

Luang Prabang, a World Heritage Town: UNESCO, Tourism and Rising Chinese Influence

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Abstract

This article revisits the conclusions of Dawn Starin's "Letter from Luang Prabang" published in 2008, in which she questions whether UNESCO's recognition of the city's historic center as a heritage site would be positive or negative for the city. She raises serious concerns about the future of Luang Prabang and suggests that UNESCO World Heritage Status would lead to a major upsurge of tourism and potentially, destroy what makes Luang Prabang special. This paper starts from the basis that reducing such a complex issue to a single binary question is misconceived. Moreover, that while UNESCO in Luang Prabang and management of the city's heritage remain pertinent issues, of far more importance and urgency, is the growing visibility of China in Luang Prabang and concerns about Chinese influence. The paper argues that negotiating this is now the fundamental pressing issue facing Luang Prabang, and that questions of China in Luang Prabang, and Laos generally, are complex, nuanced and contradictory.

Keywords: UNESCO, Luang Prabang, Laos, Heritage Tourism, China

In 2008, Dawn Starin published an important piece that poses a question: is UNESCO designation of Luang Prabang as a World Heritage Site positive or negative? In an essay subtitled "Letter from Luang Prabang", she posed this seemingly binary question thirteen years after UNESCO recognized Luang Prabang's historic center as a place of intangible world heritage that is valuable for all humanity. Her conclusion is that while time will tell for sure, overall that UNESCO designation will continue to encourage an unsustainable flood of tourists and have dire consequences for the city. She terms this process one of the very real possibility of UNESCO offering Luang Prabang a "kiss of death" (2008, 652).

Three years later, Reeves and Long observed Starin's piece as one that "cogently and evocatively alerted readers to the threats posed to Luang Prabang by the rapid rise of tourism" (2011, 3-4). While less alarmist in its approach they also contend that the process of UNESCO recognition in Luang Prabang has produced a process of change the effects of which are difficult to control and require new systems of heritage management.

The principle problem with both of these pieces, but particularly that of Starin, is that neither takes the question of local agency seriously and in Starin's case, not at all. Both view locals in Luang Prabang as passive recipients of whatever happens to them as they are pulled by dominant forces, for whom Laos is a pawn in a much larger agenda and any associated disadvantage akin to collateral damage. The first comprehensive attempt to insert agency back into this discussion appears from Berliner (2012) who argues strongly for the importance of hearing local voices of different actors in and around discourses of heritage and what this really means for those who live and work in and around the historic center of Luang Prabang. Berliner

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is a unique voice in considering just how powerful/powerless local people are and how they live out these wider agendas of heritage, globalization and social change in their everyday lives. His contention is that discourses of preservation and heritage in Luang Prabang are far more multiple, contested and contradictory than they first appear.

Berliner's arguments are profound and have informed much of my own work on heritage in Luang Prabang. Yet six years on from Berliner's article, and over a decade since Starin's piece, it is worth revisiting these issues. I argue that this is particularly crucial as Luang Prabang is now subject to a new force of change and that this has a considerable amount to do with rising Chinese presence in the city. This will only increase in the coming few years as Laos becomes far more inter-connected with China. The high-speed Lao-China part of the Kunming-Singapore railway is scheduled to open in 2021, which will drastically reduce travel time between Laos and China and make both countries far more accessible to each other. Already, numbers of Chinese businesses, Chinese tourists and Chinese influence is readily visible in Luang Prabang. For the first time, since 2016, numbers of tourists from Western countries show decline, while numbers of tourists from East Asian countries, and specifically China, show a marked increase. In 2018, almost 20% of all visitors to Laos were Chinese (Lao Ministry of Information 2018). That Luang Prabang has a reputation as a heritage town, and has UNESCO recognition of the same, may well be relevant here too.

I do not mean to argue here that questions of heritage in Luang Prabang have become less important, merely that the situation on the ground is fast changing with rising China, something to which Berliner understandably paid little attention. My overall purpose in this article is to argue that twenty-five years on from the UNESCO designation of Luang Prabang, the question of whether that is something positive or negative is a false one. No culture or city is static, and it is of course impossible to know how Luang Prabang would have developed differently. Moreover, the UNESCO certification has now been in place for over two decades. A more interesting question is to think through how local people exercise agency in such a landscape and what the limits of that agency are. Secondly, I believe that the question of UNESCO as positive or negative is an outdated one. In my research, local people were far more vocal on how Luang Prabang is changing in the face of rising Chinese influence, and what this will mean for the city. This is summed up particularly eloquently in the words of my interlocutors who told me categorically that "it does not matter what UNESCO says [about Luang Prabang] because in 30 years, this will all be Chinese anyway".

This paper is based partly on research I undertook for my doctorate for 15 months until mid 2016, in which time I lived and worked in the heritage zone of central Luang Prabang. It is also informed by a follow up visit to both China and Laos at the very end of 2017 and then a period of six months in Luang Prabang in 2019, specifically to consider the city changing as the Lao-China railway becomes a tangible reality. Throughout, I have employed ethnography as a primary means of research, but also had repeated interviews with the same interlocutors, which has allowed me to form a long-term view of their opinions over time. Some of them are local to Luang Prabang, others are migrants who have moved to Luang Prabang for education and employment opportunities.

I am not arguing that tourism has not changed Luang Prabang. Nor am I arguing that UNESCO has had no role in that. To ask about the effects and consequences of UNESCO recognition of Luang Prabang is, in my view, a perfectly legitimate enquiry. However, to reduce that to a single binary question of whether it

is good or bad, is unhelpful. A cursory look shows that the devil really does reside in the abundant detail, which is apparent just beneath the surface. This is a complex issue and requires recognition of that in the answer. For me, good or bad UNESCO is also an outdated question. I will argue here that there is now a much hotter topic in Luang Prabang in the form of China and Chinese influence. This is a complex question that is nuanced, not binary.

Luang Prabang: a timeless paradise?

Luang Prabang, capital of a province carrying the same name, enjoys a sumptuous location. Situated on the confluence of two rivers: the Nam Khan and the more famous mighty Mekong, the city is surrounded by mountains and represents a major urban center in Northern Laos. It currently takes around ten hours to reach the city by bus from Vientiane. Once the China-Lao railway is operational, this travel time will reduce by almost 90%.

Luang Prabang is a city with a long history. A royal capital since the fourteenth century, then monarch, King Fa Ngum adopted Theravada Buddhism and set a path for Luang Prabang to become an important religious center. Unsurprisingly, given its location, Luang Prabang has been the subject of considerable attention from invading influences throughout its history culminating in colonial rule from France from 1893 until independence in 1953. Laos became established as a one-party socialist state in 1975, and the revolution that brought this about was the culmination of a long period of civil war between the eventually victorious Lao communist forces and the Royal Lao Government, who were supported by the United States. American involvement in Laos during the decades preceding 1975 was considerable, and Eastern Laos was heavily bombed as a result of American attempts to contain the spread of communism in neighboring Vietnam. The city of Luang Prabang fortunately escaped this period largely unscathed by the heavy bombing.

Given its religious significance, Luang Prabang was the royal capital of the Lao Kingdom until the dissolution of the monarchy in 1975 and the founding of Laos as a one-party socialist state, a political status quo that remains in place until today. Following the regime change, the country closed to outsiders and Luang Prabang entered a difficult phase in its history, when its associations with the former regime made it almost a damned place (Berliner 2011, 2012). These grittier aspects of the past are absent from contemporary, official narratives of history in Luang Prabang. Strict economic austerity was eased as Laos adopted new economic policies in the mid-1980s that reintroduced private enterprise and opened its doors to tourism and limited forms of outside investment in the 1990s (Stuart Fox 1998; Yamada 2013). However, such initiatives have not resulted in any easing of the political climate. Laos remains a one-party state and retains a commitment to one party socialism, at least nominally.

Yamada (2018) argues cogently that by leading a process of economic reform, the Lao state ensured a place for itself within that process of change, thus avoiding making itself redundant. The process of state-managed heritage and past-making is apparent all over Laos but is particularly interesting in Luang Prabang where the usual strategies of side-lining, lambasting or ignoring pre-revolutionary heritage are at odds with the current Lao political system as the legitimate rulers of the country simply do not work there. It is notable how in much of the rest of Laos, there is silence about the Lao monarchy, except for brief statements about the monarchy being

defeated by the people's choice of socialism. This does not happen in Luang Prabang given that much of this architecture is celebrated as part of the city's heritage. For Long and Sweet (2006) this also allows for a significant convergence of interests between UNESCO and the local and national authorities: both focus on celebrating the city's architectural heritage and do not engage with difficult questions about the grittier aspects of history.

Today, much as in the rest of Laos, Luang Prabang city remains a place of considerable ethnic diversity. The population is around 56,000 with significant minorities of Khmu and Hmong people living alongside the lowland Lao population. According to the most recent population census, these minorities make up around 11% and 9.2% of the population respectively, with the Khmu being the majority ethnic group in Luang Prabang Province (Lao Population and Housing Census 2015). Luang Prabang also remains a significant religious center, and still contains over forty Buddhist temples, with a high concentration of these located inside the historic center. This is largely the area that UNESCO recognizes as a heritage site with the following justification for so doing:

[It] celebrates the city's 'successful fusion of the traditional architectural and urban structures and those of the Europe colonial rulers of the 19th and 20th centuries.... [with a] unique townscape... remarkably well preserved, illustrating a key stage in the blending of two distinct cultural traditions.' (UNESCO 1995, 46, cited in Dearborn and Stallmeyer 2009, 252)

This reflects only the positive and a-political aspects of colonialism in Luang Prabang. This means that UNESCO values the stunning architecture for which the city is renowned and anything ugly, contentious, or belonging to any other historical period is overlooked and not officially designated as heritage. As Long and Sweet (2006) argue, this has the unique effect of creating a significant convergence of interests between UNESCO and the Lao government and allows for an emphasis in presentations that generally do not engage with the difficult aspects of recent history, particularly around the revolution and founding of the contemporary Lao state. It also means that the apparently unwelcome difficult questions about modernity and the sort of future different members of the Lao population want, as well as questions of unwelcome foreign influence in Laos terminate at the perimeters of the heritage zone. These difficult questions are neither emphasized nor welcome in such a space.

The official invitation from the Luang Prabang tourist office adopts a similar approach, which is far more concerned with beauty than politics, inviting visitors to:

Lose yourself in the timelessness of Luang Prabang. Stroll narrow lanes that wind between beautifully restored Buddhist temples, traditional timber homes, and French colonial structures. Experience for yourself the legendary Lao hospitality. Engage in the daily rhythms of a place and a people shaped by a thousand years of ritual (Tourism Luang Prabang n-d)

This apparently lovely invitation has the unique effect of portraying Luang Prabang as a place that is seemingly both untouched by time and able to transcend it. The words "timeless Luang Prabang" appear in the city's official marketing. I suggest that timelessness is a deliberate strategy to emphasize the beauty and charm, while largely avoiding the difficult questions that may arise from detailed interrogation. Moreover,

timelessness evokes an almost ethereal or other-worldly quality that precludes difficult questions about the worldly realm. Moreover, the idea that the people are shaped by history, rather than shape it themselves, allows people to be present in history without allotting blame or responsibility. This is relevant for Laos generally where versions of history are particularly contested and overtly silenced in the political context. It also sets up Luang Prabang to change again as China's influence rises without open discussion of the same. The only problem is that this is an approach that degrades local people in passive victims of history rather than agents at least able to influence, even if in very limited ways, their own destinies.

As there are strict rules on what can and cannot be done with the buildings within the heritage zone itself, much of the everyday stuff of daily life including larger markets, shops and basic amenities are located outside the heritage zone. In 2007, concerns were raised largely by the International Council of Monuments and Sites about the nature of development and whether Luang Prabang should be placed on the UNESCO World Heritage in Danger list in view of breaches to the building regulations (Staiff and Bushell 2013). Some of this may come from beliefs that building regulations were being met when owing to confusion on the ground amongst building owners about the nature of the regulations (Leong, Takada, and Yamaguchi 2016). Nevertheless, the relationship between UNESCO, heritage, Luang Prabang and tourism endures strongly. While conducting my research, a guesthouse manager asked me to avoid writing anything critical of Luang Prabang given the importance of tourism, although was unable to elaborate on what he meant by this statement. He could only tell me that tourism is important to Luang Prabang, and that is vital that tourists continue to come.

And come they do, in large numbers. While tourism since the reopening of Laos was traditionally something done by backpackers, these now rub shoulders in the city's famous night market with luxury boutique tourists as well as those on short trips from Thailand or those in tour groups often from new tourist markets. Tourism in Luang Prabang shows considerable heterogeneity and 2019 is designated a special year for Lao: China tourism. I suggest that this represents a further phase of discourses of changing tourism. As Staiff and Bushell (2013) suggested: tourism is not something that happens as an external force but often represents a longer process of change. The presence of increasing numbers of Chinese lead to some Western visitors citing this as a further reason that they regret not visiting earlier they also lament that the town is soon to change into a Lao version of Chiang Mai and therefore overly commercial. Others consider that the town's UNESCO heritage zone, outside of which very few venture for any meaningful period, is more museum than living town anyway, a sort of preserved oasis which does not represent an actual living space. On either reckoning, these statements are often a prelude to an expression of frustration that Luang Prabang does not fit the picture in their imagination. This may be because of increasing commercialization of the city, worries about how Chinese visitors do not respect this apparently special space, or both.

Starin: an alarm bell

This is the sort of sentiment with which Starin begins her piece and her arrival Luang Prabang, namely that it did not fit the timeless paradise that she imagined that this "sleepy settlement" should offer (2008, 641). Her article begins with a characterization that has a long pedigree in descriptions of Laos in travel literature:

that of a remote and forgotten place in which travelers venture with Orientalist ideas of a fabled, magical Shangri-La, and one that is now threatened by the distinctly unwelcome and single march of globalization.

There is little sense from Starin's article that she resided in Luang Prabang for any extended period of time and her claims are bold for what may have been a single, brief visit. Her arguments relate only to the very center of Luang Prabang and the historic center around the peninsula. Yet a mostly unremarkable city – in tourist terms - exists beyond this and it is in this more peripheral area that there are schools, hospitals, markets, shops that do not have tourists as their main customer base. Notably, in Starin's letter, there is a strong sense of the city as having shrunk as she considers little beyond the historic center. She talks of arriving in Luang Prabang and going straight to the nearest market, which is of course, the night market. This sells mostly handicrafts. It is therefore unsurprising that Starin could not find the fresh produce that she expected to see at a market. What is surprising is that she did not know this in advance, given she indicates that she had consulted a guidebook, which described the Night Market with adjectives such as "atmospheric, romantic and traditional" (Ibid. 641). The night market has never been anything but a venue for the sale of handicrafts to customers who are generally not local. Some of these use traditional techniques on new products, some of them claim to be more traditional and authentic. It is then a place of some claims to tradition and history, but not with the sort of claims that Starin hoped to find.²

The Orientalist lens is not difficult to recognize here. Her central thesis is that Luang Prabang is indeed a special place, but that UNESCO certification will encourage tourists to visit it and that will, inevitably, destroy its illusive, special qualities. She argues this with reference to the trading of illegal wildlife and their constituent parts, inappropriate tourist behavior at the daily morning alms giving to monks, generic tourists from backpackers who demonstrate little respect for local culture and acceptable forms of behavior and a government in the sway of UNESCO that will do anything to chase tourist hard currency. In her description of the night market, Starin writes that tourists buy products "at prices totally incomprehensible to the local population" (Ibid. 641). Later she contends that "yes [Luang Prabang] is an oasis compared to next door [countries]. But for how long? Here, tourism is big business, really big businesses. Tourism is the engine that drives the Luang Prabang economy. UNESCO has made that possible" (Ibid. 644).

There is a startling lack of recognition of any degree of local agency anywhere in Starin's piece. There is absolutely no questioning of whether local people might choose to leave the historic heritage zone, and that their decisions to relocate to the suburbs and rent out their old homes may represent a choice rather than coercion. Nor is there any recognition of how people may make a choice to engage with tourism, be they guesthouse owners, tour operators or novice monks, save for a comment from a business owner about how business is going better due to rising numbers of visitors, and even his gain is placed in the context of negative consequences for the city overall. What she presents is a binary divide of tourists vs. locals, but a decidedly one-sided

² Starin argues that some of the handicrafts sold on the Luang Prabang Night Market are not actually local. My research in Luang Prabang indicates that she is correct on this point. The Luang Prabang Handicraft Association has now introduced a scheme whereby vendors can indicate that their products are handmade in the province. Further information can be found here: <https://luangprabanghandicraftassociation.weebly.com/about.html>

one as local voices are almost entirely silent in her piece. Starin positions herself away from the category of the bad tourist, who consumes Luang Prabang with no concern about the consequences. Starin reports how she feels very worried that “no concern has been voiced over the changes in social and cultural fabric of the town” (Ibid. 649). Detailed consideration of how anyone else feels about it, and the value of their own agency, is absent.

This is a major omission, because a cursory untangling the threads of tourism, heritage and different actors in Luang Prabang reveals a complex picture. Nostalgia, a longing for an idealized past is, as Berliner (2012) argues cogently, a major driving force for different actors in Luang Prabang but it is a grave error to consider that it exists in a singular form. Instead, Luang Prabang represents a battleground where different understandings and agendas of preservation of the past are played out between tourists with differing needs and expectations, heritage professionals, local and national governments and so on. Like Berliner, I have encountered often self-appointed heritage professionals in Luang Prabang, who have very specific ideas about what should be preserved and how. I have also documented large numbers of locals who are very happy to take advantage of interest in the heritage zone through renting out their old houses there and relocating to modern homes in the suburbs. This has several advantages including much cheaper land and options to use much cheaper building materials as well as places with stronger communities, better amenities and the ability not to live in a museum space. This shows sharply that depopulation of central Luang Prabang is not a completely passive process. For them, heritage and interest in the architecture of heritage is profit, in economic terms but also in quality of life.

Business and profit from heritage in Luang Prabang happens in a myriad of ways. Starin is particularly critical of tourist behavior around Tak-Baat or the daily offerings of alms to monks. She wonders if this ancient ritual has become a sort of sideshow illustrated for tourists” (2008, 643). While complaints from both academic literature, tourists and locals who have witnessed this in Luang Prabang, a growing amount of scholarship in this area recognizes that this is not merely about bad tourist behaviour (Berliner 2012; Suntikul and Jachna 2013). Starin herself notes the present of street vendors attempting to sell offerings that tourists can give to monks but fails to consider that these vendors are Lao too. Large tour groups now make up more and more of the people donating offerings in central Luang Prabang, often in the company of Lao tour guides. In late 2017, I was told by a former novice monk that the local government had prohibited novice monks from wearing blankets over robes during the winter season despite the cold temperatures at dawn on the grounds that these were not aesthetically pleasing to tourists. While I had no way of verifying that information at the time, even the suggestion raises an important question: what is the role of the local population, including the local authorities, in the changing nature of almsgiving? Like Berliner, I have noted that while tourists may describe encounters with monks in idealistic language of beauty and sincerity, monks are able to exploit visitor interest in their lives for very immediate material and often financial gain. Holt notes novice monks providing information to tourists that are clearly rehearsed for the purpose of obtaining something back from visitors in return (Holt 2009). I was asked for money by a novice monk I had chatted with several times previously in return for him answering some of my research questions. Scholars investigating Buddhism in Laos directly note an ongoing change as more boys ordaining as novices come from ethnic minorities with little history of Buddhism and less ethnic Lao

interest in actually becoming monks (Holt 2009; Ladwig 2013). I suggest this has much to do with wider societal changes in Laos as it seeks to develop, and who wins and who loses out of this process of development. For the lowland Lao, ordination as a novice monk is a means to social mobility which is no longer as necessary as it once was. For boys living in the countryside, it represents a very economic and real-world choice. Luang Prabang and how people encounter and perform its heritage are changing, and this UNESCO is not the only factor in this.

Unfortunately, Starin does not consider any of this. Instead her conclusion is clear: UNESCO certification is bad, and Luang Prabang being in its thrall will, inevitably, ruin itself as more of it is turned over to tourist engagement and the historic center depopulates. In the arrival of UNESCO and the undesirable effects of tourism therein lie the seeds of destruction for Luang Prabang. She concludes her article with a rhetorical question:

Was the World heritage label the “kiss of death”? Will this designation lead to the sort of tsunami of tourists-friendly, tourist-necessary development that threatens the very cultural character and treasures it was meant to preserve? Has it given birth to a premature mad dash for modernization, development, and tourism representing almost as serious a threat to Laos and its people and its culture as incursions and colonial ambitions and mad bombing campaigns did in the past?” (2008, 652)

This is the only occasion in which she says anything critical about the French colonial period. This is somewhat ironic when French colonial architecture is one of the major reasons for the UNESCO celebration of Luang Prabang. The analogy with the war is an interesting one with its images of utter devastation that it evokes, helpfully illustrated at the end of the article with a picture of the logo to clear the unexploded ordinance (UXO) from Laos. I suggest this is a cheap point, as Luang Prabang city was not itself directly involved in the bombings of the secret war (Banfman 1972, Warner 1997). The conflation between tourism, UNESCO and bombs is dramatized and rather distasteful. There is now a museum in Luang Prabang devoted to this, yet this is more about accessing the large numbers of visitors to the city, who may also donate much needed funds to help clear the UXO. It could also be indicative of exploiting tourist interest in Laos to assist in resolving a serious humanitarian problem. Even if so, this would also represent something far more material than the special and illusive spiritual Luang Prabang that Starin hoped to find.

Luang Prabang: multiple actors in multiple space

It is surprising that while Starin’s article raises some very big questions, direct engagement with her piece among scholarship on Luang Prabang has been so limited. I suggest that this is largely because most scholars are wary of taking such a categorical position on a complex question reduced to such a closed mode of enquiry. Yet the themes raised by Starin and their complexity have a long history in other contexts (Avieli 2015; Hitchcock and King 2003; Herzfeld 1991; Joy 2010). Returning to Berliner’s piece on nostalgia in Luang Prabang, what he notes as ideas of nostalgia, a longing for an idealized past coupled with a feeling of sadness that the present is somehow worse or threatening to become so, are exactly the feelings that Starin articulates in her piece but his only direct engagement with Starin is a brief nod to her

work as “an alarmist perspective” (2012, 784). I agree but note that Berliner demonstrates why in his own article. Starin’s worries about UNESCO and the rising tide of tourism are presented as things that everyone who cares about the future of Luang Prabang should, apparently, care about. My argument joins with Berliner’s in considering that Luang Prabang as diverse and even agendas of celebrating an idealized version of the past, of nostalgia, are multiple.

Berliner helpfully distinguishes between what he terms endo-nostalgia and exo-nostalgia (Ibid. 781). In the former, this relates to nostalgia for a past for which one has personal experience, which would include members of the Lao diaspora who hold memories of Luang Prabang from an earlier time and perhaps even from before the revolution in 1975. It can also apply to elderly members of the local population who have a long memory through which to view societal change in the city. In the latter category, exo-nostalgia, people long for a past in which they have no personal experience. As Berliner notes, exo-nostalgia is common amongst visitors to Luang Prabang and similarly, among all those who seek to preserve it to a state of imagined past other than anything they have personally experienced. In my argument, Starin’s error resides firmly in the second category: she assumes that her concerns about UNESCO and rising tourism development in Laos would be felt by anyone else in her position, yet has no personal reference point in the past on which to base her concern at what she sees as the city’s inevitable decline.

Staiff and Bushell do not share this gloomy outlook. For them, the question of whether UNESCO empowers locals or not is unclear. They argue that the starting point for considering that question should be that Luang Prabang, like anywhere else, is neither static nor frozen in time, and that it would be a grave error to even consider that it should be, a criticism I level at Starin in this article. For Staiff and Bushell “Luang Prabang is, and will continue to be, a place that is constantly remade in a non-directional and non-linear process of endlessly becoming” (2013, 109). I agree that UNESCO certification has brought change to Luang Prabang partly through its branding, which encourages tourists to visit but I would not argue that it is the only transformative force. UNESCO’s rules have consequences for local people, yet I have been told repeatedly that these are important for ensuring that tourists will continue to come, which is essential for people’s livelihoods. As Dearborn and Stallmeyer (2009) note, this means that Luang Prabang has been transformed and is still in a process of transformation. But given that nothing is static, that is no surprise. Nor should it be.

I have interviewed many people in Luang Prabang, usually local elites or expatriates, who hold reservations about tourism or certain aspects of tourism in Luang Prabang and who may claim that their position is the correct one to the exclusion of all others. Yet the extent to which they would also see UNESCO as culpable in damaging Luang Prabang is not made out, with many people across the city regarding UNESCO in multiple ways. One Lao guesthouse manager told me that UNESCO’s previously mentioned building restrictions may be seen as onerous and regulations applied inconsistently. However, he also regarded them as an organization with which it was possible to negotiate, a strategy that he utilized when trying to gain approval for a new guesthouse within the heritage zone. Another informant, a Western expatriate had some surprisingly positive words about UNESCO in contrast to the local population, who she regarded as being too ignorant to take care of Luang Prabang’s heritage. In a walking interview with me through the heritage zone, she pointed at a crumbling wall and commented that UNESCO would eventually

order something done about it and how that was positive, as otherwise nothing would ever be completed. She finished this description by telling me that: “in this town, UNESCO is the best thing that has ever happened”.

Long and Sweet (2006) note that Luang Prabang’s cultural value, to UNESCO at least, lies in its past and not in it being a living town today. Its appeal lies in its exoticism, and UNESCO is instrumental in recognizing this. Staiff and Bushell (2013) argue that the empowering qualities of UNESCO are unclear, but that locals are quick to talk about how UNESCO helps make the town beautiful, and this sort of beauty is the reason given by many visitors for the visit in the first place. This echoes with my own research in Luang Prabang. Many locals are pleased to see rising tourist interest in their town, with one interlocutor telling me about how people visit because “they want to see nature and old stuff” and how “it is important that people see how we have preserved stuff from the past up until the present day”. Many people are positive about tourists visiting Luang Prabang, even if many also apologize for their low levels of knowledge about UNESCO and what it actually does. They may talk about heritage, (*morhladok*), which Berliner points out is a new word in Lao to use in this context. I would also suggest that low levels of knowledge about UNESCO may stem from the invisibility of some of UNESCO’s work, even if its regulations have tangible effects. These same people can however talk often quite extensively about China and the growing visibility of China in the landscape of Luang Prabang.

“If I learn Chinese, I’ll never be out of a job”

At the time of writing this article, I was struck by a new discussion taking place on a Facebook group for Luang Prabang about rising Chinese presence in the city and how Chinese business owners planned to turn an empty building in the heritage zone into a Chinese restaurant. Reactions to this followed the same predictable form I had encountered in this group previously, with some other members of this group (both Western expatriate and elite local Lao) criticizing the Chinese business owner with increasing volume and suggesting that rising numbers of Chinese business interests in Luang Prabang are unwelcome because they have no respect for Lao culture. This particular discussion was played out online, but it is not uncommon for people all across Lao society to talk about rising China. This exchange is important because it underlines the depth of feeling about Chinese in Laos across the population, not merely from those who were most likely to be subject to the most negative consequences of Chinese influence, for example those relocated from land needed for Chinese backed infrastructure projects.

Laos is a poor country, and discourse from the Lao government is that the country needs to develop urgently. Current government plans are for Laos to exit Least Developed Country status by 2025 and become a middle-income country in the years that follow. These are ambitious targets, and subject to increasing criticism that they will lead to growing societal inequality. But in attempting fast-track development of the country, it is not difficult to see how mega infrastructure projects are of interest to the Lao authorities. One does not need to venture far outside Luang Prabang to see hydropower projects. Many tourists now arrive in Luang Prabang through its new airport, which opened in 2013. This gives the impression of a modern city, but its construction also incurred significant resettlement, new forms of poverty and considerable national debt for the country (Sims 2015). Doing this in the name of development is happening again as part of the construction of the Lao-China Railway,

on which people will also soon be able to arrive in Luang Prabang. For the first time, this will link China with Thailand through a high speed rail line that will run approximately half the territory of Laos. The projected end date for this project is 2021 and is easily the most ambitious infrastructure project in Laos yet. Such a project will inevitably cause upheaval for those subject to relocation. Widespread concerns were identified to me by both expatriates and locals about inadequate compensation and the cost of the project to what remains a very poor country. People also expressed concerns about who would benefit from such a project. What is clear is that this project will bring Chinese influence directly to the city of Luang Prabang in a much more immediate way than has been the case previously merely by making Laos much more accessible to China. The station is to be located outside the city center and away from the heritage zone. But even so, how this very immediate and tangible need for development intersects with ideas of timelessness, and how the two can be managed is of course another question that will require further research in the coming years.

Of course, throughout its history, Luang Prabang has been shaped by a wide range of different people and events. Presently, increasing Chinese influence is again changing the urban landscape of Luang Prabang and is making its presence felt increasingly. This is largely unsurprising as Chinese investments in Laos already far outweigh the country's GDP and is particularly apparent in infrastructure projects (Ignatius 2016). In cities, large numbers of Chinese owned and operated businesses are increasingly obvious. These include restaurants, hotels and supermarkets. Signage in Mandarin in Luang Prabang is increasingly common. Berliner (2012) noted complaints from Thai tourists that signage should be in Thai to accommodate large numbers of Thai visitors. It is notable that a large amount of signage now does feature a third language in addition to Lao and English, and that third language is Mandarin. My argument here is a straightforward one: whatever the concerns of the local population about UNESCO, these are likely to be dwarfed by their opinions of rising China and Chinese influence in Luang Prabang. In other words, Starin's question is now clearly outdated: in the main, people have other things to think and worry about.

The small but growing body of literature on Chinese influence in Laos has focused predominantly on economic activities, which involve traffic via the Lao-China border. Although there are ten Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in Laos, the two along the Lao China border have earned a profound reputation as mega playgrounds where it is possible for Chinese nationals to break Lao laws (Laungaramsri 2014; Lyttleton and Nyíri 2011). However, Chinese influence elsewhere in the country is expanding and deserves critical attention. There are now five Chinese owned and operated supermarkets in Luang Prabang itself including one within the heritage zone itself, which locals regarded as a significant change within the city's urban landscape. There is also a Chinese market in Luang Prabang, in which mainly Chinese-made goods are sold to both Chinese migrants and to local shoppers. My interlocutors reflected to me that the prices here were cheap, even though quality was often somewhat lacking. This desire for modernity, material goods and the so-called good life is noted increasingly in literature on China's influence in developing countries and to Laos itself, even if it comes at a cost to the local economy (Alden 2005; Brautigam 2011; Lyttleton and Li 2017). My participants bemoaned the rising plethora of Chinese products in Luang Prabang, yet they still patronized Chinese shops and markets to get good prices on what they wished to buy. Others worked willingly with Chinese businesses, and many have been quick to tell me that they feel the Chinese have the possibility to flout Lao laws. Other interlocutors have been quick to tell me that while

China may help Laos develop and in so doing help people escape poverty, China is likely to emerge from these encounters with greater benefit than Laos. That they were aware of this, yet still viewed China with levels of pragmatism and ambivalence shows through their own lives and bodies that this is a complicated, and contradictory issue.

Chinese influence comes in many different forms. In 2019, a branch of Chinese store Miniso had opened in the very center of the heritage zone in central Luang Prabang. Numbers of Chinese tourists are increasing and many of my closest participants had worked in tourism-related businesses including restaurants and guesthouses that cater to increasing numbers of Chinese. One attended a job interview at a Chinese managed hotel just outside the heritage zone and left disillusioned when it became clear that Mandarin language skills were a clear prerequisite to obtaining a job. Another went to university in China and returned to Laos confident that his Chinese language skills would secure him at least a reasonably well-paid job given that Mandarin speakers are so much in demand. Many were studying Chinese via free classes in Luang Prabang and dreamed of studying or working in China. Younger people especially can talk far more about China than about UNESCO, and often have a very tangible connection with China through Chinese manufactured material goods. This is only likely to increase once the railway connection is operational as the possibility to move large amounts of stuff and numbers of people much more quickly becomes a tangible reality.

Starin may well be horrified at the thought of Luang Prabang changing and its tourist demographic moving from backpackers to Chinese tourists, who often travel in groups, yet this is increasingly evident in Luang Prabang and I have heard complaints about them from tourists from Western countries. A French tourist with whom I shared a table in a coffee shop was quick to tell me how the Chinese have no respect for the local culture. This is a comment to which I made a private smile, given that the same allegation has been made about tourists from Western countries for at least the past two decades. Starin would perhaps find it comforting that very few Western tourists I encountered in Luang Prabang in the years since railway construction began have any knowledge of the coming railway. This of course interjects different needs into an existing tourist market as tourist priorities are not universal either. Tourists from other countries though might well be pleased. Wandering through the heritage zone on the way to work one day, I overheard a Chinese tourist remark to her Lao tour guide: "it's really nice here, but it's so underdeveloped. Where are all the high-rise buildings?" This observation demonstrates that ideas about what constitutes development are by no means universal. One person's ideas of utopia, development and beauty would therefore appear to constitute nightmare flaw or shortcoming to another (Laungaramsri 2014; Lyttleton and Nyíri 2011; Nyíri 2006). Interestingly, Starin comments at length on the illegal wildlife trade in Luang Prabang, particularly of the component parts of animals. This remains an issue in Luang Prabang, yet customers are overwhelmingly Chinese and arguably it is largely this market that is driving this trade (Vigne and Martin 2017).

In Luang Prabang itself, some participants argued that UNESCO could and would take an important role ensure that such a project did not change the special nature of the town, which is so appealing to visitors from Western countries and important for the local economy. Others I interviewed were considerably more concerned that Chinese influence would change Luang Prabang irreparably by bringing Chinese influence both in substance and in form much closer to the town

than previously and there being seemingly no meaningful regulation on this whatever the official statements might say to the contrary. Of course, this is still a new and emerging phenomenon but concerns about China's ability to transform Luang Prabang far outweigh any grumbling about UNESCO I have ever documented in Luang Prabang.

Conclusion

Thirty years before Starin wrote the essay that is the focus of this paper, a young scholar writing shortly after the revolution that established Laos as a one-party state and looking back at the period of time preceding those tumultuous events, observed that: "Luang Prabang is a city whose surface beauty is only the outward evidence of an inner charm which has captivated numerous visitors. That charm, though present throughout Laos, is most obvious in the glorious setting of Luang Prabang itself" (Barber 1979, i.)

Charm in a glorious setting: this is the sort of image that Starin had in her imagination when she went to Luang Prabang. Instead, she found a place subject to different agendas and drivers of change, only one of which is UNESCO. She was understandably concerned at what she saw as the negative transformative qualities of mass tourism increasing since the UNESCO designation, which appeared to threaten this image of tranquility. Yet over forty years since Barber made this statement, and over a decade since the publication of Starin's essay, people still travel to Luang Prabang in search of such images. This suggests that if mass tourism really is endangering Luang Prabang, the predictions of doom have not yet been realized fully. Belief in that dream remains prominent in the imaginations of many visitors to the city. Some visitors are disappointed that this is not realized, some of which may be indeed due to over commercialization of Luang Prabang. In this, Starin's somewhat whimsically subtitled Letter from Luang Prabang may have some resonance. But that only reveals the surface of a situation that has much to do with different agendas and multiple actors. UNESCO may be partly responsible for encouraging people to visit, but what of individual and collective agency amongst actors in Luang Prabang?

That this question is complex is unsurprising. The picture is inevitably multifaceted. Starin's neat division between tourists vs locals inevitably does not hold up. Some locals may well complain about bad tourist behavior but much of the local population continues to argue that UNESCO certification is a good thing for Luang Prabang as it encourages people to come in the first place. Some of these locals may decide to rent out their old homes in the center and move elsewhere. While this may depopulate the center, it also indicates that they are not passive subjects swept along by a tsunami of tourism engendered by a kiss of death from UNESCO that sets this chain of events in motion. Likewise, the demography of tourists in Luang Prabang is undoubtedly changing, as numbers of tourists from so-termed Western countries show decline, and those from East Asia increase. Even among these labels, needs and expectations vary.

Presumably, the contemporary local authorities of Luang Prabang, in their desire to portray Luang Prabang as an ancient city of timeless splendor, would be thrilled with a statement such as Barber's that extols the city's charm and beauty but does not venture too far into its politics. Moreover, they would also be pleased at a statement that focuses squarely on the splendor of Luang Prabang, rather than the increasingly contentious issue of the presence of China. I have argued here that even

if the question of the merits of UNESCO certification of Luang Prabang were even still a particularly pertinent one, it is now secondary to a much bigger issue about how the city is changing now.

My argument here has been that the issue of rising China in Luang Prabang was presented to me as of being fundamentally important and was the one thing on which seemingly everyone has an opinion. I have demonstrated here that this cannot be reduced to a simple yes/no question. This manifests in grumbling about the numbers of Chinese drivers, Chinese businesses and growing numbers of Chinese people. China is entering the landscape of Laos, and Luang Prabang, in fundamental ways. In sum, my research suggests that UNESCO is not perceived as a major driver of social change amongst the population of Luang Prabang and given the very low levels of knowledge about UNESCO and what it does, I consider the extent to which it ever was by locals to be highly questionable. Instead, China and Chinese influence in Laos is a major force of change. For me, this is the important question to watch and which will bring about societal change. While some Chinese will of course visit Luang Prabang out of an interest in heritage, the idea that UNESCO alone will bring about the ultimate downfall of Luang Prabang is an outdated one. In 2019, this is not the only relevant question for contemporary Luang Prabang.

I have criticized Starin for an orientalist agenda, and failing to recognize local agency in her article, especially around how people negotiate the everyday experience of heritage in Luang Prabang. To be clear, I am not criticizing Starin or any of the other scholars in this article for not considering the issue of China in Laos. This is a recent phenomenon. I am however arguing that expecting to find a straightforward answer to whether something is good or bad is restrictive and unhelpful. The issue of China in Luang Prabang and Laos generally, is a complicated one that is multi-faceted and often contradictory as the city is subject to competing forces including UNESCO, Chinese interests, diverse groups of tourists, local and national authorities as well as the changing local population. This is a question that can and should be continued elsewhere. As a long term expatriate in Luang Prabang told me in August 2019, this is not a question of whether rising China will be a “kiss of death” for Luang Prabang but a question to approach with the mindset of “it is super difficult, but I am trying to be open-minded about it”. I am not ruling out the possibility for actual or implied conflict between the agendas of new Chinese in Luang Prabang and UNESCO’s agendas to preserve the town’s historic center. Considering how UNESCO’s work changes as Luang Prabang changes, this would be a very fruitful area for further research over the coming years.

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