

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

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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

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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.

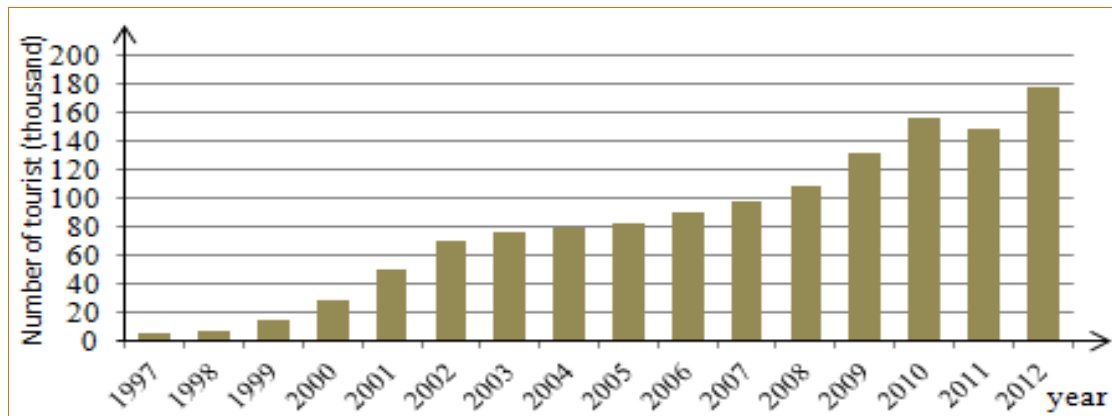


Figure 1: Number of tourist arrivals to Vang Vieng from 1997-2012. Source: Vang Vieng District Tourism Office (2013).

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.

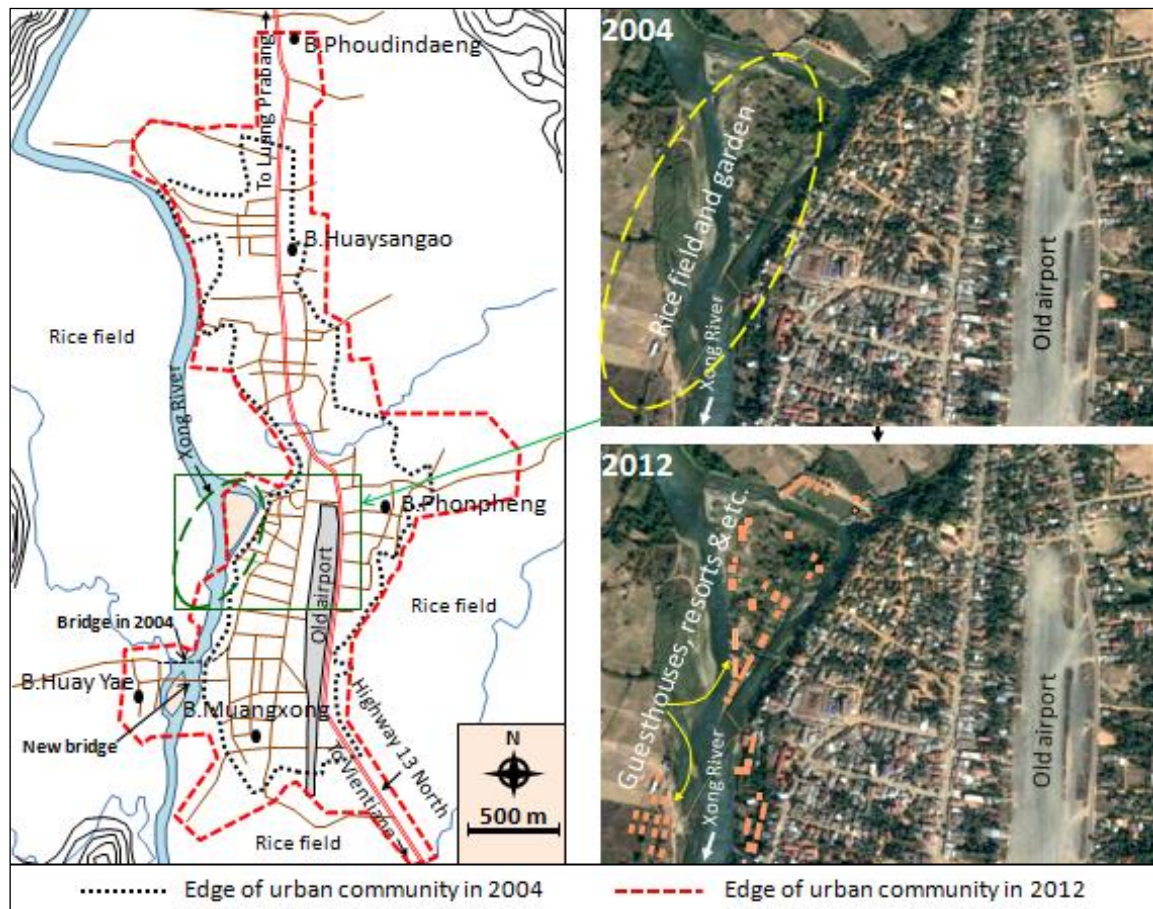


Figure 2: Path network and edges of urban community in Vang Vieng.

(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.

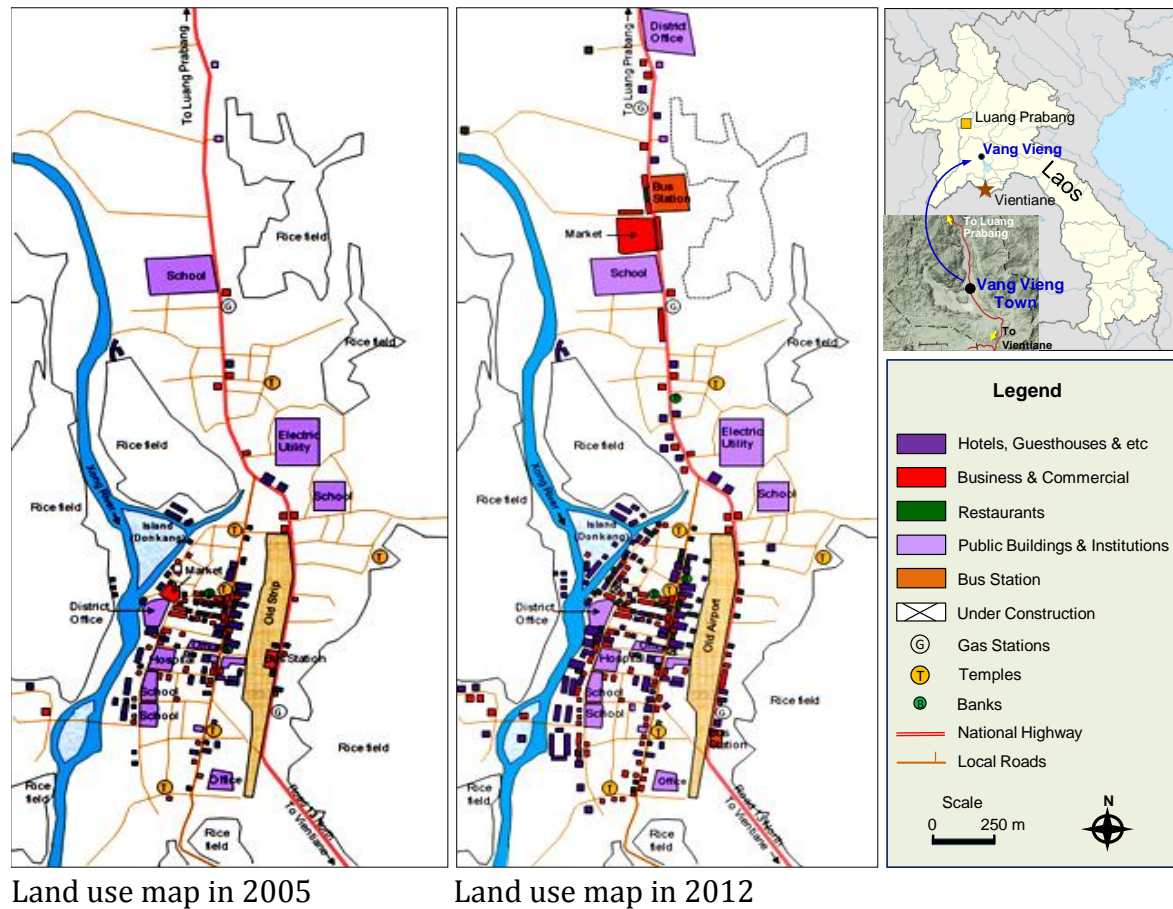


Figure 4: Distribution of accommodation, commercial business and services, government buildings, institutions etc in Vang Vieng Town in 2005 and 2012. Source: Survey and interview.

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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