

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

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## 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.

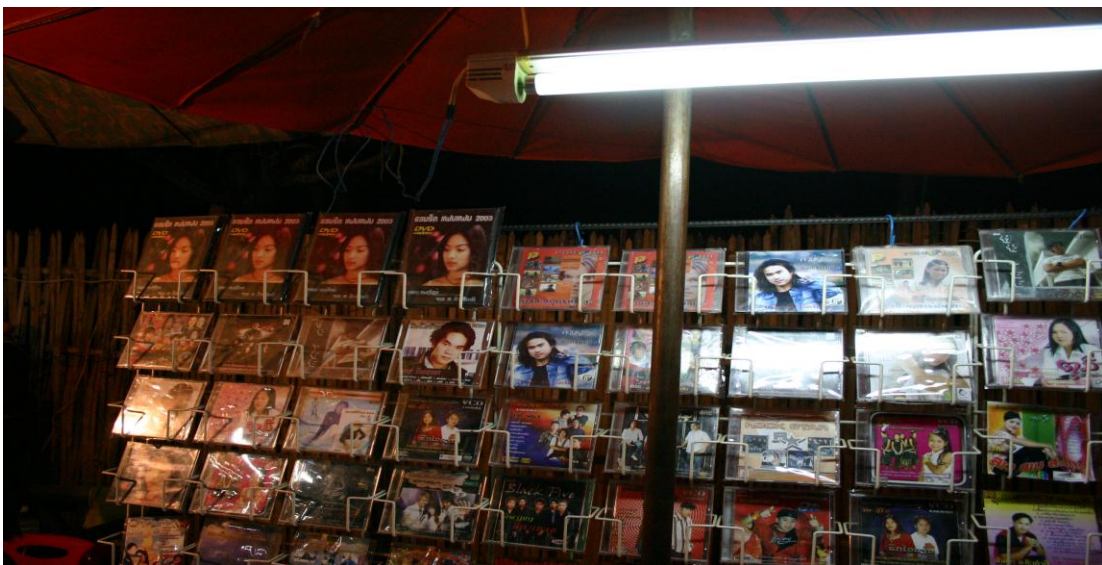


**Figure 9:** My cousins and I huddled around an old cassette player listening to Lao, Thai, and American music. (Luang Prabang, Laos, July 3, 1994).

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 past 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.

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