in seeing the sign, as was the belief that the Isan language as expressed on the signage was implicitly 'good'. These sentiments can be seen as resting on individuals' historical bodies of knowledge. The signage, the first of its type in Isan, therefore appears to have been somewhat successful as an act preserving local values and customs, or in Ben-Rafael's terminology, the signage represents a significant effect with both a top-down and bottom-up dynamism that points towards the “collective identity” of the faculty including Isan language and socio-cultural identity. While a substantial number of respondents saw Isan as 'strange', 'cute', or 'funny', a number also reported on it sounding 'beautiful', a characteristic normally attributed to a prestigious language. The fact that the language is also seen as 'strange', 'cute', or 'funny' reflects the fact that a minority language is often seen as inferior, as noted above. Thus the installation of the signage is a bold step to announcing a “self perception' that is associated with Isan, as well as one that boldly challenges the “good reasons” principle, as it introduces a language on a sign that, in very few ways, is bound to consensual ideals for languages on signs, being the first such signs in the region of 19 million inhabitants. However, even here, it should be noted that the font style of the Isan and the Thai on the main faculty sign are deliberately similar, a decision made by the faculty committee in an attempt to ensure unity with the Thai font and to achieve harmony – an excellent example of the

¹⁴⁶ As suggested by both David Lasagabaster, “Language use and language attitudes in the Basque Country,” in *Multilingualism in European bilingual contexts*, ed. David Lasagabaster (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2006), 65-89 and Ángel Huguete, “Language use and language attitudes in Catalonia,” in *Multilingualism in European bilingual contexts*,” ed. David Lasagabaster (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2006), 17-39.

“good-reasons” principle. Conversely, the decision by the student designers for the fonts on the other two signs, to basically be written in their default orthographies but with prominence for the Thai, may be seen as a combination of respect for the “presentation of self” principle as well as the “collective identity” and “power relations” principles, given the lack of any kind of “good reasons” principle for such novel signage in the collective student consciousness. To sum up, it is clear that the use of Isan does not support a challenge by Isan people to Thai state ideology of the sort documented by Missingham.¹⁴⁷

Addressing the fourth research question, determining the level of student support for multilingual signage has been successful, given the extremely high endorsement of such signage evident in the results. This endorsement fills a gap in the general research and planning agenda of the then ILMRP noted in Draper¹⁴⁸ by providing evidence of the attitude of a younger, more educated and generally less rural constituency towards both the Isan language, and initiatives to maintain and revive it. That the great majority of respondents wanted to see more multilingual signage including Isan suggests that the signage should be seen as a successful first step to officialize the Isan language, thus making it a successful “status planning” initiative within Hornberger’s framework.¹⁴⁹ Basically, it confirms the support for official multilingualism in the domain of formal education of 75%¹⁵⁰ and multilingual signage of around 85%¹⁵¹ agreement in the community. It is therefore some way to confirming as a “social fact” that the majority of Isan people want more multilingual signage, possibly concomitant with the introduction of formal multilingual Thai-Isan-English education in schools, a discourse perhaps representative of the so-called ‘ethnic revival’ in Thailand.¹⁵²

To conclude, the development of multilingual signage and hence a more multicultural setting in the Faculty of Humanities at KKU is an initiative that is clearly welcomed by the student body. While not reported in detail in the present article, interviews with faculty staff detected a minority of somewhat guarded opinions towards the signage, in nexus analysis terms perhaps due to concern about asserting the Isan sociocultural identity on the public scene, a concern perhaps both related to ongoing discourses of Isan political aspirations as well as individual historical understandings of the roles of language in Thai nation building. In addition, more needs to be done to understand how private entrepreneurs see the use of Isan, and educational offerings that include the Isan language, need to continue to be offered. The president of the University should be consulted as to whether the installation of multilingual signage would be welcome more widely. Furthermore, it should be remembered that at the time of writing, Khon Kaen’s municipalities are implementing

¹⁴⁷ Bruce D. Missingham, “Forging solidarity and identity in the Assembly of the Poor: From local struggles to a national social movement in Thailand,” *Asian Studies Review* 27, no. 3 (2003):317-340.

¹⁴⁸ Draper, 2010, 144-5.

¹⁴⁹ Hornberger, 78.

¹⁵⁰ Draper, 2010, 141, at 75%.

¹⁵¹ Draper, 2010, 141,

¹⁵² Patrick Jory, “Multiculturalism in Thailand? Cultural and regional resurgence in a diverse kingdom,” *Harvard Asia Pacific Review* Winter (2000),

<http://hcs.harvard.edu/~hapr/winter00_millennium/Thailand.html>, (21 June 2012).

ways to give the Isan language higher prestige, and they are currently working on proliferating multilingual signage containing Isan as part of an initiative to maintain and revitalize Isan culture as well as to introduce multilingual education using the mother tongue. All these events and individuals in themselves are worthy of study as part of the interaction order of nexus analysis. To sum up, within the “field” of Thai identity, a chain of social effects is slowly emerging,¹⁵³ driven by a small but increasing number of powerful patrons, which stresses the Isan “collective identity” and which may one day see formal multilingual education in Isan emerge as a “social fact.” Progress in this field should attempt to track this emerging chain of structuration effects using all the sociological tools available, and it is hoped that the present study outlines how Ben-Rafael's theoretical principles¹⁵⁴ together with nexus analysis can be utilized in a brief analysis of results.

I would like to acknowledge a grant from the Center for Research on Plurality in the Mekong Region at Khon Kaen University as well as European Union Grant EuropeAid/131209/C/ACT/T, both of which made this research possible.

¹⁵³ Bourdieu, 1984.

¹⁵⁴ Ben-Rafael, 44-48.

Appendix 1: Student Attitude Survey (English Version)**ILMRP Multilingual Landscape Study: Attitude Survey**

Research Participant Number:

1) Age:	2) Gender:	3) Town & Province of Birth:	4) Faculty:	5) Major:
6) What is your ethnicity? (MAKE SURE e.g., Central Thai, Southern Thai, Southern Thai Muslim, Lanna, Sino-Thai, Vietnamese Isan, Cambodian Isan, 'Real' Isan, Pu Thai, So, etc.)				
7) What language do your parents speak when you're not there?				
8) How many of your grandparents come from Isan?				
9) What is the mother tongue (e.g., Central Thai, Chinese, 'Real Isan', etc.) of your				
a) Paternal grandfather:		b) Paternal grandmother:		
c) Maternal grandfather:		d) Maternal grandmother:		
10) What languages do you speak with your closest friends?				
a) Main language:		b) Other languages:		
11) What language do you usually think in?		12) What language do you usually dream in?		
13) SHOW SIGNS 'A', 'B', and 'C'. What language is the second language of these signs?				
INFORM LANGUAGE OF SIGNS				
14) Did you know that there used to be an alphabet used in the Isan region before Thai?				
YES <input type="radio"/>		NO <input type="radio"/>		
15) Would you like to see more Thai-Isan-English signs like this in the University?				
YES <input type="radio"/>		NO <input type="radio"/>		NO IDEA <input type="radio"/>
IF 'YES', GO TO Q17. IF 'NO' OR NO IDEA, SAY THIS: "CHIANG MAI UNIVERSITY HAS MULTILINGUAL THAI-LANNA-ENGLISH SIGNS." SHOW SIGN OF CHIANG MAI UNIVERSITY (D, E and F). THEN ASK...				
16) Now would you like to see more Thai-Isan-English signs like this in the University?				
YES <input type="radio"/>		NO <input type="radio"/>		STILL NO IDEA <input type="radio"/>
IF 'Yes', GO TO Q17. IF 'NO', GO TO Q18)				
17) How does it make you feel to see Thai-Isan-English signs?				
About Thai:	About Isan:	About English:		
18) Is there anything you would like to ask?				

Appendix 2: Faculty Signs

Figure A. Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Student Union sign.



Figure B. Canteen sign.



Figure C..Main faculty sign.



Ethnographic Snapshots: Field Perspectives on the Transformation of Northern Laos Between 1994 and 2008

S. Steve Arounsack, California State University, Stanislaus

Abstract

Since Laos opened its doors to tourism in 1990, the country has experienced major cultural and economic transformations. Less explored aspects of these changes are the “on the ground” ethnographic details that foreshadowed the forthcoming developments. Using experiences from Luang Prabang and Vientiane between 1994 and 2008 as focal points, this paper recollects specific events that elucidate several major themes: the pace of life, rise of the music industry, Chinese influx, tourism, and social interactions. I have been traveling regularly to Laos as a researcher and native son for over 15 years – a time period that spans my first trip as a high school senior through my initiation as a professor. This article employs a reflexive anthropological approach in its descriptions and interpretations. It is hoped that these ethnographic snapshots will illuminate details for scholars and the Lao diaspora to reflect upon.

Keywords: ethnography, Laos, fieldwork, development, Luang Prabang, Vientiane

Note: Names of certain individuals were changed to protect their identity and station in life. Where possible, exact dates are given; however, in some instances only the month could be recalled. While these experiences were shared with others, these perspectives remain solely my own.

Introduction

Like many young Lao-Americans hitting adolescence during the 1980s and 1990s, my only real connection to Laos were my parents. In the US, our Lao communities were like cultural islands: once we left, we spoke, ate, and acted differently. All I really knew of Laos was that it was where my parents grew up, it was a communist country, and it was far away. Stories of *samai gaow* (the old lifestyle back home) were recycled over and over, but never really absorbed by me or my siblings. My real education on Laos commenced when I first started traveling back to the homeland.

Laos was closed to tourism until 1990. During my first trip in summer of 1994, I saw that living conditions were far different than life in the US: English was rarely spoken outside of city business districts, guest houses were far and few in between, and telecommunication was not well developed. Fast forward to 2008. The old dirt road of Lan Xang Avenue in Vientiane is now pristine and paved, and showcases luxury cars that rarely turn heads anymore. Luang Prabang early mornings, which were once sanctuaries of solemn and private alms giving, are now tourist spectacles complete with blinding camera flashes and hordes of photographers jockeying for the best angle.

The transitions obviously didn't happen overnight, but it did happen relatively quickly in the span of less than two decades. Were there events "on the ground" that provided early clues to the forthcoming changes? This article will provide ethnographic snapshots that will elucidate the small changes that added up to some very big ones. What follows below is derived from experiences as a researcher and native son over a 15-year period (1994 – 2008). After sifting through roughly 50 hours of video and approximately 20,000 photographs, certain events stood out. Anchored by events in Luang Prabang and Vientiane, various themes of transformation are explored: development, modern music, the Chinese influx, tourism, and social interactions. Each section will provide details on how these aspects changed through time. This article employs a reflexive anthropological approach in its description and analysis (*i.e.*, an approach that will acknowledge not only my own subjectivity but the role I have played in shaping the events before me). It is not meant to be an exhaustive examination but rather a series of selective portraits that will engender a very specific recollection of Laos during a period of great flux.

Vientiane: First impressions and culture shock

Nineteen ninety-four was a series of firsts. The maiden return trip to Laos was a shock to my physical and philosophical systems. Processing Laos first meant adjusting to the climate, cultural cues, food, and time differences. Laos reintroduced me to my five senses.

(Vientiane, June 29, 1994). It was my first time back to Laos since I left at the age of three and my first time in Vientiane. Out of the airport, my senses were overloaded: it was bright, hot, and dusty, like a scene from an old western movie.



Figure 1: Activity along Route 13 near the Wattay Airport. (Vientiane, Laos, June 29, 1994)

We hired a *tuk tuk* (a motorcycle modified into a hooded, but open-air taxi) to take us to a friend's house near Wattay, somewhere just off Route 13. As we walked around, I didn't see any sidewalks and there weren't very many cars. Instead little scooters with entire families piled on them ruled the road. We had just arrived from Bangkok where traffic was the most congested I had ever seen; Vientiane, by comparison, seemed like an abandoned city. We stopped at a local shop to call friends back home to let them know we arrived safely. It was a quick three-minute call, but it left us USD\$20 lighter.

Over the next few days, relentless rains embraced the city. It came down hard against the corrugated tin roofs and seemed to readily flood neighborhoods and roads. The streets in Vientiane were getting muddy and filled with potholes; motorcycles were forced to slowly snake around each water hazard. The ground was an Earthy muddy brown and blended almost seamlessly into the old wooden homes and buildings. For the first time ever, I realized that it could rain and still be uncomfortably hot.

I was probably more American-Lao than Lao-American in the mid 1990s. My notions of freedom and social graces were very western because that's all I knew. My first few experiences in Laos bestowed an education no classroom ever could.

(Vientiane, July 13, 1994). "Put that camera down!" screamed the armed guard at the top of Patuxay, a monument in the city center fashioned after France's *Arc de Triomphe*. I was filming with my large VHS camcorder on the top level of the monument and panned over to the Prime Minister's office in a very casual manner when this guard raced up to me.



Figure 2: One of the last images I took with my VHS camcorder before a guard told me to stop filming. The city center was dusty and cars were sparse. (Vientiane, Laos, July 13, 1994)

I didn't realize there were restrictions on filming government buildings. I'm sure he was just doing his job, but he seemed overzealous and paranoid – we were in a public space after all. I stumbled for an explanation because my Lao wasn't very fluent. My mom then came to rescue and explained that I was just a naïve teenager who didn't know better and that she'd keep a closer eye on me. His tense expression eased and he let me off the hook. From this point on, it was clear that I had to watch my actions more closely. My mom became my new guard – she then confiscated my camera for the next few days.

(Vientiane, July 15, 1994). It was my younger brother's birthday. We were staying with my mom's close childhood friend, who was now married to a high-ranking government official. We called him *paw loong* (uncle) "Chanh." He offered to take us to dinner to celebrate. Driving up to the restaurant, I had a sinking suspicion that it wasn't a typical eatery because of the exterior. I never knew restaurants had bouncers at the door. But since my mom and her friend's teenage children were with us, I thought it was harmless enough. Inside it was dark. We were escorted to a large table because we had a big party; even so, the table seemed much larger than we needed. Uncle Chanh was charismatic and seemed to know most of the people there and was treated very well. We sat down and ordered a few sodas for underage teens like myself. We were getting comfortable when *lumvong* music (traditional dance tunes) starts up and the lights start pulsating different colors. Uncle Chanh smiles and starts clapping along. I found it very entertaining initially. Then he waves his hand to some employees. Four young girls – probably younger than we were – came out of the shadows to sit next to all the young men at our table. I froze because I didn't know what this meant. I looked to my mom for some guidance. She said they were just dance partners – it's fine. Uncle Chanh looks my way and whispers "you like?" I respond with an uncomfortable smile. We all proceed to the dance floor. My brothers and I are horrible at the *lumvong* and dance like stiff robots. The music finally stops and I thought it was the end of the awkward ordeal. No such luck. The young ladies follow us back to the table. Now the extra large table made sense. My Lao at the time was not good enough to engage in anything other than superficial talk – "how are you" and "wow, it's dark in here." The young lady assigned to me was friendly but seemed distant. There was really nothing connecting us other than obligation. We were both relieved when the dinner was over. Uncle Chanh paid for dinner and gave each of the girls a few dollars for their time. They politely respond with a *nope* (a greeting or sign of respect with clasped hands and a slight lowering of the head). To me, it felt awkward to have to pay for young women to dance and spend time with us. Uncle Chanh by all accounts seemed like a nice decent man—that's what made the situation even more disorienting. Was this type of behavior acceptable in Lao culture now? Perhaps I was too judgmental, but it didn't sit well with my sensibilities. As we left, my brothers and I looked at each other in disbelief.

Luang Prabang: Returning Home

It seemed as though I was traveling further and further back in time the closer I got to Luang Prabang. Bangkok was modern and crowded, and Vientiane was measurably less congested, but Luang Prabang, in my mind, languished in the past. From local accounts, it moved much slower and was largely resistant to change because of its World Heritage designation in 1995. This section articulates several dimensions of Luang Prabang's quick ascent as a popular tourist destination. More specifically, this section will capture the pulse of life by benchmarking events in the Baan Phan Luang neighborhood, Nam (River) Khan Bridge, markets, and along Route 13 from Luang Prabang to Vientiane.

Baan Phan Luang

(Luang Prabang, June 30, 1994). After a couple of days in Vientiane, we left for Luang Prabang by an old Soviet refurbished propeller-driven airplane. The ride was not smooth, and twisted my stomach into knots. We began our aerial descent into Luang Prabang. Being the rainy season, the waters were high and muddy. I didn't see anything resembling a town until the plane hooked around a small mountain. There it was. Etched along the Mekong River was a settlement of white buildings amongst a sea of lush greenery. This was home to all the stories from my mother's childhood.

The airport was small and antiquated, but I was so excited, I hardly noticed any of the details I usually pay attention to. Waiting on the other side of the customs station were strangers whose build and facial features closely resembled my mom's. It was as if half the town came to greet us. The caravan of *tuk tuks* and trucks made their way to grandma's house in Baan Phan Luang, which was no more than a few miles away. I scanned the lush green landscape and realized that while we were in the homeland, it was nowhere near the home I knew. The dirt road that led to the house was flanked by overgrown shrubs and trees and saturated with beach ball-size potholes.



Figure 3: The road leading up to grandma's house in Baan Phan Luang. (Luang Prabang, Laos, June 30, 1994)

My uncle said that officials had plans to pave the road leading up to the house, but for now it was a postcard of a jungle.

When we arrived at the grandma's house, swarms of kids and elders came to see us. This was the house where I was born and where my mom lived until we escaped. There must have been over 70 people – mostly relatives – waiting for us. They all knew our names. How could I possibly get to know all of their names? They knew us only through pictures and we knew them only through stories. From my perspective, there was an unusually high number of mobile elders in the neighborhood. They walked around spouting unsolicited advice, scolding kids, and brandishing betel nut-red stains around their wrinkled lips. It was clear that they were the cultural gatekeepers of traditions and of law and order. These observations gave me more insight into the attitudes and proclivities of elder Lao women in the US – this was their upbringing.

The house was in essentially the same condition it was in when my mom left in 1980. The walls were thatched and the roof made of rusted corrugated tin. It felt hotter than Vientiane for some reason, which didn't bode well when I realized that there were no modern amenities at grandma's house. It was the first night that I could ever recall being denied air conditioning.

We were severely jetlagged. For the first week, I consistently woke up at 2 am and slept for much of the afternoons. I drifted in and out of deep sleep because of the stifling heat and thin thatched walls. We could easily hear footsteps outside and virtually every baby and rooster in the neighborhood. It seemed like the same 70 people were there before we took our afternoon nap and when we got up. No one was in a rush to go anywhere. People just hung around. Didn't they work? Luang Prabang was a city without watches. My uncles wore watches, but I never saw any of them look at their wrists or ask about the specific time. Time had a different meaning here and the concept of "Lao time" began to crystallize for me. Gatherings were referenced by simply morning, noon, or evening, not a numerical time of day. And almost all greetings were initiated with *kin kow leaw bor* ("did you eat yet?")

(Luang Prabang, June 20, 1999). The street was void of much of the foliage that was present back in 1994. The diaspora was pouring money into Laos – the development race was on. We tore down the old house and constructed a new one in its place in 1995. We were planning on making regular trips there and wanted something more modern and spacious. We were among the first wave of diaspora to renovate residences for our extended family in Laos. In 1996, the house across the street was renovated and others down the street toward Muang Nga soon followed.



Figure 4: Grandma's newly remodeled house. (Luang Prabang, Laos, June 20, 1999)

The majority of houses in our neighborhood were very old. Grandma didn't really like the new house we built for her. She complains that the tile floors are too cold and hard; the stairs are too difficult to navigate and much too steep. The western style bathrooms were foreign to her. For her, bigger and newer was not better. She spends much of her time sitting on the ground in the front yard with her long skinny arms wrapped around her legs. Grandma banter with her lifelong friends as they pass by throughout the day. As evening descends, the arched silhouettes of elders shuffling around the neighborhood dissipate into the quiet evening.

The dirt road in front of grandma's house kicks up dust whenever cars or motorcycles pass by. She complains about the speed of vehicles and the increasing dust so my brother and I take turns watering down the street to keep the dust levels minimal. My uncle tells me that road conditions will improve and that they have plans to pave that road all the way down to Muang Nga. Rumors say they will break ground next year, but these rumors are almost five years old.

(Luang Prabang, December 5, 2004). More money was pouring into the neighborhood, however not only by the diaspora. The house across the street was rented out to a Canadian who was building a tutoring center of some kind. Most of the youth were happy to engage with the newcomers and learn spots of English. For the most part interactions with these long-term visitors were cordial. Several houses down, there was an Australian who regularly hosted late night parties. He even had a chained monkey living in the front yard. Not

everyone was pleased with partying, but oddly no one complained about the monkey.

Grandma became more frail and she found it increasingly difficult to walk to her beloved *wat* (temple), which was a mere 300 feet from the house. We rented a wheelchair for her from the hospital located downtown. I was excited to see her more mobile again. She found the contraption to be cumbersome and odd, but was thankful to be able to attend services at the temple again. I wheeled her around for the next few days before I had to head back to Vientiane to finish up some research.

The following morning I packed my things onto the truck. Goodbyes were never easy for grandma and it also became increasingly hard for me because of the growing bonds. She had never left Luang Prabang and never knew what the outside world was like. Her universe consisted of her 100 or so grandkids, her home, and the local *wat*. Each time we left, she said it was like we disappeared back into her memories. We were only real in her dreams and were merely voices that came from a telephone – still not real to her. I know it wasn't customary to show too much physical affection, but I hugged her anyway. Her frail body didn't allow her to hug me back. I touched her leg again before I left. It would be the last time I saw her. She died two months later. She lived to be 100 years old or close to it – no one could be certain since birth certificates at the turn of the century only existed as faded stories.

(Luang Prabang, June 20, 2006). Along with my mom and my then girlfriend, I walked to the temple where my grandmother was cremated. Five years ago, this *wat* had only one small building which was used as a common area for worship. With financial help from my mom and her childhood diasporic friends, the temple was now complete with quarters for the monks and the *mae kaows* (nuns that help with duties at the temples), a cremation facility, and a larger common area for rituals. The diasporic wealth of any one neighborhood can usually be measured by temple restorations and home renovations.

(Luang Prabang, August 10, 2008). The neighborhood was busier with more foot traffic. Students frequented the tutoring center across the street. We regularly saw tourists, which was surprising given that we were miles by foot from where most guesthouses were clustered. However, the street was noticeably quiet in another aspect: most of the elders – people of grandma's generation – had passed away. The arched silhouettes that guarded the quiet nights of decades past were now replaced by motorcycle headlights and giggling children. People stayed up later and were louder.

Things were different not only in the neighborhood but amongst my own family. My uncle lamented that even our own family, while large, didn't get together as often as when grandma anchored the family. Everyone was busy, and other than funerals and some weddings, it was rare to see all the cousins come together. In

the past, it was a daily routine for virtually everyone to check in on grandma and just hang out.

Fifteen years after talk about paving the road in front of grandma's house, it remains just that, talk.

The Nam Khan Bridge

(Luang Prabang, July 3, 1994). The most direct route from the airport to the inner city is to take Phetsarat Road through Muang Nga and cross the Nam (River) Khan Bridge.

It was early morning. My mom said that we were going to visit one of her childhood friends that lived on the other side of the Nam Khan in Baan Meaun Na, right where the bridge ends. We took my uncle's work truck across the bridge a few times already, but this was my first time walking across.

By the time we reached the bridge the morning fog lifted a bit. There were motorcycle and bikes making their way into town, but traffic was sparse. For pedestrians, there was a separate side rail. The walkway was constructed of wooden planks, some of which were missing. We watched our steps carefully. There were a few kids crossing back going the opposite way so we paused and gave way. The walkway is narrow and the handrails were a bit shaky, but otherwise sturdy enough. Kids scurried across the bridge as if they memorized all the patches where the planks were missing. We had a large group, probably about ten of us. As we marched across, the sound of the rocking planks clearly dominated the morning air save for the occasional squeaky bike and intermittent motorcycle.

(Luang Prabang, December 6, 2004). Cars and *tuk tuks* were no longer allowed to cross the Nam Khan Bridge because officials were worried about its structural integrity. Traffic was instead diverted across the Route 13 bridge passing by Wat Phol Phao.

I hopped on my bike around noon and headed into town to take a few pictures. Coming from Baan Phan Luang, I passed through Muang Nga. I took a right onto Phetsarat Road about to cross the bridge. After a few pedals, I had to stop and get off. There was a line of bicycles backed up almost 150 feet from the bridge. This was the first "traffic jam" in Luang Prabang that I had ever experienced. It was surreal. I finally got to the bridge and bicycles were slowly inching past each other, one lane going into the city and one lane coming towards the airport. Occasionally, I'd see someone struggling to balance his bicycle at low speeds and stumble off, causing even more havoc. After making it through to the other side, I pulled off to the sidewalk and just marveled at this bottleneck – something I thought I'd never see here.



Figure 5: A “traffic jam” at the Nam Khan Bridge. (Luang Prabang, Laos, December 6, 2004)

Markets

(Luang Prabang, July 2, 1994). During our first week in town, we stopped at the local shopping complex known as *talaat Dara*, located conveniently at the intersection of the Kisolat Road and Kingkitsarath Road. It was a “mall” of common household goods, electronics, pharmaceuticals, and clothes. Almost all of the goods sold were for local consumption, not souvenirs for tourists. It was easily accessible to most locals and was really the only major shopping complex in town. We got off our motorcycles and walked them up to a parking attendant who collected a fee of roughly ten cents to keep an eye on our vehicles. Shops closed shortly after dusk in Luang Prabang and the streets became quiet once more.

(Luang Prabang, December 8, 2004). My uncle said that there was a new shopping experience called *talaat mueet* (night market) that started in late 2002. It was an experiment meant to stir interest along the road in front of the palace, which was known to shut down shortly after nightfall.

As we pulled up to the four-way intersection of Kisolat Road and Sisavangvong Road, I saw a modest gathering of vendors. I expected it to be brighter and livelier. Instead there was a row of quiet light bulbs swaying from wires. Under dim incandescent lights were textiles, t-shirts, and odd trinkets like bottled snakes. There were probably no more than 20-30 tourists perusing through a street saturated with nearly identical merchandise. Footsteps were louder than voices. There was surprisingly very little chatter and the vendors didn’t make a

hard push to sell their goods. Most of the conversations I witnessed were good natured, but the lack of language skills on both sides of the bargaining made interactions choppy and brief. It was a subdued experience. In my mind, I thought that this market wouldn't last. I couldn't have been more wrong.



Figure 6: The famed night market during its early years of operation. (Luang Prabang, Laos, December 8, 2004)

(Luang Prabang, August 10, 2008). By now the night markets had become a hallmark of the Luang Prabang experience. The streets were buzzing with tourists and locals alike. They were heading in two different directions, however. The tourists were gearing up for the night market while the locals were buying food to head home. Vendors were noticeably more assertive in their negotiations. They stood firm on prices more so than in the past and many of the vendors were young with noticeably better English skills. The conversations were much more involved with funny jokes and lively banter. Many of the visitors picked up Lao greetings, numbers, and some were even conversant (to the surprise of some vendors). The young Lao and Hmong entrepreneurs were agile in their swift conversion of USD to Euros to Thai baht and back to Lao kip. Both sellers and buyers were evolving. We stayed until closing because we knew that's when vendors would make their best deals. We ended up getting several handmade pulp paper and flower lamps for 75 cents each. They started off at USD\$5.

Route 13

The 230-mile road from Luang Prabang to Vientiane along Route 13 remains one of the most affordable ways for locals and budget-minded tourists to traverse between two popular cities in northern Laos. Between 1999 and 2004, the road weathered increased traffic and anyone who has experienced the journey probably still remembers it, for better or worse.

(Luang Prabang, June 27, 1999). My brother and I stayed for a few weeks in Luang Prabang and decided it was time for a change of scenery. There were two options. A plane ticket cost about USD\$60 per person while a nine-hour bus ride cost only \$6. The outcome was becoming painfully obvious. We made the best of it so we invited our teenage cousins, “Phon” and “Vilay,” and a few others. Most of them had never been to Vientiane and this was a good time to show them the “big city.”

The busses seemed dated and didn’t convey a sense of confidence, but since the locals were regularly making the trek, I felt generally OK. We didn’t take the V.I.P. busses since they didn’t seem to be any better for the price difference. “V.I.P.” was interpreted very loosely around these parts. While there were a handful of European backpackers, locals made up the majority of the travelers. Rainbow-colored plastic bags were being tossed up to the roof to be secured. There didn’t appear to be any baggage restrictions in terms of weight or number. Seeing the fluid baggage handling gave me a better sense that operations were running smoothly.

After all the passengers loaded, a young uniformed officer armed with an AK-47 jumped on board. There had been a string of robberies along this route in recent years and the government took notice by providing some level of protection. I’m not sure how safe I felt since the gun was almost as big as the soldier. The engine started and we headed south. Vilay asked to sit next to the window – not a bad idea since I heard the vistas were spectacular. Blocking the aisle space immediately in front of us was a long outstretched white leg. That leg belonged to a laid back European fellow who took in the scenery with his partner. His leg was a war zone for mosquito attacks. There must have been hundreds of red bites riddled all over just that visible portion of his leg. Poor guy. We made a quick stop to pick up a monk who sat at the front, next to the driver.

We didn’t make it far when we encountered our first round of turns, dips, and inclines. Each gearshift shook my bones. Next thing I knew Vilay stuck her head out the window and started making awful sounds. Phon said that Vilay was known to *cai kow pbeak* (sell noodles) – that’s why she sat next to the window. The stench translated that metaphor for me. There were others who suffered motion sickness on the bus and joined Vilay in a symphony of selling noodles.

There were cars and other busses along the way, though not many. Around each turn, the driver would honk to signal our presence. The views along the highlands were as beautiful as the locals had described. The mountaintops looked like green islands amongst a sea of white clouds. I now understood why refugees longed to return to this part of the world.

Many hours and hundreds of turns later, we finally reached flat terrain. The symphony of people poking their heads out the windows had quieted down and those who were sick now had color returning to their faces. The monk sat in front the entire time without anything to lean on – quite an amazing exercise in physical and mental discipline. It was a long, exhausting nine-hour ride. I quietly noted in my journal that I would never take this journey again.

(Luang Prabang, December 22, 2004). I noticed quite a few more American and European travelers at the southern bus depot. The young Lao man selling the tickets spoke decent enough English to keep lines moving. It cost USD\$12 for each of our one-way tickets. It was a cold morning as my mom and I said our goodbyes and boarded the bus with my aunts.



Figure 7: The southern bus depot during an early morning. (Luang Prabang, Laos, December 22, 2004)

Five years ago, I noted that I would never take this bus ride again. Yet, there I was again due to financial constraints. This time I knew what to expect – or so I thought. We sat near the front so the smell of the “noodle-selling” would be behind us. I had my iPod charged up for the long haul. There was no armed

guard on this bus. I heard that attacks were rare and weren't cause for concern anymore.

The bus wasn't that full when we started so I assumed we'd have plenty of room to stretch our legs. Then every five minutes or so, we stopped for local passengers along the roadside who would pay the stern looking woman guarding the door. We must've stopped several dozen times in just the first two hours. At that rate, it would've taken two days to get to Vientiane. As the bus was getting more crowded, the bus attendants lined up small colorful plastic chairs in the aisle to accommodate the additional passengers. The entire aisle was blocked. We stopped at Phou Khoun, a small town about 75 miles from Luang Prabang. Local women came to the window to sell us packaged snacks and fruits. We needed to get out and stretch our legs and a bathroom break was much needed. The outhouse was unisex so there was a long line. The image from the inside of that outhouse was something that I couldn't wash from my brain and made me glad to be male. I felt bad for the ladies who had to use those facilities. Walking back to the bus, I notice a very modern and clean bus that was worthy of its V.I.P. title. Through the slightly tinted windows, I could see passengers smiling in their air-conditioned and spacious seats. Envy would be my companion for the rest of the trip. We picked up a monk who, like the previous trip years ago, sat in front without any back support. This time, he also brought with him a very large stone Buddha statue that blocked the entrance to the aisle. The bus was bursting at the seams with both earthly and holy passengers.



Figure 8: A bus ride from Luang Prabang to Vientiane along Route 13. The aisle of the bus being blocked a large stone Buddha. (Luang Prabang, Laos, December 22, 2004)

The combination of frequent stops and beeline of smaller private vans and trucks prolonged an already lengthy journey. Being a larger slower bus, we yielded the majority of the time. It took almost 11 hours to reach Vientiane.

Music

Songs emanating from Laos since 1975 tended to serve communist ideology or were iterations of old folk classics. Thai music was really the only source for anything new or modern, but in general music from the outside world was censored in public arenas. The youth yearned for more.

(Luang Prabang, July 3, 1994). My cousin Lung was the same age as me and we started to bond. His best friend Tuy – also the same age – joined us for practically all of our daily tourist excursions and would reconvene with us in the evenings for dinner and music. Beyond universal smiles, one of the first things we exchanged was music. At night we would huddle around an old Sanyo stereo and take turns inserting cassette tapes.



Figure 9: My cousins and I huddled around an old cassette player listening to Lao, Thai, and American music. (Luang Prabang, Laos, July 3, 1994).

I had my Richard Marx cassette tape with the hit song “Right here waiting for you.” My cousins recognized the song because of its massive worldwide popularity. They had access to bootleg American music and it showed. Some

belted out the chorus even though they didn't have a clue what the words meant. They probably thought the same when I sang in Lao. In the spirit of cultural exchange, I asked what new Lao songs were out and what was popular among the youth. My cousin popped in a tape. The cadence was modern, but the opening line that followed was not Lao. It was a song by Bird Thongchai, a popular Thai singer. I recognized it as Thai immediately and again asked for contemporary *Lao songs*. I thought they just heard me wrong. My clarifications were met with bewildered stares. Lung explained that there was no Lao pop or rock genre; in fact there was no “new” music in Laos. With few options that evening, Richard Marx and Bird Thongchai filled the warm air. While many of my cousins had a passing interest in learning English, Tuy had an uncommon eagerness in learning more about music, English, and American culture. He would play a crucial role in my research a decade later.

(Luang Prabang, December 9, 2004). I was looking for some new CDs to buy at the night market. CDs and VCDs were usually housed in simple plastic sleeves. I was expecting the usual iterations of old Lao classics or communist tunes. Browsing through the selection, there were a surprising number of new artists out. An array of young faces graced the CD covers, which were now housed in harder plastic cases. The older classics were still placed in the simple plastic pouches. There were a new record label FanFam from Luang Prabang and a burgeoning company named Indee Records from Vientiane. From the US, there was Sarky's first CD. Sarky is a notable Lao American singer who made “Sao on-line” one of the most recognizable songs among the diaspora. Genuine Lao CDs were marked with an official stamp. Thai CDs on the other hand were invariably copies and the paper sleeves were poor photocopies; the CDs themselves were generic stock CDs marked by simply a number. The Thai bootleg copies were going for about USD\$1. Lao music was more expensive at about USD\$1.50.

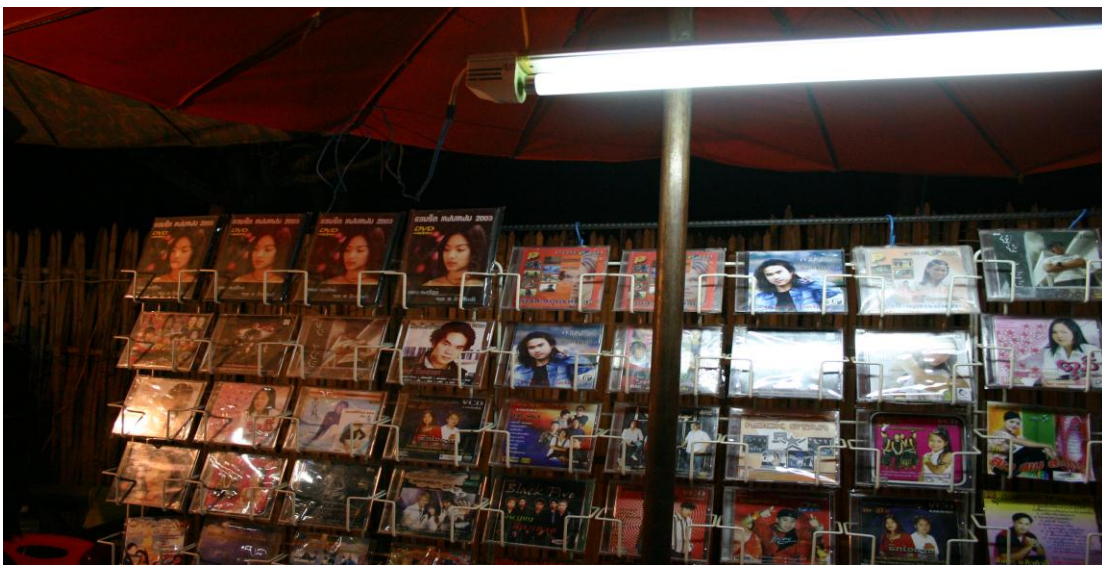


Figure 10: A typical stall selling both Lao and Thai music at the night market. (Luang Prabang, Laos, December 8, 2004)

I was conducting research on the Lao music scene in 2003, but most of it was focused on Lao American musicians. I didn't really think about Lao music *in Laos* until I heard the song *Mr. Hinsom* (a term used to describe a rock used to cleanse the body during showers). The group called themselves Overdance. New sounds began rocking Laos. Songs now had a western hip-hop cadence and from all accounts very catchy. My cousins in Luang Prabang and Vientiane were singing the choruses regularly in 2004.

(Vientiane, December 24, 2004). Huge billboards were advertising the Lao-Thai Friendship Concert, the largest concert at the time. I hadn't plan on attending until my friend Tuy from Luang Prabang, who was also involved in the music business, called me earlier in the week. He asked if I wanted to interview some of the performing artists during their pre-concert sound check the day before the actual performance. I thought it was a good opportunity, but didn't fully realize what a historic two days it would turn out to be. In the early evening, I hopped on a motorcycle with my cousin and we headed to International Trade Exhibition and Conference Center (ITECC) for a brief meeting with a rock band called Cells and some other young performers. We walked up to the convention center and much to our surprise, didn't encounter any type of security. I went inside alone with my camera and at first it was dark, but then I saw the large brightly lit stage and a sea of neatly arranged plastic chairs. The stage was professionally decorated with banners from various sponsors. I wasn't sure what to expect, but I certainly didn't expect Laos to be this advanced so quickly – maybe I was tainted by the small amateur “concerts” I had seen in old videos. I walked up to members of the group Overdance – I recognized them because they were the centerpiece on those huge billboards all over town. They were polite, especially Gai, the female lead. While they seemed to be enjoying their newfound fame, they also remembered the proper Lao etiquette of paying deference to strangers and elders. They called me “*ai* (older brother) Steve” because I was technically older, though probably not by much. Soon there was a crowd gathering around me – likely because I had a professional-looking camera and they knew I was from the States. They were as curious as I was. Sak, the lead of the band Cells, introduced himself with his signature raspy voice. He was very expressive and warmed quickly to conversations about Lao music. I asked them about their lives before music, why they entered the profession, and what this concert meant to them. Then this petite shy girl came up and introduced herself to me. Assertive, but not aggressive, she said, “Sabaidee, I'm Aluna.” Her accent was distinctly Australian and her English was very good. Aluna was obviously very intelligent and knew a lot about the world because of her international travels. I then met with Pet (nickname for duck), one of the managers for Indee Records, a new startup at the time. I spent a couple of hours chatting with everyone and filmed their preparation. I didn't see any other cameras there and it is quite possible that I may have the only footage of that pre-concert preparation. Before I left, Pet asked me if I'd like an all-access pass for the concert the next day. Of course I accepted. It was dark and the parking lot was

empty as I left ITECC. I was struck at how young everyone was, from the performers to the owners. The next day would prove to be even more noteworthy.

(Vientiane, December 25, 2004). I was up early getting my camera gear ready for the concert later in the evening. My cell phone rings. It's Tuy again. This time he had good news about someone who I had wanted to interview but never thought I'd ever meet. He had arranged for me to go to Alexandra Bounxouei's house right before the concert. Half Bulgarian, Alexandra is arguably the most famous singer from Laos. He said that there would be a driver – one of his friends – waiting for me in front of That Luang at 3 pm. There was a hitch: my mom promised my cousins that we were going to their house for lunch and their residence was a good distance from the city center. I negotiated with my mom and explained how important this interview was. Mom didn't seem all that impressed but she went along with it. Lunch runs late of course and I don't get to the That Luang parking lot until closer to four o'clock. I don't see anyone resembling Tuy's friend. Maybe I was late and they left – I wasn't sure. Then a red car rolls up and asks me if I'm "ai Steve." He was late, and together we were really late. I worked up an apology in my mind as we drove up to her Alexandra's home. Tuy's friend was really excited to see Alexandra in person as well. It was a nice home by any standard – I expected no less because of her stature. Alexandra strolls up to the gate and gently *nopes* me and says "sabaidee." I apologized for being so late, but she doesn't seem bothered by it and calmly reminds me of "Lao time" – people are always over an hour late for interviews she smiles. I wasn't used to such lax notions of time. She looks very young, even younger than her posters suggest. Behind her is her mom and we exchange greetings. We all start off speaking in Lao but then transition rather smoothly into English. I was impressed by her English. She even knew slang words. Alexandra was composed and had polished answers – to be expected because she had been doing this professionally since childhood. Our interview lasted for about an hour or so, then I was given a quick tour of her home and the adjacent studio where her father helps compose music. I knew my time was reaching its limit when her Japanese tutor arrived. She was already grooming her language skills to conquer Japan. Knowing that my friends and family would be skeptical, I took pictures to prove I was actually there. Before we left, the driver also wanted to take a picture with Alexandra. It was awkward, but I obliged and took a picture of him that he would never see because I had no way of getting him that picture. I thanked Alexandra and her family for their time. I was off to the concert at ITECC.

The parking lot – empty the night before – was buzzing with cars and motorcycles. The sun was setting, giving the dusty skyline a golden sheen. My cousin dropped me off again and as I walked up, I was amazed to see incredibly long lines. There was a sense of excitement of the unknown. People were getting anxious but remained orderly. This was the country's biggest concert ever and performing were two huge Thai singers, Parn and Dunk, and the country's first

real celebrity group Overdance. This time, there was security. In fact, they had airport-level scanners. Bags were put through conveyer belts and patrons had to go through metal detectors. I was allowed to skirt security because of my all-access pass. The first picture of the concert I took was memorable. The doors flung open and the first ticket-holders rushed in. I barely turned on my camera in time to snap a photo of young girls running to grab seats near the front.



Figure 11: The very first concertgoers rushing into ITECC during the Friendship Concert. (Vientiane, Laos, December 25, 2004)

I went backstage to chat with Cells, Aluna, and Overdance as they were about to make their debut performance. They seemed understandably nervous. But when they took the stage, they shook off the nerves and nailed their performances. That's not what surprised me though. It was the reaction off stage that made me take notice. The music was loud and the performances lively, but the crowd was very quiet, almost stoic. The crowd just didn't know how to react. Other than a few screams, the vast majority just stood and stared. Even the guards who should've been watching the crowd had dropped jaws and faced the stage. I'm not sure any of us knew what to really make of this unprecedented event. I just snapped as many photos backstage as I possibly could. After the concert, the singers invited me to their after-party, but I declined because my cousins were expecting me home as it was my last night in town. The morning after, the sun rose to find Laos awakening to a new era in music.



Figure 12: The audience reaction remains stoic at the Friendship Concert. (Vientiane, Laos, December 25, 2004)

(Vientiane, September 8, 2008). The city felt different. In four short years, the music industry was developing at a blistering pace. Dozens of new artists were being groomed every few months. Making my way through Vientiane, I saw huge posters of Aluna and Sak advertising for cell phone companies and other businesses. By now they were polished interviewees and were acclimating themselves to stardom. Aluna – that meek girl whom I met at the concert in 2004 – exploded in popularity. She came to the US in 2005 to tour for the E-Lao Concert series. Aluna returned home to a country thirsty for new music. In the early part of 2008, she earned the title of Female Artist of the Year at the first ever Lao Music Awards. Cells, the rock band I met along with Aluna four years earlier, won for Best Album and Best Rock Song.

(Vang Vieng, September 12, 2008). Aluna was busy when we were in Vientiane, so we instead met up at her family’s resort in Vang Vieng. We had become good friends over the years. Over a quiet dinner along the Song River, we reminisced about 2004 and how it all started. Aluna admitted that Laos is different because of the music. The youth now have a creative outlet. That makes some hopeful, but makes others nervous. She has a large following among the youth and is respected by the government. In fact the Lao government was comfortable enough to allow her to speak to Matt Lauer on NBC’s nationally broadcast “Today Show” in early 2008. In essence, she was the face of modern Lao music.

Chinese Influx

Over the last 150 years, many cultures have influenced Laos, of which the Chinese are just the latest – or perhaps the earliest depending on one’s interpretation of history. The Lao owe much of their ancestry to the Chinese in fact. The story of the Chinese in recent times starts with the French.

(Luang Prabang, July 8, 1994). Across from my cousin’s house, which also doubles as a tiny storefront, is the shoreline of the Nam Khan. On that shoreline sits a small well groomed home that was occupied by a Frenchman, “Jean.” He had a long-term lease and regularly interacted with his neighbors, even picking up the local accent.

As I sat there on a lazy afternoon at my cousin’s storefront, I inquired more about Jean. It wasn’t lost on me that Laos was a French colony or that there were vestiges of French culture everywhere, from the buildings to the food. I wondered what my cousins really thought about the French. When asked about Jean, my cousin said he was pleasant and well mannered. When I asked about the French in general, her tone soured: they were viewed as being arrogant and they *doo took kon lao* (looked down on Lao people). This gave me some insight as to how *farangs* (Westerners or Europeans) were really viewed. At an individual and personal level, there seemed to be warm acceptance. At the meta-population level, perceptions were driven by larger narratives of historical occupiers affronting Lao sovereignty. Also, there weren’t very many *farangs* at Luang Prabang at this time in the early 1990s. Numbers probably had a strong influence on perception. The French were largely contained and small in numbers. The next major wave of settlers came in much greater numbers.

(Luang Prabang, June 24, 2002). I needed a formal suit. My mom and cousins propose a visit to *talaat jeen* (Chinese market) because prices are rumored to be very cheap. The market is located across the street from the old soccer stadium in the southern part of the city. (An updated picture in 2004 shows the mall’s signage. See **figure 13**). As we browse through the different shops, I am surprised to see variety of goods sold: industrial machinery, spare car parts, old stereo sets, and an ocean of shoes. The Chinese vendors were segregated from the other Lao shops. Still, this was the first time I had seen so many Chinese in Luang Prabang. It seemed to have happened overnight. Even just a couple of years ago, I didn’t remember hearing anything about them. Locals only voiced their displeasure with the so-called Vietnamese influence and grumbled about former French occupiers.



Figure 13: The Chinese “mall” located across the street from the old soccer stadium. (Luang Prabang, Laos, December 17, 2004)

Now people were taking notice of the Chinese. What did they want? Why are they here? I had no idea. I was just there for a suit. As we entered the store, I saw only two people working: one salesman and a seamstress with an old sewing machine in the corner. We found their accent to be very thick and hard to follow. Their conversational Lao took patience to understand, but when it came to numbers, they were far more fluent. They were the only tailors in the complex so the prices weren't as competitive as we were lead to believe. We ordered two suits at USD\$50 each. Numbers are never lost in translation.

(Luang Prabang, August 26, 2008). It was a gloomy day. Raindrops tapped our helmets as we rode to the new university just north of Luang Prabang proper. Souphanouvong University was the largest institution of its kind north of Vientiane. As a faculty member from the US, I'd always been interested in the status of *gaan seuksa Lao* (Lao education). My cousin was a current student and I had another cousin who was a faculty member. Approaching the school's entrance, we were instructed to get off our scooters and walk them down the pathway. It's a way to slow down speeders and to keep tabs on people coming in. The buildings were crisp white. Some parts were still under construction but it was mostly completed. School was out of session so we roamed freely.



Figure 14: The cafeteria of Souphanouvong University. (Luang Prabang, Laos, August 26, 2008).

We were getting hungry and headed to the cafeteria, which still remained opened. We approached the entrance to see a doormat written in Chinese. The room was fairly large. Evenly spaced out on the tables were the usual comforting compliments of spices: chili sauce, *nam pa* (fish sauce), and *ka pi* (shrimp paste). We didn't see anyone looking to serve us so we headed to the small snack shop towards the rear. There was a young man who greeted us with an awkward *sabaidee* and motioned us to peruse the shelves. We gathered our materials and proceeded to check out. We asked the young man about the activity of the school. He looked blankly at us. Then my cousins asked him another questions. Blank stare. He looked confused and uncomfortable. My cousins and I looked at each other not sure why we couldn't connect with him. He muttered something in language vaguely familiar. It wasn't Lao – he was speaking a southern dialect of Chinese.

Tourism

Part of the allure of Laos is its charm, size, and quaintness. From 1975 to the early 1990s, however, very few knew where it was on a map and even fewer wanted anything to do with it. During the 1990s, the diaspora found comfort in connecting with the motherland. Soon thereafter major news outlets championed this hidden “Jewel of the Mekong.” No secret stays hidden forever. By 2008, Luang Prabang had become one of the most well-known tourist attractions in Laos and throughout Southeast Asia. The previous two decades have witnessed marked transitions in the number and types of tourists whose compasses have pointed towards Luang Prabang.



Figure 15: Crossing the Nam Khan Bridge in the morning. At that time, cars were still allowed to traverse the bridge. (Luang Prabang, Laos, July 1, 1994)

(Luang Prabang, July 1, 1994). It was my first foray into “downtown.” We took my uncle’s work truck across the Nam Khan Bridge on a foggy morning. It was eerily quiet. The monks had already made their rounds and residents retreated back to their homes. There were a handful of scooters on the road and few other miniature light duty trucks scattered throughout. Our Toyota truck’s engine was noticeably louder than any other sound. We slowly passed Wat Visoun, turned right at the four-way intersection and took another right on Sisavangvong Road (the street where the Royal Palace is situated). We stopped right in front of Wat Phou Si. On the way there, several things stuck out: the old French-style buildings, locals sweeping their residences, and *tuk tuk* drivers parked curbside, not in any particular rush. The languid pace of life was evident.



Figure 16: A street view heading towards Baan Visoun, near the three-way intersection. (Luang Prabang, Laos, July 1, 1994)

We began our ascent up the 327 steps of the famed hilltop temple located on Phou Si (also known as Wat Chom Si by the natives). Other than a Lao couple at the top, we were the only ones enjoying the view. It was breathtaking. We stayed long enough to see the fog partially lift, revealing the town yawning into consciousness. There was very little activity or traffic at all. Once back down to street level, we walked passed the Royal Palace. Small shops were opening up and the sounds of children emerged. The only language I heard was Lao, specifically the Muang Luang high-pitched variety. I didn't see one *farang* that entire morning.



Figure 17: An early morning view of the city from atop Wat Chom Si (commonly referred to as Phou Si). (Luang Prabang, Laos, July 1, 1994)

(Luang Prabang, June 28, 2002). Each time back, I try to make at least one trip up Wat Phou Si. It was early evening and I was gingerly going up the steps. About three quarters of the way up I see a group of Europeans coming back down. Behind them is their Lao tour guide. She's young and her English is competent. As her group takes a short break, I strike up a conversation with her and about her experiences as a guide. She's a native of Luang Prabang and she thought it would be a good way to make money while learning English and other new languages. The money is good – much more than she'd be making being a teacher or government worker. This made sense and I kept thinking that this could be a lasting trend.

By this time, I couldn't walk more than half a block along Sisavangvong Road without spotting Europeans. Most were adventurous, but lived modestly; practically all of their belongings were stuffed into backpacks (which they actually wore in front of them). Boutique hotels were propping up at an alarming rate. Still, most were cheap guest homes, ranging from USD\$15-40 a night.

The shops along Sisavangvong Road were eager to cash in on the burgeoning tourism industry. Part of the allure of Luang Prabang was that it didn't have the standard large commercial stores. They were mostly quaint shops run by locals.

(Luang Prabang, December 9, 2004). It's been said that Thailand looked to the West for much their inspiration for culture (music, fashion, *etc.*) but they rarely looked to their eastern neighbors in Laos for cultural insights. "Kanya" and her cadre of friends were young Thais in their late twenties who took an interest in Laos. I met Kanya back in the states a few years prior. She knew I'd be in Luang Prabang and asked if I could show her and her friends around.

They rented a van to accommodate all nine of them. The first night there, we went out to a restaurant near Wat Visounalath. The Lao waiters spoke to them in Thai, but Kanya and her friends tried to speak Lao in return. A good effort was made by both sides to make the other feel at home. The following day we visited the Royal Palace in the morning and took a narrow boat across the Mekong to Tum Ting, the site of the Buddha caves. During the entire time, they were genuinely fascinated with questions about Lao customs and the history of Luang Prabang. This enthusiasm went against much of the conventional narrative I had heard from my relatives in America and in Laos. It's been thought – and probably still is pervasive in many Lao circles – that Thais looked down on the Lao as backward and on Laos as a less developed nation. This trip by my young Thai friends certainly wasn't going to change those perceptions in one visit, but it was a marked departure from what elders had impressed upon me.

In 2012, the Lao government reported that Thai visitors make up roughly half of all incoming tourists to Laos.

(Luang Prabang, December 16, 2004). My Lao-French relatives were in Luang Prabang for the first time and since no one was available to show them around, I volunteered. I felt like I knew the town well after ten years. They were teenagers who spoke very little Lao and their mother, who was my first cousin, told me to keep a close eye on them. We took a *tuk tuk* into town and walked around Sisavangsong Road waiting for the night market to get started. It was nearing sunset when I asked if they'd like to enjoy a serene and peaceful vista atop Wat Phou Si. The speed of their young legs reminded me of my first trip up this hill a decade ago. I had to stop a few times to catch my breath and each time I did, I had to step aside to allow tourists to pass me by. They were already at the top waiting for me. Instead of enjoying a low-key evening watching the sunset, we were busy looking for an unobstructed view and simultaneously ducking under cameras as everyone tried to get their postcard shot. It was standing room only.



Figure 18: Sunset atop the famed Phou Si. Scores of visitors vie for the perfect view. (Luang Prabang, Laos, December 15, 2004)

(Luang Prabang, June 29, 2006). My girlfriend and I walked down Sisavangvong Road through the night market looking to get a foot massage. As we were getting our feet washed, my masseuse calls me by my Lao name "*ai Khath*." I was surprised because I didn't recognize her. Her name is "Joy" and she lives around the block from me in Baan Phan Luang. Joy said she was very young when I first came back to visit in 1994 and she remembered the fanfare of that initial visit. We chat while she massages my feet and I am again reminded of how small this town really is. For all the changes, the locals are still working in the area. Joy is grateful for the ability to make money, but being a masseuse was not high on the

list of dream jobs. She helps to support her family and eventually wants to go to school although she realizes that's not likely given that she's making good money now. School would mean a pay cut. Towards the conclusion of the massage, she says that Europeans tip well and that Asians tend to be less generous. I'm not sure if that was meant for me to ante up, but I paid her almost double what the rate was to show my appreciation.

Our feet felt great. We started walking back towards the night market. Locals tended to show up early, not to necessarily shop but to chat with vendors who were either their relatives or friends. After a while, only tourists remained. I couldn't help noticing a new breed of tourists in Luang Prabang. They were dressed in pleated khakis and crisp ironed shirts and blouses. These were the type to stay in fancy hotels ranging from USD\$75-300 per night. While backpacking expats were still roaming Luang Prabang, there was definitely a new clientele that decorated the city. In speaking with the night vendors, they seemed to welcome this new breed because they didn't haggle much with the prices.

(Luang Prabang, August 26, 2008). Locals by now were used to seeing tourists of all stripes, sizes, and colors. They would come and go. A new type of visitor had more long-term aspirations.

It was a typically warm, beautiful evening. Along with my cousins, my wife and I took a leisurely stroll down Khem Khong Road, which hugs the contours of the Mekong River. The night market was setting up and we made our way to the food stalls where Kosalat and Sisavangvong Road intersect. I separate from the group looking for a thirst-quenching orange shake. I see a vendor with a line forming – usually a good sign when locals crowd any one area. I order two shakes. As the young woman starts to blend the oranges, a tall Caucasian resumes their on-going conversation. He was polite enough to only continue talking when she wasn't taking orders from customers. I was curious to see what he was doing in Luang Prabang – vacation, visiting friends, work? His name was Justin and he hailed from Colorado. He didn't seem that surprised when I spoke English to him. We sidestepped the line and continued chatting after my drinks were made. He shared with me his passion for teaching science and mentioned that he'd love to come back to spend more time in the country. Justin had been there for a few months already and for him, Laos was more than a tourist destination. He found ways to connect with the Lao and found genuine happiness there. I was somewhat skeptical because I had seen so many foreigners romanticize their brief stint in Laos – but invariably they come and go. Justin was persistent, but polite – traits that would serve him well here. We exchanged contact information and headed our separate ways.

A couple years later, Justin started up Village Science, a group whose mission is to inspire Lao youth through meaningful science education. Justin currently resides in Vientiane and considers Laos his "home."

The French were one of the first outsiders to settle in Laos over last 150 years. When Laos opened up in 1990, the diaspora were one of the first entrants. They eagerly flew back to reconnect with family. The first type of tourist I saw were the roaming backpackers in the mid 1990s, then came the refined vacationers. Word spread and by early 2000, scores of guesthouses and boutique hotels welcomed visitors from western countries who had more refined tastes. Thais and East Asians (South Koreans, Chinese, and Japanese) then took an interest in Laos early in the millennia. By 2005, the casual tourist gave way to socially conscious entrepreneurs who saw more lasting roles in Lao society. This type of visitor is becoming part of the societal fabric in Luang Prabang. They stay for months at a time, sometimes years. Some even marry locals. The ones I know have followed their passion in life, be it non-profit work or starting a business.

Lasting Impressions

(Vientiane, December 23, 2004). I heard the new *talaat saow* (the famed morning market) had changed considerably since my last visit. I decided to have lunch there with one of my aunts. We cruised down Lan Xang Avenue and found it to be clean, but busy. It still welcomes visitors to a beautiful view of Patuxay. I saw tourists at the top of Patuxay taking videos and posing for pictures. Those playful images stood in stark contrast to my 1994 incident when I was sternly reprimanded for taking the same footage. Now those videos are openly – and proudly – displayed on YouTube.com. *Tuk tuks* shared the road with Mercedes Benzes. Teenagers either had their fingers texting or their cell phones glued to their ears.

My mom and I were at the old morning market to shop for a few *sinhs* (traditional waist-high sarongs for women). I'd been through this bargaining drill countless times before at this very complex. Foreigners – even Lao Americans – usually don't get great deals because of the high markups. My aunt who's a native was willing to bargain for us. But it's like the vendors have a sixth sense about such games; some have become adept at snuffing out the use of locals for bargaining. It's a cat and mouse game. We kept a watchful eye but keep a safe distance from the action. Both parties were coy about their price points. The conversation was polite, but fairly cut and dry. There wasn't the usual light-hearted banter of decades past. In less than ten minutes, it became clear there would be no middle ground. We left with our money and they were left with their merchandise. My aunt lamented that bargaining had become less flexible and these vendors largely catered to *farangs* because they can get more – there was little need to haggle down to the bone with locals anymore. But maybe this was just Laos stretching its free market legs. It's difficult to fault someone wanting to get more for their goods. The price was more than what we were comfortable paying so we decided to spend our money on food instead.

(Luang Prabang, August 20, 2008). My plane arrived. I shove my bags on the luggage cart and head out with my wife to wait curbside for our ride. My relatives were never late in picking us up so it was a little odd this time around. This time only two uncles picked us up. There was no fanfare. It didn't come as a total surprise though: in each

successive trip back, the welcoming party dwindled in numbers. In 15 years, I had been back numerous times so maybe my presence wasn't noteworthy anymore. People were busy with families and earning their livelihood. Luang Prabang moved faster now; people don't have the leisure time that they once enjoyed. I joked with my uncles that on my next trip I'd probably have to walk home from the airport. They laughed at the outlandish thought. I have another major trip planned in 2013. I'll have *tuk tuk* fare ready just in case.

Discussion

At the time of these events, I had virtually no idea that they might serve as micro-benchmarks of larger processes. It is only with decades of deep reflection with my mom, natives, colleagues, and friends that I am able to contextualize these field experiences. In doing so, I have gained greater clarity into my own biases and have evolved to become less judgmental about the changes happening in Laos. It has been constructive to conceptualize development in Laos, not so much in broad terms, but through an ethnographic prism of the average citizen. When larger trends are coupled with an enhanced understanding of ethnographic details, researchers can better wrestle with the notion of change on a more holistic level. Academic theories and the societal frameworks they attempt to generalize are stripped of their vagueness. Only then can both tragedies and triumphs become anchored in the reality of ordinary Laotians.

At the most basic level, any meaningful change must usher in opportunities for the average Laotian. One scenario that comes to the forefront of my mind deals with my cousin Phon. On a hot July afternoon in 1994, I crawled into a little hut at the rear of my uncle's house. What greeted me was a mound of shredded tobacco. Behind the mound was my cousin Phon who couldn't have been more than 10 years old at the time. Her little fingers were quickly rolling the shredded tobacco into the shape of cigarettes. Next to Phon was a stack of hundreds of neatly packaged cigarettes just about as tall as she was. I was shocked to see that children had to enlist for this type of work because of the lack of opportunities. I held back from making any judgmental comments, but that frustrating feeling of helplessness stayed with me for some time. By 2008, Phon was an articulate young woman who worked hard to learn English and eventually earned a job with Lao Aviation – a job that earns her a livable wage. When I think of her newfound opportunities, a sense of optimism emerges. Phon's hopeful story must also be shared along with those that expose the vices of development, not in an attempt to give balanced coverage, but to provide an honest depiction from as many angles as possible.

While change is the undercurrent of this examination, some aspects remain stubborn and unchanged in Lao culture. For example, in Luang Prabang, garnishes are still hand tied in small bunches (see **Figure 19**). This intricate custom is largely impractical because of the time involved. On even a broader scale, the Theravada Buddhist version of alms giving remains as constant as the flow of the Mekong itself. For all its development, Laos at some level clings to its deeply rooted customs. A future research endeavor might do well in teasing out these unswerving cultural traditions.



Figure 19: Hand wrapped garnishes remain a vestige of traditional food culture. (Luang Prabang, Laos, August 24, 2008)

That Laos has changed is not the most intriguing part of the story. Change was almost inevitable given its geography and size: its landlocked position practically assured the continuance of foreign intervention. However, the internal and external forces behind these changes, once unleashed, created ripples that outpaced the government's and scholars' ability to fully understand them. It might be time to re-conceptualize Laos not as a victim of change, but as a maturing player in regional affairs. Laos has an opportunity to reframe its perception from being land-locked to being land-linked. It can be a centerpiece for strategic alliances between its powerful neighbors. There is a growing legion of technologically competent youth, a vibrant tourism industry, a more relaxed attitude towards censorship of music and film, access to development loans, and perhaps most importantly, the interest of the international community. In July 2012, Secretary Hillary Clinton became the highest-ranking US official to visit Laos in almost six decades. Laos is no longer a passive observer. More than ever – even if it's just a matter of degrees – Laos is a greater stakeholder in its own development.

Acknowledgments

Foremost, I thank my mom and wife for helping me put these events in historical context. My relatives in Laos whom have embraced my presence in their lives over the past twenty years have enabled me to better understand life “on the ground.” This paper would not have been possible without their generosity and humanity.

Evaluation of Official Development Assistance Projects Implemented in Laos by the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, Japan International Cooperation Agency, and Korea International Cooperation Agency using the Millennium Development Goals as Indices

Yongseok Noh,¹ and Kazuo Watanabe

Abstract

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of the United Nations have guided global development efforts for the past decade. After years of global effort to meet the MDGs, it is important to evaluate the extent to which such efforts have resulted in successful development projects. In this paper, we examine the implementation of development projects in Laos to evaluate their compliance with the MDGs. We surveyed projects implemented by multilateral [the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the World Bank] and bilateral [the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA)] development agencies as representative of all such efforts. We examined whether the budgets of the projects and the number of projects implemented were evenly distributed across the MDGs. All projects studied were initiated since 2000. The results showed that both multilateral and bilateral agencies implemented projects targeting specific MDGs rather than focusing on all eight MDGs. The number and budgets of projects in Laos during the last ten years that have been implemented by both types of agencies reflect a primary focus on MDG 2 (to achieve universal primary education) and MDG 7 (to ensure environmental sustainability). These results suggest the need to implement projects in Laos that promote all of the MDGs.

Introduction

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were established in September 2000 by the United Nations (UN). The leaders of 147 nations adopted the Millennium Declaration and the international development objectives to be achieved by 2015. The eight MDGs are: (1) To eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; (2) To achieve universal primary education; (3) To promote gender equality and empower women; (4) To reduce child mortality; (5) To improve material health; (6) To combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases; (7) To ensure environmental sustainability; and (8) To develop a global partnership for development. All aid agencies in the world should follow the MDGs when planning and implementing development projects. According to a UN report

¹ Corresponding author. Graduate School of Life and Environmental Sciences, University of Tsukuba, Tennodai, Tsukuba, 1-1-1 Ibaraki, 305-8572 Japan.

(Jensen 2010), the overall improvements called for by the MDGs were reached a decade after the Millennium Declaration. The number of people living below the poverty level has decreased, maternal mortality rates have decreased, and efforts to improve the environment have progressed. Additionally, developing countries are adopting MDGs as their development strategies. However, the UN and the World Bank, the key implementers of the MDGs, have been reporting that progress toward meeting the MDGs varies according to region and nation (Ross-Larson 2011). For example, it has been reported that greater improvement is evident in East Asia than in Sub-Saharan countries. Within East Asia, China has demonstrated much greater improvement than other countries in the region (Leo and Barmeier 2010).

To determine the causes of uneven progress, we used Laos as an example of a less developed nation in Southeast Asia to assess the implementation of development projects through Official Development Assistance (ODA). Laos has improved in its adherence to the MDGs since the new millennium (Badiee 2010). We will try to understand this outcome in relation to the input provided by ODA. Analysis of ODA input in support of achieving MDGs has shown that ODA from agencies that assist in development constitutes a main resource for such development (McCarty and Julian 2009). Thus, we analyzed input from ODA in the service of implementing MDGs to determine the distribution of such resources.

The MDGs for Laos have been achieved to some extent. According to the 2010 World Development Indicators, Laos scored 6.0 out of a possible 8.0 points with respect to the achievement of MDGs (Badiee 2010). Given that the major portion of funds used by Laos for development purposes came from international aid, and given that Laos has shown improvement with respect to the MDGs over the past ten years, we assumed that ODA provided by both multilateral and bilateral development agencies had been evenly distributed over the entire range of MDGs. In this study, we will test this assumption and determine whether ODA has been used fairly in efforts to meet MDGs. This research will identify difficulties encountered in efforts that rely on ODA to implement programs promoting sustainable development in pursuit of MDGs.

Thus, we examined the distribution of ODA projects according to the MDG that each was intended to promote. To this end, we quantified projects undertaken by two types of development agencies in Laos.

Methods: Survey of the implementation of development projects in Laos

We attempted to examine whether the number of projects implemented and the budgets of development projects reflected a fair distribution across the eight MDGs. All projects studied have been initiated since 2000. We collected data about the number of development projects conducted in Laos since 2000 and about their budgets. We reviewed the project-completion reports produced by the multilateral development agencies, the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and the World Bank. We selected bilateral aid agencies based on their strong presence in Laos and collected data about projects conducted by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) from the agency's website and data about projects implemented by the Korean International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) from personnel at the agency's headquarters.

ODA projects in Laos

During the study period, the World Bank conducted 23 projects. The MDGs that correlate with these projects are listed in **table 1**. The projects were grouped by MDG for comparison, with the exception of four projects that did not fit into an MDG category (**tables 1 and 2**). The ADB implemented 17 projects, which have been grouped according to MDG (**table 2**). Five JICA projects and 12 KOICA projects implemented during the study period have also been classified according to MDG (**tables 3 and 4**). To analyze the MDGs addressed by development projects implemented in Laos, the number and financial allocation of all projects were classified according to MDG (**tables 5–8**). The budgets of JICA and KOICA projects have been converted into USD for comparison.

First, we found that the number of projects implemented and the allocation of project budgets tended to emphasize MDGs 2, 7, and 8 (**figure 1**). Additionally, projects that addressed MDG 1 (to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger) were also conducted with a relatively high frequency (**figure 2**). Both the total number of projects and the budgets allocated to projects were skewed toward MDG 2 and MDG 7. When the analysis of the number of programs was separated from that of the amount of money allocated to programs, the results for MDG 1 and MDG 8 differed from each other. Although many programs related to MDG 1 were implemented, their budgets were relatively small, indicating the existence of many small projects dedicated to the alleviation of poverty (MDG 1). On the other hand, few programs were focused on MDG 8, but those that were devoted to this goal were large in scale. Both MDG 2 and MDG 7 attracted many programs that were also well funded.

Second, we found that this trend applied to both multilateral and bilateral agencies. Multilateral agencies focused the largest proportion of funding on MDG 7 (**figure 3**). **Figure 4** shows that multilateral agencies also conducted the largest number of projects focused on MDG 7. MDG 2 also attracted a high proportion of the funding and projects emanating from multilateral agencies. In terms of bilateral agencies, a comparison of **figures 5 and 6** shows that bilateral agencies conducted only one project that addressed MDG 8 but that the budget of this project was large. This finding reflects JICA's bridge construction project over the Mekong River, which had a relatively large budget allocation. With the exception of this project, we again found a strong bias toward MDGs 2 and 7 in most projects implemented by bilateral agencies. Like multilateral agencies, bilateral agencies had the most programs and the largest budgetary allocations devoted to MDG 7, with MDG 2 also attracting many programs and substantial funding.

Thus, we found that MDGs 2 and 7 were targeted by many development projects in Laos that were initiated with ODA provided by the World Bank, ADB, JICA, and KOICA during the ten years since the Millennium Declaration. Thus, the distribution of resources was not even; instead, it was weighted toward several foci.

Discussion and Conclusion

Official development assistance and the Millennium Development Goals

The MDGs were established to achieve harmonious and sustainable development in less-developed countries. After ten years of global efforts, the pursuit of each goal has led to improvement; however, holistic efforts to achieve the MDGs are needed in Laos. ODA projects in Laos have not pursued all MDGs equally during the past decade. Both bilateral and multilateral agencies have focused on MDG 7 (to ensure environmental sustainability) in Laos; the number of projects and the financial allocations have been weighted strongly toward this goal in comparison with the other MDGs. Further studies are necessary to examine the reasons for this bias. Our results lead us to conclude that the MDG projects conducted by international agencies in Laos during the past decade have failed to achieve balanced developmental progress in all MDGs. These agencies tended to focus on specific MDGs, namely 'to achieve universal primary education' and 'to ensure environmental sustainability.'

In 2012, we may reach another turning point in global efforts to achieve sustainable development. Further development goals will be discussed based on global experiences to date. The present trend in world development aid is increasingly focused on the performance of recipients' countries and on measurable results (Bourguignon and Sundberg 2007); accordingly, the performance of aid projects needs to be monitored and evaluated in terms of the MDGs addressed and the balancing of developmental goals. The results of this study can be used to expand the evaluation of developmental aid projects. The trend identified among projects implemented in Laos can also serve as a resource for decision makers guiding ODA implementation.

Input and achievement of MDGs

The progress toward MDGs in Laos is a result of many factors such as resource input and project output and outcome. These, in turn, relate to the role of donors, the governance of the recipient countries, and the combined efforts of these two stakeholders. In this paper, we examined issues related to input and its distribution across the MDGs by ODA donors. During the ten years since the Millennium Declaration, both multilateral and bilateral development agencies have contributed the largest proportion of their resources in Laos to projects related to MDG 2 and MDG 7. General progress in Laos toward MDGs has been reported by the UN, but the skewed use of ODA resources raises questions about the possibility of developing a better approach to the achievement of these goals.

The importance of primary education (MDG 2) has led to its prioritization; some researchers have argued for the effectiveness of focusing aid on the educational sector (Chapman and Quijada 2009). Similarly, ensuring environmental sustainability (MDG 7) is a key step in development. The construction of infrastructure guarantees further community development as well as technological transition (Jowitt 2009). Despite these arguments for the importance of specific MDGs, development should be achieved harmoniously within a framework of development plans that address all domains covered by MDGs. This can be achieved in several ways. First, it may be possible to attain this goal through the moderation of the United Nations. However, because the goals and actions of multilateral development agencies are independent, it remains

difficult to moderate both multilateral and bilateral agencies. Second, enhancing the ability of recipient countries to implement projects in the absence of substantial influence from donors may represent another approach to this goal. Indeed, efforts to expand the capacities of recipient countries are essential. Third, the specific situation in Laos may call for the prioritization of primary education and sustainable environmental development. To address these issues, further research is necessary to identify the causes of the trend observed in this study. Understanding of the effect of input factors on the implementation of MDGs will facilitate the implementation of all MDGs, thereby contributing to sustainable development in Laos.

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Table 1. World Bank Projects implemented in Laos since 2000.

No.	Sector	Million USD	MDGs
1	Ecosystem and Wildlife Conservation Project	1.5	7
2	Lao PDR ² Upland Food Security Improvement Project	14.97	1
3	Lao PDR Rice Productivity Improvement Project	3	1
4	Lao FCPF ³ Implementation Support	3.5	7
5	LA(Lao)-Poverty Reduction Fund Project	15	2
6	LA-Additional Financing EDP ⁴ II	15.5	2
7	Second Education Development Project	13.5	2
8	Lao Nam Theun 2 Power Project	42	N/A
9	GMS ⁵ Power Trade (Laos) Project	18.8	N/A
10	Laos PDR FMAC ⁶	37	8
11	Nam Theun 2 Social and Environmental Project	20	7
12	Community Nutrition Project	2	1
13	Health Services Improvement Project	15	5
14	Community Nutrition Project EU Funding	2.12	1
15	LA-Sustainable Silk Production Partnership in Rural Laos	1.88	3
16	Lao PDR Trade Development Facility Project	8.25	N/A
17	Lao PDR Fourth Poverty Reduction Support Operation	10	2
18	St. Vincent HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control	7	5
19	Fifth Poverty Reduction Support Third Lao PDR Poverty Reduction Support Operation	20	2
20	Grant	10	2
21	Lao PDR Second Poverty Reduction Support Operation 2	8	2
22	Road Sector Project	43.18	N/A
23	Poverty Reduction Fund	21.71	3
Total		333.91	

² Lao People's Democratic Republic

³ Forest Carbon Partnership Facility

⁴ Education Development Project

⁵ Greater Mekong Subregion

⁶ Financial Management Adjustment Credit

Table 2. Asian Development Bank projects implemented in Laos since 2000.

No.	Sector	Million USD	MDGs
1	Airport Improvement Project	89.9	8
2	Champassak Road Improvement Project	51.93	8
3	Vientiane Integrated Urban Development Project	27.67	7
4	Industrial Tree Plantation Project	15.4	6
5	Postsecondary Education Rationalization Project	22	2
6	Community-managed Irrigation Sector Project	22.41	1
7	Secondary Towns Urban Development Project	33.5	7
8	Xieng Khouang Road Improvement Project	60.74	8
9	Environment and Social Program	21.9	5
10	Shifting Cultivation Stabilization Pilot Project	9.2	1
11	Vientiane Urban Infrastructure and Service Project	43.67	7
12	Water Supply and Sanitation Sector Project	23.43	5
13	Basic Education (Girls) Project	34.6	2
14	Rural Access Roads Project	27.48	8
15	Great Mekong Subregion: East–West Corridor Project	40.78	7
16	Great Mekong Subregion: Northern Economic Corridor Project	129.08	7
17	Small Towns Development Project	21.1	7
Total		674.79	

Table 3. Japan International Cooperation Agency projects implemented in Laos since 2000.

No.	Sector	Million Yen	MDGs
1	Strengthening Finance Aid	1,500	4
2	Third Poverty Reduction Support Operation	500	7
3	Second Poverty Reduction Support Operation	500	7
4	Greater Mekong Power Network Development Project	3,326	6
5	Second Mekong International Bridge	4,011	8
Total		9,837	

Table 4. Korea International Cooperation Agency projects implemented in Laos since 2000.

No.	Sector	Thousand USD	MDGs
1	Ministry of Foreign Affairs electronic network	1,200	1
2	Mekong riverside road construction	800	8
3	Vientiane community development	2,320	5
4	Secondary school textbook procurement	3,000	2
5	Bolicam community potable water development	750	5
6	Vocational training center	800	2
7	Vientiane rural development	2,320	5
8	Irrigation improvement	1,700	1
9	Irrigation dam construction	3,200	1
10	Vientiane secondary school establishment	2,500	2
11	Secondary school textbook procurement	3,000	2
12	Children's hospital	3,500	5
Total		25,090	

Table 5. Classification of World Bank projects according to Millennium Development Goals.

MDG	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	N/A	Total
Budget	22.09	92.00	23.59		22.00		21.50	45.25	112.23	338.7
(million USD)										
Percent	7%	27%	7%	0%	6%	0%	6%	13%	33%	100%
No. of projects	4	7	2		2		2	2	4	23
Percent	17%	30%	9%	0%	9%	0%	9%	9%	17%	100%

Table 6. Classification of Asian Development Bank projects according to Millennium Development Goals.

MDG	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	N/A	Total
Budget	49.89	56.60					398.44	169.86		674.79
(million USD)										
Percent	7%	8%	0%	0%	0%	0%	59%	25%	0%	100%
No. of projects	2	2					11	2		17.00
percent	12%	12%	0%	0%	0%	0%	65%	12%	0%	100%

Table 7. Classification of Japan International Cooperation Agency projects according to Millennium Development Goals.

MDG	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	N/A	Total
Budget	11.9						23.8	47.73		83.43
(million USD)										
Percent	14%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	29%	57%	0%	100%
No. of projects	2						2	1		5
Percent	40%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	40%	20%	0%	100%

Table 8. Classification of Korea International Cooperation Agency projects according to Millennium Development Goals.

MDG	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	N/A	Total
Budget	4	9.3		3.5			8.27			25.07
(million USD)										
Percent	16%	37%	0%	14%	0%	0%	33%	0%	0%	100%
No. of projects	2	4		1			5			12
Percent	17%	33%	0%	8%	0%	0%	42%	0%	0%	100%

Figure 1. Budget allocation of projects implemented by the four agencies according to Millennium Development Goals.

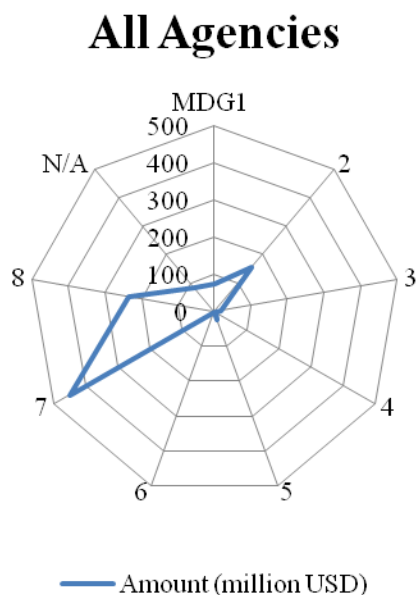


Figure 2. Distribution of projects implemented by the four agencies according to Millennium Development Goals.

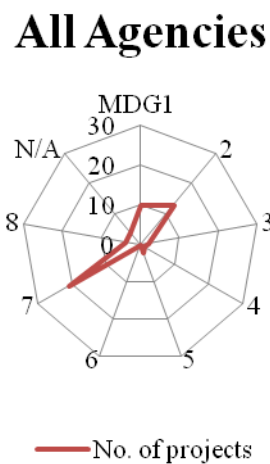


Figure 3. Budget allocation of projects implemented by multilateral agencies according to Millennium Development Goals.

Multilateral Agencies

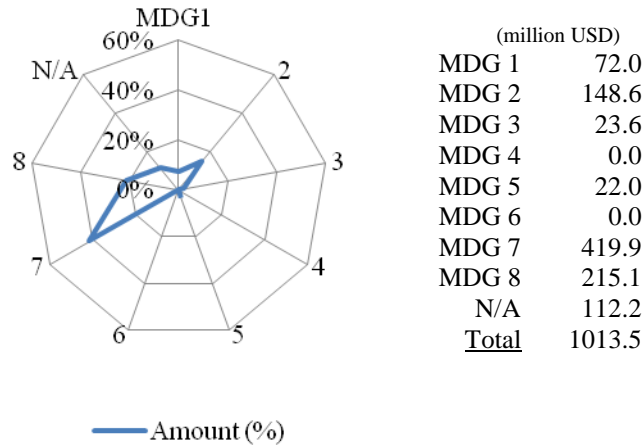


Figure 4. Distribution of projects implemented by multilateral agencies according to Millennium Development Goals.

Multilateral Agencies

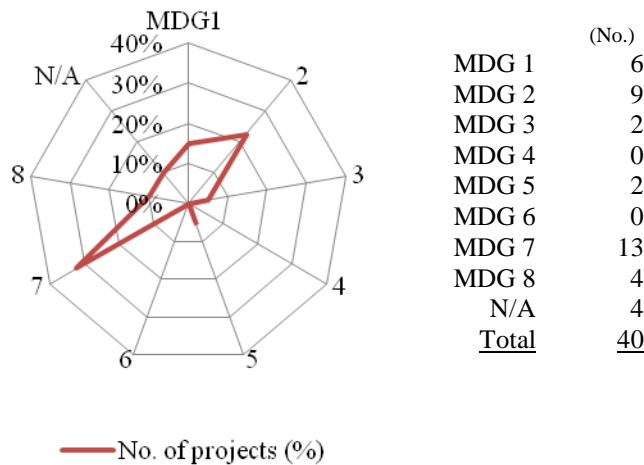


Figure 5. Budget allocation of projects implemented by bilateral agencies according to Millennium Development Goals.

Bilateral Agencies

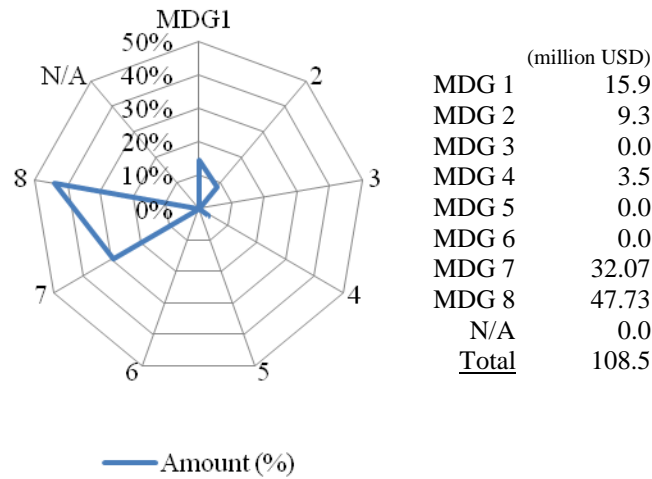
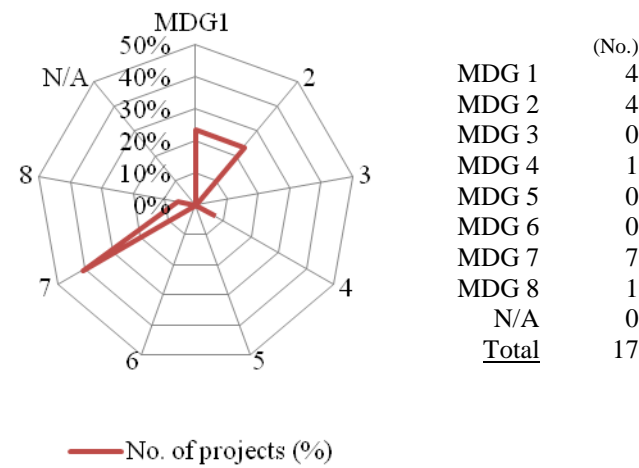


Figure 6. Distribution of projects implemented by bilateral agencies according to Millennium Development Goals.

Bilateral Agencies



Cultural Landscape of the Urban Community of Vang Vieng in the Context of Tourism

Bounthavy Sosamphanh,¹ Sekson Yongvanit,² and Yaowalak Apichatvullop³

Abstract

This study aims to investigate the existence of and changes to the cultural landscape of the urban community of Vang Vieng, Vientiane province, Lao PDR, in the context of tourism. A qualitative method was used to empirically describe and compare settlement forms, land use, the differences in the ways of life, occupation, and the effects of new cultural phenomenon on the local culture. Data gathering was conducted by survey, observation and interviewing urban residents. It was found that settlements are crowded between the old airport area, stretching along the Xong riverbank and had a trend of expansion and increased density to the north and east of the town. The downtown area is crowded, as the land is being used by various entities such as hotels, guesthouses, restaurants and tourist agencies etc. Almost all of these entities are related to tourism. The dwellings are of modern architectural design. Conversely, land on the outskirts is not as crowded, as it is used mostly for dwellings and governmental offices. There are two types of cultural landscapes in the town: vernacular cultural landscape and the new cultural landscape. The vernacular cultural landscape consists of dwellings in a vernacular architectural style; the houses and structures are of wood, or half cement and half wood. There is grass and a well in front of the houses, and the women wear the Lao sarong. The new cultural landscape developed in the downtown area where there are buildings of modern architectural design, and restaurants that include a space for people to rest and watch television while eating and drinking.

Keywords: cultural landscape, urban community, tourism context, Vang Vieng

Introduction

The meaning of landscape is defined by the Royal Institute (2006) – and is also indicated in the geography dictionary – as the following: “The general characteristics of one particular area including works of nature and humankind”. The word “cultural landscape” has been defined in various ways (such as “the built environments which surround us”) since humans have settled down in one particular area, and the surrounding environment would have changed in order to serve their needs and culture. However, these particular changes would have been

¹ Ph.D. candidate (Development Sciences), Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Khon Kaen University, Thailand.

² Associate professor at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Khon Kaen University, Thailand, and corresponding author.

³ Associate professor at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Khon Kaen University, Thailand.

sufficient with respect to nature. This is for the well-being and coexistence between humans and the environment. Therefore, the differences of cultural landscape of a particular area vary within their environmental contexts. Furthermore, those differences also influence the management notions of an area (Siamrath 2009). Anthropologists have categorized culture into two types that are either tangible or intangible.

This may divide cultural landscape into tangible and intangible as well: (1) Tangible cultural landscape includes dwellings, places of religion, settlement forms, community characteristics, physical evidences, and the changes in life of communities or societies; (2) Intangible cultural landscape includes the principles, beliefs, traditions or other notions relating to human behavior that involves the communities' geography for their lifestyle (Bunyapavit and Yadmak 2008). From those meanings we can see that cultural landscapes are the result of both humankind and nature. Cultural landscape presents the evolution of human society and their settlement from the past up to the present day. A cultural landscape study is a geographical study. Sauer's (1925) concept indicates that a cultural landscape study is not understood just from studying natural factors like history of the past, but emphasizes on interdisciplinary factors, not just the study of one particular thing. This kind of study has not been widespread in Lao PDR. Therefore, in this case study, we are interested in studying the cultural landscape of the urban community of Vang Vieng, Vientiane province of Lao PDR.

There are two types of communities in Vang Vieng, local and urban. The local community has its own living expansion, beliefs and environment. These local communities have settled down according to the natural, physical features of the area, and developed according to their environmental conditions. Almost all of the settlements are spread across a narrow plain of land that lines along the river or a road. The local communities' expansion is different from that of the urban communities because the urban communities' expansion is regulated by the Urban Plan Office, while almost all local community expansion is not regulated. In addition, the urban area is the center of tourism in Vang Vieng. It is this difference in management style, we believe, that accounts for differing cultural landscapes in the local and urban communities. This study is focused on the urban community.

Research objectives

This article aims to investigate the changes in existence within the tourism context of the cultural landscape in the urban community of Vang Vieng district, Lao PDR.

Literature review

The notion of cultural landscape is a new concept used to study the characteristics of areas in the Lao PDR. The researcher has taken the concept and theory of cultural landscape from many scholars as a guideline for study. Sauer (1925) discussed the meaning of cultural landscape as being a landscape that is fashioned from a natural landscape by a culture group. Culture is the agent while the natural area is the medium; cultural landscape is the result. Vogeler (2010) explained that elements of cultural landscapes include: roads, sidewalks, houses, lawns, parks, signs, billboards, stores, shopping malls, graffiti, office parks, factories. While Plumwood (2006) said that the intervention of human expression on the land and nature define cultural

landscape, Calcatinge (2010) suggested that the cultural landscape is a product of the inter-relationship of humans and space. Cultural landscape is a past representation that has become part of our present-day life. Its richness and variety are physical evidence of culture, religion and social community (ICOMOS 2009). So, if the location of the cultural landscape is an urban area, we can call it an urban cultural landscape. Urban cultural landscape occur when there is a combination between the heritage value of tangible and intangible elements (**table 1**); both of these elements can create an expression that gives spirit to and forms the character of an area (O'Donnell 2008). Therefore, the condition of an urban cultural landscape needs to be appreciated by documenting and preserving it.

Cultural landscapes are cultural properties that present the combined works of nature and man, as designated by UNESCO. They are illustrative of the evolution of human society and settlements over time, under the influences of the physical constraints and/or opportunities presented by their natural environment and of successive social, economic, and cultural forces, both external and internal (ICOMOS 2009). Therefore we can conclude that the urban cultural landscape is formed because of human intervention with their surroundings, which is a specific and unique urban landscape. This shapes and creates an urban image that can be used as its identity. Urban cultural landscape is a reflection of the physical and cultural conditions in the region, which occurs due to political, economic and social influences of the past, the present and continues into the future.

Table 1: Elements of urban cultural landscape.

Tangible Elements	Intangible Elements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Natural system • Land uses, land patterns, land clusters • Spatial organization • Visual relationships • Topography, surface drainage • Vegetation • Circulation system • Water features, natural and constructed • Non-habitable landscape structures & buildings • Spatial character, spatial form & spatial scale of habitable structures • Vocabulary of site furnishing & objects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Festivals • Traditional music, dance, performance • Pilgrimage • Worship • Rituals • Commemoration of past events • Traditional practices • Gathering place for native plants • Gathering place for craft materials • Iconic shared community place of memory and present use

Research Methodology

This study was conducted using qualitative methods. The data gathering techniques are as follows: settlement observation, city plan and land use study and the use of area within the household. The observation of cultural landscape characteristics involves studying the community's traditions and lifestyles, the economy, and changes surrounding urban landscapes that have been influenced by globalization and tourism development by interviewing local residents for a Vang Vieng historical

study. The conceptual framework is a combination of the cultural landscape concept of Sauer (1925), Plumwood (2006), the concept of urban cultural landscape of O'Donnell (2008) and the urban landscape theories of Kostof (1993) and Kevin Lynch (1960) and focuses on the land use, urban edges, paths, district and open spaces of Vang Vieng town. Content analysis is used for describing the changes and the existence of cultural landscapes in the urban area of Vang Vieng.

Research Findings

1. Overview of Vang Vieng

Vang Vieng is a district of Vientiane Province located on National Highway No. 13 North (NHN 13), and the town is located about 156 km to the north of the capital, Vientiane. More than two thirds of the district's area is mountainous, consisting mostly of limestone mountains and cliffs of various shapes and sizes. The average annual temperature is 25 degrees Celsius. There are two seasons: the dry season is from October to April, and the rainy season from May to October. The average annual rainfall is 3,681 mm. Vang Vieng district can only be accessed by using NHN 13, which has a daily bus service. Important elements in attracting visitors are natural resources such as the Xong River, which is the main river of the district and has the capacity to support various tourist activities; there are also more than 30 caves, of which over 20 are open to visitors. Apart from this, the good weather, a beautiful landscape, the culture and life style of the local people sustaining their fine traditions and uniqueness have increased the potential of Vang Vieng district for tourism. It should be noted that there are several other natural tourism resources located close to the main road, NHN 13, that are easily accessible to tourists.

Vang Vieng district is located on the route connecting Vientiane with the World Heritage City of Luang Prabang, making the area ideal for welcoming the increasing numbers of tourists and those travelling between the two cities. The town of Vang Vieng has developed dramatically with a number of infrastructure support systems.

2. Tourism expansion in Vang Vieng

Prior to 1986, Laos had a closed-door policy. There were few foreign tourist arrivals. Most travel to Vang Vieng was carried out to visiting relatives or friends or for non-business reasons. Infrequently, some foreign visitors paid a visit as representatives of their country or representing international organizations, most of which were from the former socialist countries (Phabouddy *et al* 2010). Apart from this, access to Vang Vieng was inconvenient, as the road system did not connect to routes in the local areas.

In 1986, the Lao PDR government implemented an open-door policy for welcoming foreign investment, and changed the former socialist economic management into a free market-oriented management mechanism. This enabled foreign investors and visitors to travel into Lao PDR. In 1989, the Lao authorities announced the opening up of the country and officially welcomed foreign visitors (Yamauchi and Lee 1999). In 1995, the importance of tourism was realized when the National Assembly of Laos identified the tourism industry as one of the priority action plans for national development. Investment in infrastructure development

was increased. Travel by car began to expand for travelers between Vientiane and Luang Prabang, a city where a great number of foreign tourists had planned to visit, which led to the expansion of the tourism industry. Therefore, being located along the National Highway, which connect the two cities, Vang Vieng’s indigenous residents have ample opportunity to advertise and develop their district as the ‘en-route’ stopping place of choice for travelers and thus can become one of the most significant, popular and charming tourist attractions in Laos.

In 1994, the first tourism service was established in the Chang Cave area. Subsequently, natural tourism development commenced at some other tourist sites and various facilities were built. In 1996, there were 13 guesthouses and hotels in the municipal district. Nineteen ninety-seven was the first year when there was data collection of visitors travelling to Vang Vieng, and it was found that during that year there were only 4,468 visitors. In the following year, 1998, the number of tourists had increased to 6,694 people, an increase of 50 percent, which was considered exceptionally high when compared with the previous year.

In 1999, the Lao PDR government announced the, “Visit Lao Year Festival,” which enabled tourism to grow dramatically. For instance, the increase in the number of visitors, accommodation, restaurants, shops, other services, tourist resort sites and other facilities has been very noticeable. In just a one-year period, from 1998 to 1999, the visitor population more than doubled, as foreign tourists visiting the district grew to 14,436, while in 1998 there had been only 6,694 visitors.

Despite the expansion of tourism resources during the year 1999, there were only nine caves open to tourists. By 2012, 20 caves were accessible to tourists. Apart from this, there are five cultural tourism resources and two agricultural tourism resources. At the same time, the amount of accommodations have increased in the town, which now has 97 guesthouses and hotels, 85 restaurants and various units providing tourist services. Visitor numbers in 2012 had reached 177,191 (see **figure 1**). Factors that assisted in the dramatic expansion of tourism in Vang Vieng after the “Visit Lao Year Festival” include the government’s massive investment in infrastructure development, particularly the construction of the electric town network from the Nam Ngum Hydropower System, water supply system, improvements to roads and transport, and the establishment of an agency responsible for the direct administration of tourism. As for the private sector, they have invested in the development of accommodation facilities, restaurants and other services for visitors.

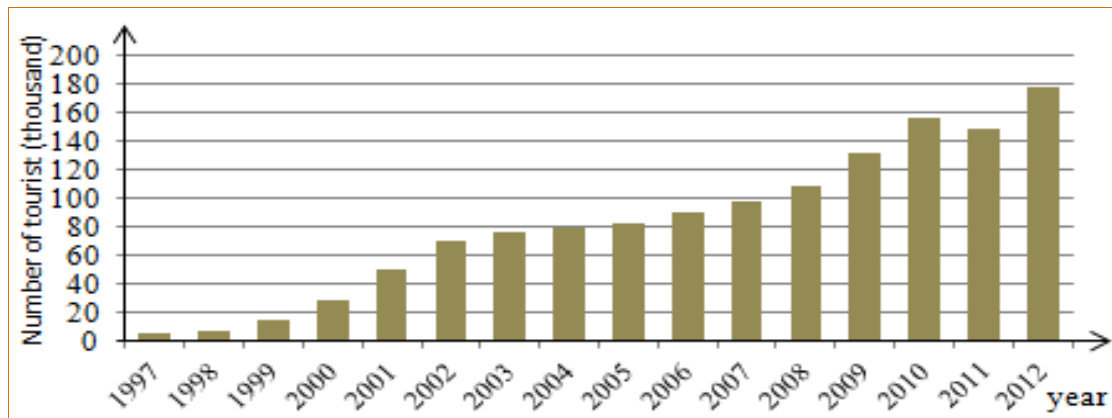


Figure 1: Number of tourist arrivals to Vang Vieng from 1997-2012. Source: Vang Vieng District Tourism Office (2013).

3. Urban cultural landscape in Vang Vieng

3.1 Community's settlement

Since ancient times, there has always been a group of people who have dwelled in the urban zone of Vang Vieng, dating back to around the early 14th century. The observation of dwellings that existed during the reign of King Fa Ngum the Great show that there was a small village called "Thin Haeng Village" settled in the area. Uthai (1999) stated that Muang Xong residents and others from nearby districts who stayed in Vang Vieng during 1920-1940 found that there was living evidence of human architecture in Vang Vieng, such as moats and bricks surrounding the area from the south to the east of Vang Vieng, a deep canal, brick moats, a small river called "Huay Sa-ngao" in the north, and the Xong River in the south. This evidence confirms that the present settlement of Vang Vieng was part of a community in ancient times. Presently, the center of this settlement is on the original area and expands to the south. This area includes NHN 13, the old airport and the Xong River. Almost all of the houses are settled between the airport and the Xong riverbank. However, it has potential to expand toward the north and east of the town. The land use in the urban zone is quite crowded compared with other zones that were mostly used for dwellings and government buildings, but the land in this zone is used for human activities and mostly related to tourism.

3.2 Urban landscapes in Vang Vieng

(a) Edges: According to a map in 2004, the west boundary of Vang Vieng town is on the east bank of the Xong River. There is still space between the houses and the riverbanks where a riverside walk-way for sight-seeing along the Xong River is planned to be built. In the east, Vang Vieng town covers the area of Phonpheng village, located next to rice fields, and in the south it covers the area of Muangxong village, which is also next to rice fields. The town also covers the area of Huaysangao to the north. The expansion of the town has been caused by tourism, as shown by the large number of hotels, guesthouses, restaurants and tourist service stores. In 1996, there were 13 guesthouses and five restaurants in the municipality. In 2012, the number had risen to 97 guesthouses and 85 restaurants with the increase in construction for facilitating tourism resulting in the expansion of the town boundary. In 2012, the town has broadened to cover the land on the west bank of the Xong River where villages, such as Huay Yae, are located. Moreover, more resorts, guesthouses and tourist service stores are established on Don Klang Island and on the west bank of the Xong River. This is how the western boundary, which originally ended on the east bank of the Xong River, expanded to the west bank (see **figure 2**). Fortunately, the southern and eastern boundaries have not changed drastically, only the area of residences that stretch and reach to the rice fields. The northern boundary seems to stretch from Huaysangao village to Phoudindaeng village, where the administrative office was moved to. In addition, the fresh market and the bus terminal were also moved to the North.

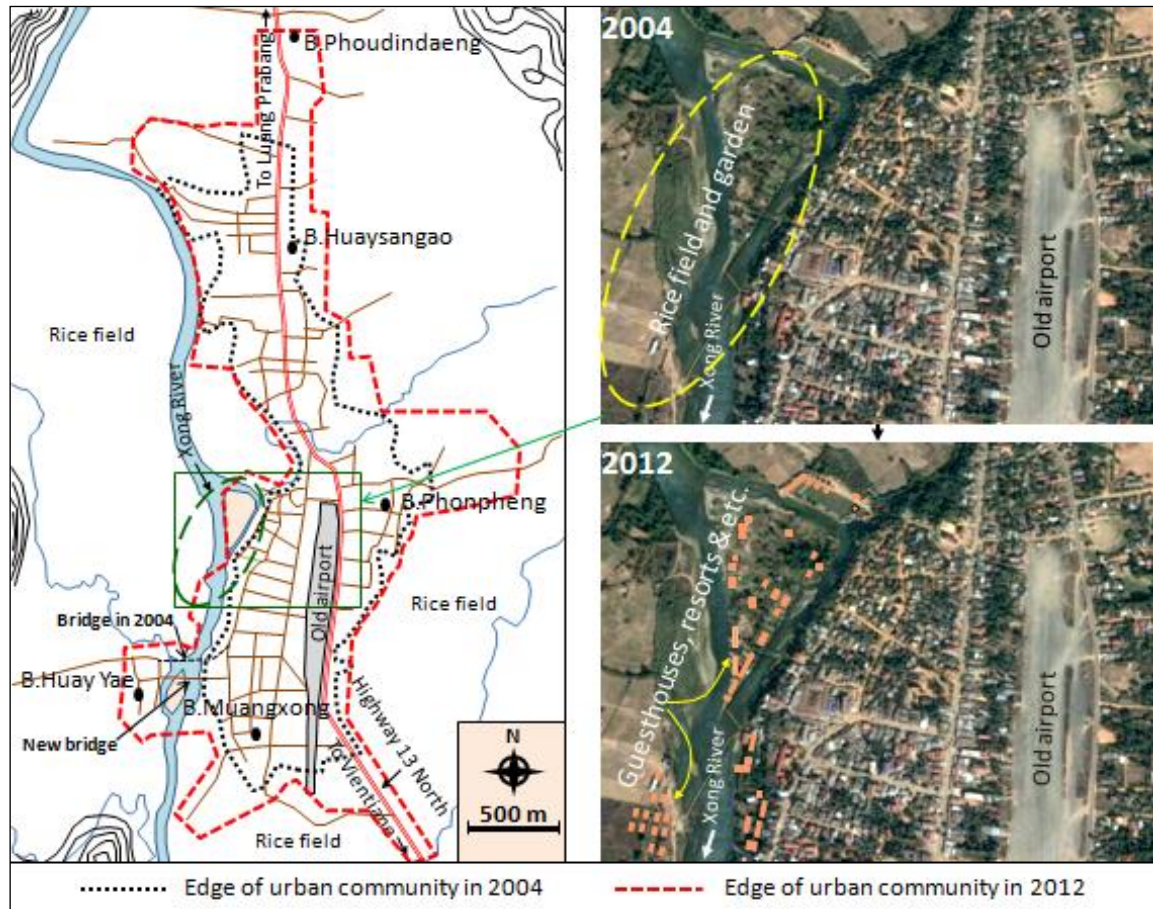


Figure 2: Path network and edges of urban community in Vang Vieng.

(b) Paths, signboards and street furniture: The infrastructure in Vang Vieng has not changed much over the past decade. There are three main streets that are NHN 13 to the east, the street through the heart of the town, and the street along the Xong River. Various alleyways connect the three main streets. Those streets and alleyways have been developed – they were widened and tarred. Lights and drains have been installed along the roadside where there are walk ways. This development can be seen especially in the center of the town.

The expansion of the tourism industry in Vang Vieng encourages advertising and service businesses. Signboards are one of the advertising instruments and are very popular with the service businesses such as restaurants, shop houses and guest-houses. This results in a variety of styles of advertisement and includes the lights that are harmoniously displayed along the roadside, especially on the main road. Most of those signboards are of the same size; the backdrop is yellow while the letters are black, red and blue. These signboards are at eye level, so they can be easily seen and read. There is not enough street furniture, such as trash cans, in the urban zone. However, the amount of rubbish from both tourist and residential consumption is great. The trash cans found in this area are made from bamboo; the community’s residents put them in front of their houses, and the garbage collection vehicles empty them on a scheduled basis.

In addition, the street furniture such as benches, telephone boxes, flowerpots and traffic signs are also found in the urban area; sometimes the street furniture can beautify the landscape but this furniture is not taken into consideration by the authorities. In addition, electric poles, telephone wires and internet wires are found in the area of junctions. These wires are quite messy and not harmonious to the area, thus making the landscape unattractive (see **figure 3**).



Figure 3: Main street in Vang Vieng town.

(c) Land use: Before the expansion of tourism in Vang Vieng, there was not much variety in terms of land use. The land use mainly consisted of residential, governmental agencies, and vacant areas. The areas in use were not crowded and were only occupied by important sectors such as the market, bus station and government agencies, which were located in the center of the town. After the expansion of tourism, land use changed. Some markets, bus station and government agencies were moved out from the center of town because of the increased density. However, 56.25 % of the sample group agreed that vacant land had been utilized to generate additional income streams. Most of the land in the town was used for tourism services such as hotels, resorts, restaurants, internet cafés, rental car shops, tour guide shops, etc. (see **figure 4**). The density of area usage is increasing every year, forcing some things that need a lot of space to move out from the center of town. For example, the market (moved in 2007), and the bus station (moved in 2008) were relocated to the north of town, which is two kilometers away from their former locations. Meanwhile, some governmental agencies moved from the center of town to a new development zone, which is three kilometers away from the former location. These examples of the way in which the area is being used

are caused by the fast growth of the town, which is related to factors of tourism (Serey *et al* 2010). The basic infrastructure was greatly developed in the town zone.

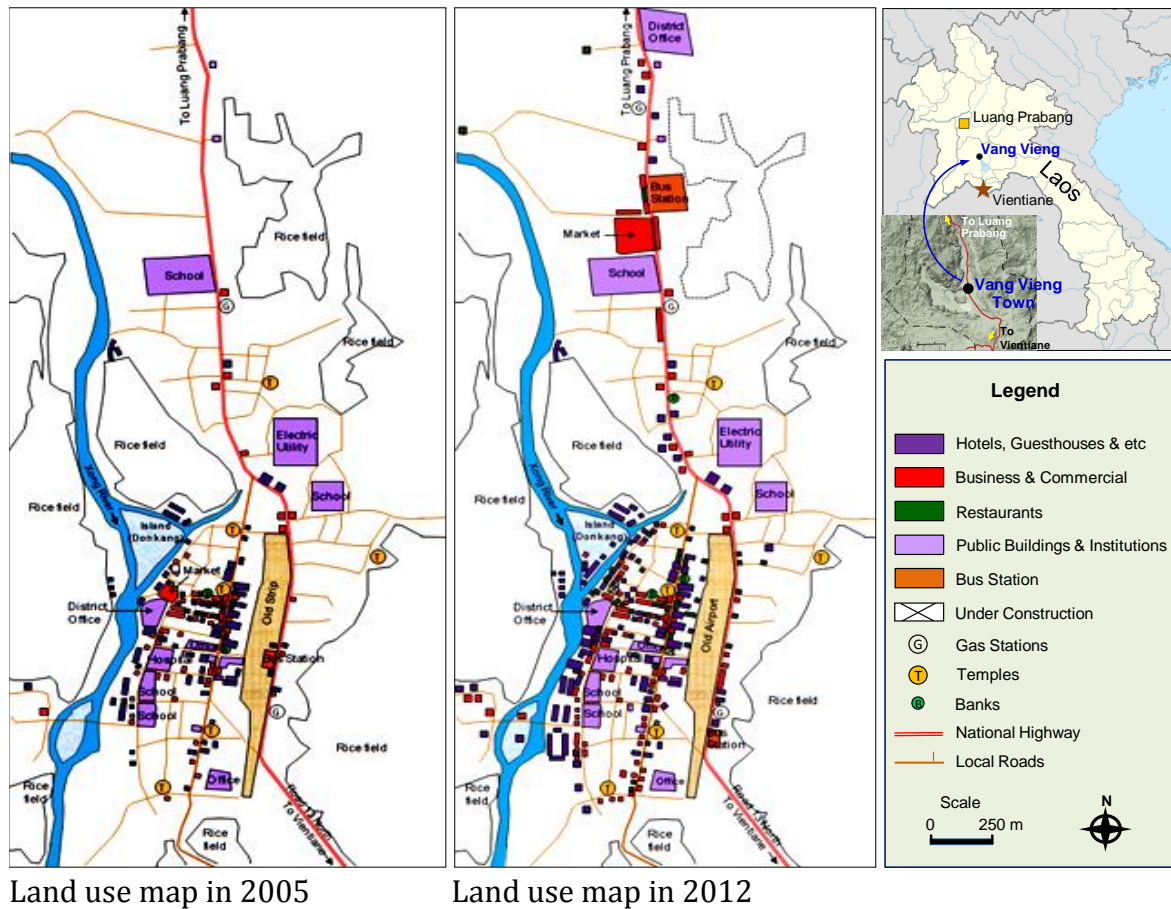


Figure 4: Distribution of accommodation, commercial business and services, government buildings, institutions etc in Vang Vieng Town in 2005 and 2012. Source: Survey and interview.

From the maps in **figure 4**, we found that, in 2005, the area used for guesthouses, restaurants and tourist services was not large in size and it was mainly in the vicinity of Savang village. However, in 2012, the area used for tourist services is much greater and Savang village is now very crowded. Some business have even trespassed onto the Xong River bank and expanded into the nearby villages, the main roads and onto small streets.

(d) District: The urban community consists of two districts, which are downtown and suburbs. Downtown, or the business zone of Vang Vieng, begins from Samosorn road to Wat Thad (temple) and covers the streets around the Xong riverside. Here are the lodging businesses, hotels, shop-houses, restaurants and other service business shops aimed at serving the tourists. The land use in the business zone is crowded compared with other zones. Furthermore, it is very crowded on the roadside and in the lanes. The architecture of the dwellings is modern and contemporary. The modern architecture emphasizes function and utility rather than just the aesthetic. These houses and structures are made from cement, bricks, steel and wood (see **figure 5**). The houses in this zone are partitioned as the hospitality business zone, the businesses that feed families and the suburbs zone, which include land that is mostly used for dwellings and for

government offices. The dwelling architecture is a type of vernacular architecture; it is noted that the pounds and courtyards are in local style and are set to the front of the house. Furthermore, a kitchen garden is also planted within the house compound. The houses and structures are constructed of wood, or half cement and half wood. The roof is of galvanized iron or tiles (see **figure 6**). Housing in this area is not crowded compared with the business zone. In addition, there are some government buildings that cannot be categorized into a group of districts because their settlement is scattered around the Xong riverbank and on the south side of the community.



Figure 5: Modern Architecture in downtown.



Figure 6: Old architecture in the suburb.

(e) Activities node: From the area of study and using the town's images as stated in the methodology of Lynch (2000; cited in Lormaneenoparat 2003), it was found that the activities node or the places used for events and activities in the municipal area are as follows: (1) Crossways area of the street that connects with the road on the Xong riverside. This area is used by the hospitality industry which takes the atmosphere of the community to be lively and reflects the town's liveliness; (2) Wat (temple) Thad and Wat Klang is an area on a hill and is located in the heart of town, close to the business zone. This area is used for the cultural festivals, events and religious ceremonies of the community. Although these two temples are quite old, they cannot be considered sylvan. Planting more trees in the temple compound is recommended for these two temples; (3) The morning market or Vang Vieng market is the big market that is an important node, located at the north of the community and at the side of NHN 13, 2.5 kilometers away from downtown; on its right hand side is the bus terminal. There are various types of goods available at this market. The market area is zoned; this began with the car park. Next are gadget shops, such as accessories, mobile phones, clothes, luggage and shoes. Next to this zone is the food zone, fruit and vegetable zone, and the meat and fish zone. The last two zones are open only in the morning while the others are open all day. Therefore, this market also plays a significant role in the community.

(f) Open spaces: An old airport that runs along the north-south direction and is located almost at the center of the community is a main open space for urban residents. People in Vang Vieng town usually get together to take part in activities such as wedding parties, market fairs, morning and evening exercise, driving lessons, celebrations of national and international special days and any activities that require lots of space for many people to gather usually take place at this old strip (see **figure 7**). This public open space is approximately 100 meters wide and

1,500 meters long. Currently, the south of this space is occupied by some invasive construction.



Figure 7: Wedding party at the old airport.

In addition, the courtyards around the various offices, such as the police station, primary schools, secondary schools and vocational schools are important open spaces for the town. They are used by local people for recreational activities, such as playing football, volleyball and petanque in the evenings. These open spaces have rarely been changed. The open space that is most drastically changed is the space on the east bank of the Xong

River. In 2004, the walk way had a width of 10-15 meters along side the Xong River. It was open space with few buildings. The administrator had a plan to build a walk way along the river to benefit sightseeing of the Xong River and the parallel limestone mountains. However, two to three years after that, buildings, hotels, guesthouses restaurants and tourist service stores were built to facilitate the tourists. Currently, the open space along the Xong River is barely visible. Furthermore, open spaces surrounding local people’s houses are turned into places of business, such as guesthouses, restaurants, stores, massage parlors, internet cafes, motorbike/bicycle rent, tour guide companies and other kinds of business. Therefore, the town is packed with buildings and other construction.

3.3 Vang Vieng indigenous culture and the new culture phenomenon

Vang Vieng consists of several tribes, such as Tai Dang, Khmu, Lao Phuan and Hmong. These tribes moved and settled in Vang Vieng at different periods. Many years later, these tribes became one. This was because of inter-marriage and people participating in social, religious and cultural festival activities together. Some of their identities are similar but things such as housing architecture, has identified each tribe. But in the present day, they are similar and quite modern. Moreover, the



Figure 8: Style of restaurants in Vang Vieng.

costume culture of women and girls has also changed from the past. They always wear the Lao sarong, but these days they will wear the Lao sarong and jeans, which seem to be popular among all the people of the new generation.

The tourism industry in Vang Vieng generated income and created new occupations. Tourism has also affected the residents’ way of life, resulting in their

occupations being changed from agriculture to the hospitality industries. Moreover, in others sectors, such as the construction businesses and government public services, these functions have also adapted to serve the tourist industry. For instance, there are some facilities like resting zones where tourists can lay down to watch television, eat, drink or wait to meet their friends. Services such as these have never before been provided in Vang Vieng restaurants in the past, but we can see them today (see **figure 8**). Additionally, these consumptive behaviors are extremely different from the local cultures.

Conclusion

The old cultural landscape of Vang Vieng, or the cultural landscape before the tourism industry period, is vernacular or local. This landscape was combined from the cultures of the three tribes of the Lao, the Hmong and the Khmu. Even though Vang Vieng is an urban community, their lifestyle is quite local and associated with agricultural activities. Their food supplies are acquired from the surrounding area. Their settlements are grouped to the west of the old airport. Their land uses are quite similar and most of the uses are for dwelling and official places, while the land used for other purposes is found in Vang Vieng. Their house architecture styles are quite local, the courtyard is found to the front of or to the back of the house, while open space is found around the house. The main infrastructure, such as the main road, is in good condition, while the sub-roads, lanes or alleys are small and rugged. The residents' lifestyles are simple and not frantic. Growing and harvesting an agricultural crop is their main occupation. The landscape in tourist destinations is natural. However, tourism has made changes to the whole landscape in Vang Vieng, resulting in the settlements and the land use. Land use has been divided into downtown and outskirts. Land use in downtown is crowded and used for dwellings, shop-houses, restaurants, lodging and other hospitality businesses. Housing is developed in modern architectural style. But the land use in the outskirts zone is not crowded, mostly used for dwellings and for government places. Housing architecture in the outskirts zone is vernacular. Shop-houses, restaurants and lodging are scattered and found along the roadside. The main roads and sub-roads are asphalted and connect to each other. There are two types of cultural landscape in the town; they are the local cultural and new cultural landscape. The new cultural landscape has western influences; for example, buildings feature modern architecture, like new styles of restaurants, and Lao girls changed from wearing the Lao sarong to wearing jeans.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Singh, Sarinda. *Natural Potency and Political Power: Forests and State Authority in Contemporary Laos*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012. pp. 192 + x

Reviewed by

Ian G. Baird, Assistant Professor, Department of Geography, University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA

Natural Potency and Political Power is an interesting book, but one that has not been easy for me to review. On the one hand, there is no doubt that Singh has provided an insightful account of the ways that many ethnic Lao people discuss and understand contemporary environmental issues, especially those related to wildlife consumption, forest management and conservation. But, even though I would certainly recommend it, I also felt somewhat uneasy and even a bit dissatisfied with parts of the book.

Relying on what the author refers to as “patchwork ethnography” (following Tsing 2005), Singh, an anthropologist from Australia, sets out, primarily through observations in the capital city of Laos, the Nakai District center, and a rural village on the Nakai Plateau, to “show how Lao people make indirect political statements in their commentary on social and environmental changes taking place throughout the country” (pg. 2). Although she fully acknowledges that, “[p]olitical debate is stifled and muted in post-socialist Laos” (pg. 2), she correctly points out that it is far from completely absent. With this in mind, she considers the politics surrounding forests in Laos, as “[f]orests frequently feature in politicized discourses because of their symbolic potency in Lao worldviews, as well as their material importance for national development and for the livelihoods of the largely rural populace” (pg. 2). She convincingly argues that, “In Lao worldviews, forests can speak of identity, aspirations, and authority, which in turn speak of governance and the legitimacy of the Lao state.” To make her point, Singh links environmental narratives with social understandings and commentary about the legitimacy of the state in ways that few authors have dared do in relation to Laos. She deserves a great deal of credit for presenting rich field data and generally convincing evidence to support her arguments.

After laying out her overall research project and objectives in chapter 1, Singh sets out to justify her theoretical framework in chapter 2. As she puts it, “Of central importance for this book is the dialectical contrast between civilization ‘settlements’ (*muang*) and the wild ‘forest’ (*pa*),” a point I will return to later in this review. In particular, chapter 2 deals with Lao negative views of “conservation”. She then continues, in chapter 3, to consider contemporary Lao beliefs associated with “wildlife and wildlife consumption.” In chapter 4 she specifically turns to Lao narratives and beliefs associated with the largest and arguably the most prestigious animal in Laos: the elephant, an apt topic considering the controversies surrounding wild elephants on the

Nakai Plateau, particularly in relation to the controversial Nam Theun 2 Hydropower Project, which despite being widely criticized by international non-government organizations (NGOs) located outside of Laos (NGOs, either local or international, inside of the country are not able to openly criticize the project) has oddly emerged as Laos' flagship large dam project, having received crucial support and financial guarantees from the World Bank, and more marginally and belatedly, the Asian Development Bank (ADB). In chapter 5, Singh focuses on debates in Laos surrounding forest resources, outlining the nature of forest decline in the country, the importance of forest resources to the Lao economy, and the Lao state's responsibility for the ongoing trend in forest decline. She correctly points out that recent experiences in Laos in relation to "community forestry" have demonstrated the desire of the Lao state to maintain firm control over the country's forest resources, and "the state's limited commitment to prioritizing the needs of the rural poor in the process of forest-derived development" (pg. 102). In particular, she argues that, "in contemporary Laos, clearing the forest is a sign of development, but forest decline without the receipt of prosperity is a sign of unworthy authority" (pg. 103). Chapter 6 builds directly on the arguments developed in chapter 5. The author shows how the Lao state tends to conceal forest decline, and shift blame for it onto others, particularly by attempting to make state authority over forests less discernible. I would argue that Singh is at her best in this chapter. She outlines how this process of making authority in relation to forests less visible is evident in relation to a well-known state-owned enterprise, *Bolisat Phattana Khet Phou Doi* (Mountain Development Company) (BPKP). Second, the author persuasively argues that, "forest decline is admitted but attributed to rural villagers through a focus on swidden cultivation and, to a lesser extent, deficiencies in reforestation" (pg. 132) (and village maintenance of planted trees in particular). Finally, Singh shows how conservation initiatives are frequently misrepresented and subverted to direct attention away from state actions, especially greed and incompetency when it comes to forest management. The perception of conservation being opposed to development, which is initially presented in chapter 2, is, according to the author, used to "reframe emergent competition between the state and villagers over forest resources as competition between Laos and foreign conservationists" (pg. 132). She points out that, "All three examples indicate aspects of strategic and opportunistic misdirection, but there are also many elements that point to the vulnerability of the Lao state and fundamental weaknesses in its claim to authority" (pg. 132). Chapter 7 provides some well formulated and presented concluding remarks. Singh states that, "This book has used the concepts of potential and worldviews to link ideas about state authority with ideas about social order. As an alternative to power, potential usefully recognizes that the exercise of authority is a relational and contingent social process...Everyday encounters are important in the localized construction of the state, but so too are the abstractions that people use to interpret and represent such encounters" (pg. 155). The first part of the final paragraph of the book is worth presenting at length:

[T]his book reveals how people in contemporary Laos nominally accept the state's authority, even though they may also continue to question its legitimacy. Significantly, the potential of the state is founded partly on a sense of mutual interest rather than the exclusive application of fear and coercion. Legitimacy is confirmed with the delivery of personal property,

while judgments of illegitimacy emerge when personal prosperity is deemed to be a promise that will never eventuate. A focus on promised to deliver prosperity moves analysis of the state beyond binaries of progress or failure and emphasizes the more dynamic, uncertain, and personalized perceptions of the state's potential. Furthermore, this analysis highlights how the rural periphery contributes to indirect social and political commentary in a context where open public debate is very limited.

In thinking about this book, my conclusion is that it is a must-read for anyone interested in wildlife, forestry and conservation issues in Laos. Without, however, wanting to give the impression that I am overly critical of it, it is worth pointing out some of its weaknesses and limitations. First, while it can be argued, as the author claims, that “a standardized system for Romanization of the Lao language is yet to be developed” (pg. viii), the reality is that there has long been a system for romanizing the Lao language, one that has been in use in Laos since the French colonial period. Even today, one only has to examine the romanized spellings of most Lao names to recognize that such a system does exist. It would have been appropriate for the author to have attempted to apply it, in order to make the large number of Lao language words and sentences included in the book more accessible to Lao people. In addition, a number of Lao words are clearly spelt incorrectly by the author, possibly demonstrating language limitations.

While the above issue is more of a quibble than a substantial criticism, I am more concerned by the way Singh described how the Lao government became much less positive about “conservation” projects beginning at around the end of the 1990s. While her account of what happened partially rings true, it tends to present a monolithic view of both “international aid” and the organizations that implemented “conservation” projects, and thus does not adequately represent the diversity of views regarding “conservation” and “development” issues within the international aid community in Laos at the time, or the wide range of approaches that non-government organizations (NGOs) adopted in Laos during the 1990s. I was an active member of the NGO community during this period, both as a practitioner and funder of NGOs, and my particular project – The Lao Community Fisheries and Dolphin Conservation Project (*khong kan pamong xoum xon lae bok pak hakxa pa kha*), which operated from 1993 to 1999 in Khong District, Champasak Province, and came under the Department of Forestry – took a very different approach to conservation and development than what Singh described generally for Laos. From the very beginning, we recognized that it was crucial that conservation be seen in a positive light, and that it not become labeled as “anti-development”, if our project was to be successful at winning over the hearts and minds of local people. Therefore, we did not recommend that any restrictions be put on villagers' activities per se. Instead, we promoted a participatory process that allowed local people, with state support, to identify their own natural resource management problems, and then implement their own specific and (crucially) changeable management plans to address them. We started by working in just a few villages, and indicative that villagers were far from opposed to “conservation” work, we soon started receiving unsolicited requests from villages outside of our project area for us to help facilitate similar programs in their communities. We decided that we would only work

in a village if we received a written request from its leadership to do so. By August 1998, we had received requests to work in 63 villages, and villagers had demonstrated their commitment to conservation, often by protecting their most important deep-water fishing grounds in order to conserve large brood stock in the dry season, and ultimately increase fish stocks for people to catch in the future. While the State emphasized protecting fish in the ‘breeding season’, mainly the rainy season, locals felt that the low-water dry season was the most crucial season to protect fish in. This story certainly does not coincide with the single narrative about conservation projects in Laos that Singh presents. Nor does Singh’s account adequately represent the varied views and practices of the work of many other NGOs working on different kinds of natural resource management and conservation projects in the country at the time. Certainly she could have written in a more nuanced and expansive way, and thus her description of this period should not be taken as the “last word”.

One of Singh’s key assertions is that “conservation projects” in Laos are generally seen as being “foreign” and imposed. While this is partially true, I believe, for a few reasons, that Singh overstates her argument.

First, Singh’s field sites were in Vientiane and Nakai. Therefore, her data were limited to the view in the capital city (an urban view) and an area that had become heavily politicized in relation to “conservation” due to the controversy surrounding the Nam Theun 2 dam, and the associated protected area that was developed as a direct result of that project. The circumstances in these two locations are far from typical for Laos, and certainly differ from places like Khong District, Champasak Province, where the “conservation” of fish and wetlands was added by the local government without NGO support as part of the district’s “development plan” in 1999.

Second, Singh’s results seem to have been greatly impacted by the way she used and understood the Lao language, a problem that should serve as an important lesson for researchers in the future. Singh uses the Lao word “*anurak*” to represent the concept of conservation, and it would appear that this is the word she used to discuss the idea of conservation with local people throughout her study. For us, we were quickly informed, even before our project began in January 1993, that “*anurak* is a Thai word, not a Lao word.” Thus we never used it, instead applying the term “*bok pak hakxa*” (protection, with more of a stewardship slant) to the name of our project (see above). This presented conservation in a different context, and in a Lao way. Since then “*anurak*” has become increasingly prevalent in the Lao language, largely because of its introduction through foreign conservation projects. No wonder many Lao people think of conservation projects as being primarily foreign—the only time most rural people have ever heard the term “*anurak*” (outside of possibly Thai television shows) is in relation to foreign projects, mainly those implemented by larger and less participatory organizations! But does this mean that Lao people are negative about the overall concept of conservation, as some might assume from Singh’s arguments? Many certainly are critical of foreign-funded projects that restrict their livelihoods without adequately allowing for local participation, but there are other forms of conservation, local ones referred to using “*bok pak hakxa*” or other Lao terms, that Lao people are much more amenable to. Regrettably, Singh does not seem to be aware of this major shortcoming, which I fear has crucially impacted the results of her study.

The *muang* (town) – *pa* (forest) dialectic, while somewhat useful at times, seemed sometimes to be overstated. While Singh carefully qualifies her views by making it clear that she does not want to suggest that “Lao worldviews persist as a series of static values that stubbornly resist all change” (pg. 56), I nevertheless often found myself feeling unconvinced by her application of this framework for understanding the ways Lao people see things, even though there were times when I felt that the dialectic worked quite well. Unfortunately, all the above limitations of the book are found in chapter 2, which I believe is the most problematic part of the book.

The rest of the chapters are much less problematic, but there are still some limitations. For example, in chapter 3, Singh translates the Lao term “*lin phu (phou) sao*” as “flirt with young women”, when it actually means to “have sex with young women”, thus fundamentally changing the meaning of the sentence. This is, however, only a small quibble. More importantly, Singh fails to mention that many people in Laos, based on Buddhist beliefs, choose not to eat certain wild animals known as “*sat 10 prakan*”, which refers to ten animals, such as snakes, tigers, elephants, etc., that should not be eaten. Certainly not everyone—or even most people—follow this rule, but many do, and this idea does have an impact on Lao views. It should have been mentioned.

In chapter 4, on page 98, Singh presents some dialogue between her and a government official who argues that elephants are not eaten because they are “useful”. She counters by mentioning that buffaloes are also useful and they are eaten. Crucially, she fails to recognize that in many lowland parts of Laos, such as Khong District, Champasak Province, buffaloes were indeed rarely if ever eaten in the past due to the belief that they were “useful” animals. While beliefs have largely changed, and Lao people virtually all eat buffalo meat today, this was not always the case, thus making the official’s argument much more reasonable than Singh seemed to recognize at the time. There is indeed something about the usefulness of animals that makes them less palatable to Lao people than Singh realizes.

Singh also misinterprets Lao history in chapter 4 in relation to Lao royalty in two crucial ways. First, she claims that villagers are mistaken when they associate royalty with Vientiane rather than Luang Phrabang. In fact, they are more correct than she realizes. First, the Luang Phrabang royal house was relocated to Vientiane by Chao Xaysettha in the 16th century after being repeatedly sacked by Burmese troops. It was located there until the Siamese destroyed and depopulated Vientiane in 1829 following Chao Anou’s failed revolt against Siam. Moreover, she discusses villager interest in Chao Phetxarat, and while it is true that he originally came from Luang Phrabang, he was in fact based in Vientiane when he was working for the French government and coming to the Nakai Plateau. Thus, it is not surprising that villagers associated him and royalty with Vientiane. Secondly, Singh only recognizes the authority of Luang Phrabang royals, when in fact her field site in the Nakai Plateau was mainly under the influence of Champasak royals, although it was on the fringes of Champasak control. Still, this should have been acknowledged.

While being largely sympathetic to Singh’s view about Lao forest management deficiencies, it would have been appropriate to have acknowledged some of the recent efforts to close crucial structural loop holes in the logging and wood processing system. Certainly, problems are far from resolved, and corruption remains endemic, but Singh chooses not to mention these recent efforts, even though she widely cites reports that

fully acknowledge these changes, while also pointing out many continuing problems. Some aspects of Singh's description of the FOMOCOP project are also inaccurate, although the overall picture appears to be correct.

I also feel that we need to develop a new term for Laos. While it is certainly not as "socialist" as it was, neither is it fully "post-socialist", a term developed to apply to European East bloc countries that became democracies in the 1990s. While Singh is certainly not the first author to describe Laos as "post-socialist", Laos only awkwardly fits the label. The government still espouses (albeit not very sincerely) the idea that "state capitalism" will eventually lead to socialism. Thus, Laos is more of a "transitional-socialist" country than simply "post-socialist".

Finally, although I have pointed out a number of limitations to *Natural Potency and Political Power*, I do not want readers to "throw the baby out with the bathwater", as Singh's book is certainly not a wasted read; far from it. Part of the reason that she has made some errors is because she has engaged in arguments that others have not dared to before. I am especially positive about her use of the idea of potential to frame her understandings of state interactions with the population in contemporary Laos. Her limitations are ones that should be expected in ground-breaking, and unusually (especially in the field of conservation) balanced arguments. This is, indeed, important to understand, and I hope all the readers of this review, including the author, recognize that despite its limitations, I believe that Singh's book represents an important contribution to the literature, and I will certainly be assigning it to my students to read. In fact, I already have!

Vatthana Pholsena. *Laos – Un pays en mutation*. Paris: Éditions Belin, 2011. pp. 208.

Reviewed by

Oliver Tappe

Pholsena's recent book *Laos- Un pays en mutation* is part of the *Asie Plurielle* series established by the French publisher Belin. This series provides introductory country studies for a non-expert public. After having covered already fifteen countries including Timor-Leste and Uzbekistan, Belin finally delivers a profound study on Laos. With Pholsena, the publisher got one of the most renowned experts on Laos as author. Her fields of expertise include history, politics of memory, ethnicity and the complex socio-economic dynamics of contemporary Laos. *Laos- Un pays en mutation* offers deep insights into the social, cultural and economic transformations of the Lao PDR and provides detailed historical excursions that contribute to the understanding of present developments. Even though the book is explicitly dedicated to non-specialists, it has much to offer to students and experts of Laos thanks to its broad thematic range and long-term perspective. It is a concise country study that is well suited as introductory and inspiring reading for anyone interested in Laos.

At present, Laos has become the unlikely center of an increasingly integrated economic region. The powerful neighboring countries of Thailand, Vietnam and China consider Laos as key hub for their trade interests and thus invest in various infrastructure projects. The most recent and spectacular project is a railroad from Kunming to Vientiane, intended to link southern China to Bangkok and Singapore. At the same time these countries are competing for political influence in Laos not least to exploit the country's rich natural resources. Copper mining, rubber plantations and hydropower dams entail considerable economic, environmental and social impacts in a country still characterized by village-based agriculture. The current processes of rural transformation, urbanization and increasing social inequalities pose considerable challenges for the ruling Lao People's Revolutionary Party with its new generation of technocrats inspired by the examples of Vietnamese and Chinese socialist market economy.

Pholsena embeds her excellent discussion of these contemporary dynamics within a detailed, historical analysis of the Lao nation-state. It is a history not only of ruptures but also of strategies of adaptation and *müang*-style flexibility. Divided into three main parts and nine chapters, the book tackles the political, economic, and cultural dimensions of this history and links it to contemporary aspects of Lao society. Eight meaningful maps add to the explanatory power of Pholsena's account, including a short chronology, a useful statistics table, and a list of selected reading from the appendix. The main text contains only few references since it is intended for non-academic use. Yet, the short bibliography gives some direction for further reading, in particular with regard to French literature, which is often overlooked in the English-speaking world.

Part one of the book discusses the history of Laos from the Lao Buddhist kingdom of Lan Sang to the postcolonial Lao nation-state. The coherent narrative makes the reader aware of the fascinating historical vicissitudes of the “Lao multi-ethnic people” (according to official discourse). Moreover, this section provides an overview of the country’s geography, demography and economy. This section also provides some key facts for the understanding of this special country: the low population density (6.5 million on 236,800 sq km), the difference between plains and uplands, which imply contrasting agricultural practices (wet-rice cultivation vs. swidden), the ethnic heterogeneity, and the fact that the “majority” of the ethnic Lao constitute only slightly more than half of the population.

Part two gives a fascinating account of the “ways of modernization” of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic since the communist revolution of 1975. One chapter discusses the changing role of Buddhism under socialism and its present significance as pillar of a Lao national culture. Another central topic is ethnicity and the relation between the modernizing state and the ethnic minorities of the uplands – one of the author’s main fields of research. Pholsena gives the reader deep insights into the state’s development strategies, such as large-scale resettlement and agricultural intensification. Furthermore, she explores the role of ethnic minorities in the revolutionary struggle and the current status of ethnic minority members in the Lao party-state (*phak-lat*). While some are members of the politburo – such as Pany Yathotou (Hmong) – most ethnic minority representatives mainly occupy political positions on the provincial and district level in regions where the Lao constitute the minority.

Part three discusses the political and economic regional integration of Laos. It is mainly an analysis of socio-economic data and lacks the compelling narrative of the preceding chapters. Yet, the author provides useful insights into contemporary economic and geopolitical tendencies, especially concerning the relations between Laos and its resource-hungry neighbors. Moreover, she gives a neat account of the *phak-lat* bureaucracy. Her discussion of the notorious *phu nyay*-politics demonstrates that the Western label of “corruption” fails to take into account the social and cultural complexities of patron-client relations in Lao society. In her short conclusion, the author calls for a local perspective to understand the responses and strategies for adaptation of the heterogeneous population of Laos facing massive social and cultural transformations.

As mentioned above, the book contains a useful selection of maps. Some of them are based on the fascinating “Socioeconomic Atlas of Laos” and complement the rich economic and demographic data provided in the book. One particularly telling map illustrates the time people need to reach their respective provincial capital from less than one to more than ten hours. It thus substantiates the much-cited “remoteness” of some regions and illustrates the fact that 50% of the population of Houaphan, for example, must travel more than 30 km to the nearest hospital. Another interesting map shows the ethnolinguistic diversity of Laos by demarcating, with different colored dots, settlements of more than 100 people, according to ethnolinguistic family – thus creating a kaleidoscopic impression instead of questionable ethnic boundaries. Two quite disturbing maps show the locations of approximately 40 projected hydropower dams, and the distribution of unexploded ordnance (UXO) throughout the country. A

somewhat problematic map is the one about the ancient Lao kingdom of Lan Sang. Of course Vatthana Pholsena is aware of the perils of “historical” maps that suggest clear-cut borders – even if marked as “approximate frontiers” – and thus ignore territorial ambiguities. Yet a more explicit and critical analysis of this misleading map would have been necessary to prevent the unwary reader from assuming a historical “Greater Laos” occupying large parts of mainland Southeast Asia, including *Isan* and parts of northwestern Vietnam. In fact many *müang* entertained tributary relations with two or three larger powers and therefore could not be claimed by a specific territory. Moreover, territorial control by the Lao courts was almost non-existent in the mountainous areas beyond the river valleys (page 44) so that these areas would have to be consequently excluded from any map attempting to represent spheres of political sovereignty in pre-colonial times.

Admittedly, any book intended as a general country study for a non-expert readership cannot tackle all complex issues in full detail. Thus, comprehensive accounts on specific topics alternate with more cursory overviews, which still provide invaluable information for readers not familiar with the respective contexts. Pholsena succeeds in her challenging task to deliver a thematically comprehensive and historically informed analysis of modern Laos. *Laos – Un pays en mutation* should be taken as inspiration for comparable versions in the English and German languages, being a rare example of a book that can function both as reference for interested scholars and as a slim paperback companion for inquisitive travelers.

Portraits of 1957 Laos: Historic Photographs by Joel Martin Halpern. Luang Prabang, Lao PDR: Big Brother Mouse, 2010.

Reviewed by

Jonathan H. X. Lee, San Francisco State University

Portraits of 1957 Laos is a memoir-like photographic travel document of an American anthropologist, Joel Martin Halpern who spent time in Laos in 1957, and again, in 1959. The text is in English and Lao. *Portraits of 1957 Laos* captures images of Laos from the particular interest of a cultural anthropologist: daily life in Laos, ceremonies and processions, cultural traditions, rituals and religious life, work, material culture, the royal family, life along the Mekong River, and various ethnic groups (primarily Lao, Khmu, and Hmong villages). In total, this volume contains 128 full color photographs. Of special interest to students and scholars interested in religions of Laos, Halpern captures the 2500th Buddhist anniversary in 1957, along with a Cow Spirit ritual. These photographs offer educators meaningful visual data to use in the classroom.

Portraits of 1957 Laos offers interesting factoids of life and society in Laos in 1957. For example, one image documents the celebration of Chinese New Year among the large Chinese merchant community in Vientiane. Chinese-Lao or Chinese-Laotian in Laos and in the diaspora is understudied, as such, students interested in this topic, will find this reference a useful start. It is well known that Buddhism is an important religious institution in Laos, as well as embedded in Lao society. Halpern provides some critical reflection on the gender dynamics of Buddhism in Lao society with the image of a Lao woman who takes her infant son to the Buddhist temple, noting the importance of Lao women in the transmission of Buddhism in Lao society. Halpern writes, "Although only men can serve as monks, Lao women are the most active in Buddhism on a day-to-day basis" (14). For readers who are interested in material culture, Halpern offers many pedagogically useful photographs with equally useful captions on the differences among the ethnic clothing of the White Hmong, Akha, and Khmu.

The photographs and description of the Cow Spirit ritual captured the particular interest of this reviewer who is interested in Asian American folkways and folklife. The Cow Spirit ritual continues to be practiced among Hmong American communities, albeit adapted to negotiate local restrictions on livestock and animal sacrifices in urban communities, such as Chicago. Hmong Americans must find culturally sensitive ranchers to sell them a calf to sacrifice on their farms. Halpern offers useful data on this ritual for anyone interested in ritual change and transmission among the Hmong diasporic communities.

For current scholars of Laos, this volume will offer many interesting and useful photographic images and data. Although it documents Laos, a long time ago, it offers meaningful evidence of life, culture, society, and history. Readers who have experienced Laos in the last two decades, and recognize the rapid and profound transformation of Lao societies will find this volume interesting as the images of Laos they captured are compared to Halpern's photographs.

As a pictorial memoir-like travel document, *Portraits of 1957 Laos* is recommended for teachers who teach children in the k-6 levels because the writing is clear, concise, and simple. College students and teachers may find it useful for images of ethnic Laotian clothes, material culture, and the ways that Buddhism is practiced and expressed by both men and women, lay and monastic believers. It is also recommended for anyone interested in the study of Laos. Lastly, this book is recommended to Laotian Americans who seek a basic, useful, easily digestible resource on diverse cultural aspects of life in Laos in 1957 and 1959.