

# Cultural Heritage Preservation of the Ancient City of Luang Prabang, Laos

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**ABSTRACT.** *Luang Prabang is a famous ancient capital and Buddhist center of Lao PDR, which has history of over 1000 years. The ancient city of Luang Prabang has been listed as a cultural heritage on the World Heritage List by UNESCO. However, with the development of globalization and the increase of tourists, the cultural heritage protection of the ancient city is greatly challenged. Due to changes in people's living environment and conditions, Luang Prabang's cultural heritage protection faces many problems. Therefore, this paper aims to analyse the cultural heritage resources of the ancient city Luang Prabang, to find out the problems in protecting the culture of the ancient city and to give suggestions of cultural heritage preservation of the Ancient City of Luang Prabang.*

**Keywords:** *Cultural Heritage Preservation, ancient city, Luang Prabang*

## 1. Introduction

Luang Prabang is a city in the north of Lao PDR, which is 300 km away from the capital Vientiane. It is formerly the capital of the kingdom and also known by the ancient name of Chiang Thong. Until the communist takeover in 1975, it was the royal capital and seat of government of the Kingdom of Laos.[1]

Luang Prabang is located on a peninsula at the confluence of the Nam Khan and

Mekong River. The center of the designated unesco town consists of 3 main roads. The population of the city as a whole is roughly 56,000 inhabitants with the unesco protected site being inhabited by around 24,000[2]. Luang Prabang has both natural and historical sites. The town is well known for its numerous Buddhist temples and monasteries. And among the natural tourism sites are the Kuang Si Falls, Tat Sae Waterfalls, and Pak Ou Caves.

The downtown of Luang Prabang takes on the shape of L with an area of around two square kilometers, surrounded by mountains. Most of the residents of Luang Prabang are Lao Nationality. Two villages of Dai Nationality are located with a distance of three kilometers northeast to the downtown. In the mountainous areas of the southeast of the downtown, there are also villages of Meng Nationality (Miao), Yao Nationality and Kamu Nationality. In addition, there are also overseas Chinese and foreign residents from Vietnam, Thailand, India and Pakistan. All overseas Chinese and overseas Indians and Pakistanis live in the commercial zone along Sisawangwong road in the downtown. Hence, this district is also called “China Street“. Most of the overseas Chinese come from Chaozhou of Guangdong, Hakka, Guangzhou, Hainan and a few of them are from Guangxi and Yunnan.[3]

Luang Prabang is the oldest surviving town in Laos. It is the best preserved capital of the capital city of Southeast Asia. The residents believe in Buddhism and there are more than 30 temples within the city. It is a veritable Buddha capital. In 1995, UNESCO listed the ancient city of Luang Prabang as a cultural heritage on the World Heritage List[4]. Every morning, the monks would walk along the street. And the believers would kneel along the street waiting for offering. When the monks of the various temples came in line, the believers give alms with food and drinks to the monks. This daily behavior has become a beautiful scenery in the eyes of travelers.

Cultural heritage contains the unique spiritual values, ways of thinking, and imagination of the nation. It embodies the vitality and creativity of the people and is the crystallization of the wisdom of the local people. However, with the development of globalization and the increase of tourists, the cultural heritage protection of the ancient city is greatly challenged. At present, Luang Prabang's cultural heritage protection faces many problems. Due to changes in people's living environment and conditions, the ethnic and regional cultural characteristics are disappearing gradually. Therefore, it is imperative to strengthen the protection of

cultural heritage of the ancient city of Luang Prabang.

## **2. Methodology**

Qualitative research is used in this study. This paper seeks to analyse the cultural heritage resources and the significance of the ancient city Luang Prabang, to find out the problems in protecting the ancient city and to give suggestions of cultural heritage preservation of Luang Prabang. For this purpose, this study applies three methodology. First, literature scan was conducted and applied research about Luang Prabang and cultural heritage of the ancient city Luang Prabang were evaluated. Following the review of literature, observation method was executed. Finally, data collection was mainly based on field investigation of in-depth interviews. The key informants are the experts and people with specific knowledge of Luang Prabang. The casual informants are local people of Luang Prabang and the general informants are the people of external world.

## **3. Results and discussion**

### ***3.1. Analysis of the cultural heritage of the ancient city- Luang Prabang***

#### ***3.1.1 Cultural Heritage: Material and Non-material cultural heritages***

Cultural heritage includes tangible and intangible cultural heritages in terms of concept, including material and non-material cultural heritages. Material cultural heritage refers to the cultural relics of historical, artistic and scientific values; while non-material cultural heritage refers to the traditional cultural manifestation patterns close to the masses' life that exist in the non-material form and are passed down from generation to generation. [5]

Tangible cultural heritage refers to the "cultural heritage" in the traditional sense, which includes historical relics, historical architecture and human cultural heritage according to the *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (World Heritage Convention for short)*. Material cultural heritage includes immovable cultural relics such as ancient relics, ancient tombs, ancient buildings, stone cave temples, stone carving, fresco, modern and contemporary

important historical relics and representative architecture and movable relics such as important objects, works of art, literature, manuscripts, books and reference materials, etc.; as well as historical and cultural cities (blocks and villages) that have outstanding universal value in terms of architecture styles, homogeneous distribution and combination with environmental landscape. [6]

According to the definition in *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* issued by UNESCO, intangible cultural heritage refers to various practices, performances, demonstration forms, knowledge and skills and related tools, material objects, handiwork and cultural sites deemed by the groups, teams and sometimes individuals as the cultural heritages. [7]

Non-material cultural heritage includes: oral narration and presentation, including the languages as the media of non-material cultural heritage; performing arts; social customs, etiquette and festivals; knowledge and practice related to nature and the universe; Traditional handiwork skills. Non-material cultural heritage refers to various manifestation patterns of traditional cultures (such as folk literature, folk activities, performance arts, traditional knowledge and skills and related tools, material objects and handiwork products, etc.) and cultural space (the sites that hold traditional cultural activities on a regular basis or show the manifestation forms of traditional cultures in a centralized form, such as song fair, temple fair and traditional festivals, etc.).

Non-material cultural heritage is also known as intangible cultural heritage, mainly referring to the folk cultural heritage that is passed down in the way of oral or action feathered with national and historical accumulations and widespread and outstanding representativeness, which is once honored as "living fossil" of history and culture and "back profile of national memories".

### ***3.2 Significance of "Ancient City" of Luang Prabang***

Generally speaking, the historical and cultural cities and towns show a kind of form, gathering of buildings and a special gathering of forms and modes with thousands of year's history. Such form includes entity objects, such as folk house, temple, road and bridge, gatehouse, public architecture and other buildings as well as various so-called spaces, such as street and square. This is the city and town that

we often mention. City and town is known by its form, while the historical and cultural cities and towns have more meanings due to the continuity of its history, which include various information such as construction and techniques, space and form, material and color in the form. Hence, the form of the ancient city of Luang Prabang itself is an existence of logo and history with self-evident value.

But the meaning or value of the "ancient city" is not just as simple as the form. City is dwelling and life, the space and site for the living activities of vivacious people. Each ancient city has a vivid history, narrating the remote and renewed life of the late and living people. The Luang Prabang ancient city also has its own story.

Hence the ancient city of Luang Prabang not only means several sparse or dense houses, wide or narrow streets, small or big squares, but also a group of specific people live in the ancient city, who have gathered there and have formed common and specific lifestyles and thinking modes in the long history. This is the culture of the ancient city.

The culture of the ancient city is the real meaning for the ancient city to exist and the core of the value of the ancient city. To return to the culture is the key to correctly knowing the ancient city. The nature of protecting the ancient city is to protect the culture of the ancient city.

What we need to rethink about is our understanding of the ancient city and its culture. The ancient city and its architecture in the ancient city are the material cultural heritage of the ancient city, which is a kind of visible and touchable "hardware culture", while the behavioral mode and the ideology of people in the ancient city is the spiritual part of the ancient city, which is a kind of "software culture", or known as "non-material cultural heritage". "Hardware culture" and "software culture" are both the important components of the culture of ancient city.

Therefore, in terms of protection of the ancient city, we should protect not only its material cultural heritage, but also its non-material cultural heritage. We should protect not only the objects, but also the humankind and "spirit" of the ancient city. The ancient city with spirits is lively.

### ***3.3 Problems in protecting the culture of ancient city of Luang Prabang***

Luang Prabang is an outstanding example of the fusion of traditional architecture and Lao urban structures with those built by the European colonial authorities in the 19th and 20th centuries[8]. According to the interview of the foreign tourists and the local residents in Luang Prabang, they held the opinions that under the background of globalization and urbanization, relatively speaking, it was not easy for Luang Prabang to retain the primitive atmosphere. However, in the past ten years, it was inevitably influenced and some changes have taken place in the city as well.

3.3.1 In the past ten years, with the development of tourism, urbanization of Luang Prabang was aggravated. Many buildings retained the styles of the ancient architecture; however, it was built or renovated by imitating the ancient architecture instead of retaining the original architecture[9].

3.3.2 With the popularity of commercialized atmosphere in Luang Prabang, there are more and more shops developed in the downtown of Luang Prabang.

3.3.3 Many residences in the downtown of Luang Prabang have been purchased by non-local people and foreigners, while many original residents have moved out of Luang Prabang and emigrated to other places, and even to foreign countries. At present, there are fewer original residents in the downtown of Luang Prabang, most of whom live in suburb or villages.

3.3.4 Tourists brought new way of life to Luang Prabang and left lots of garbage to the city.

#### **4. Suggestions of cultural heritage preservation of the Ancient City of Luang Prabang**

##### ***4.1 Protection of the "city"***

Protection of the "city" is the protection of the tangible cultural heritage. Firstly, it means to preserve the ancient city, the historical remains, architecture, streets and the object traces and scenes remained in the histories. Secondly, it is to preserve the natural environment and various man-made environments closely related to the ancient city, such as landscape features, farmland landscape and wood vegetation, etc. In Luang Prabang, the historical architecture has been well protected as well as streets and textures of the ancient city including the waters and mountains

surrounding the ancient city, which is well worth approving and persevering and learning by other countries in terms of cultural protection of the ancient cities.

Luang Prabang is the fusion of traditional architecture and Lao urban structures. Its unique, remarkably well-preserved townscape illustrates a key stage in the blending of these two distinct cultural traditions. Therefore, protection objects of Luang Prabang shall include many important religious regions, administrative architectures and shops, the traditional architecture and the colonial architecture in the first half of the 20th century; the natural preservation zone consisting of the wetland zone, river bank zone, forest land zone and PhouSi Mountain zone.

Architecture diversity(Figure 1) and superposition of urban architecture in the colonial period and traditional village dwelling are the main features of urban architecture of Luang Prabang[10]. There are lush vegetation, several important religious facilities, administrative architecture with the colonial style and the residential architecture in the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century in the downtown of the city.



*Figure 1: Architectures and shops in the ancient city of Luang Prabang*

In addition, there is plenty of water area in Luang Prabang, which creates the quiet and verdant atmosphere in the central wetland of the residential area. The region along the right bank of Mekong River still retains the architectural style of Laotian traditional villages. The structure and decoration of temple architecture are the essence of Laotian art and the rare heritage of Lane Xang culture. Temple architecture is not only religious site, but also the education site, the nursing home and the living center in the villages.

#### *4.2 Protection of the people of Luang Prabang*

"People" is the cohesion between the tangible cultural heritage and intangible cultural heritage[11]. It is necessary to preserve the people living in the ancient city, who grow up with the ancient city and gather there for generations. The grass and wood, house and tile, street and scenery in the ancient city are all built by them, who is the ancient city. Their history is the history of the ancient city, their story is the story of the ancient city. Therefore, the protection of the ancient city is closely related to these people, these indigenous locals. On the street of Luang Prabang or in the room, we can see the local residents(Figure 2) in Laos who get up early to give alms or lie in the rooms peacefully or go in and go out with the slippers or walk on the street with a cloth pouch. Only the existence of these local residents makes the tourists feel that they are in Luang Prabang rather than somewhere else.

Man and scenes should be a combo in an inseparable overall relationship. In Luang Prabang, the unity of man and scenes leads to the coordination of scene and builds this specific time-space scene.



*Figure 2: The local resident of Luang Prabang*

Many original residents move out of Luang Prabang and emigrate to other places, or even in foreign countries. At present, there are fewer original residents in the downtown of Luang Prabang. Therefore, while developing tourism, Luang Prabang should also consider to adequately maintain the local original residents for the local people should be the main body and owners here. The original resident is the culture



of historical block. If they totally move out of the place, there is no historical charming left in the block. The original resident is the foundation of developing tourism and business, who should be maintained. Through combining the unique traditional appearances of Luang Prabang, develop the special commerce, residence and tourism, maintain some original residents and improve the vitality of Luang Prabang.

#### *4.3 Protection of the spirits*

Protection of the "spirits" is the protection of intangible cultural heritage. To be precise, it should be the protection of spirits or vitality. Continuity of the spirits of the ancient city is prolongation and growth of culture (Figure 3). The maintenance of object is one kind of preservation in a still state.



*Figure 3: The temples and glutinous rice culture of Luang Prabang*

According to interview of local monks, residents and Dr. Souneth Phothisane, five philosophical spirits of Laos are summarized as follows (five "good")[12]:

- (1) Good dwelling environment. In terms of dwelling, it is featured with naturalness, simplicity, convenience, comfort instead of luxuries.
- (2) Good walking (referring to good places in the comfortable way).
- (3) Good talking.
- (4) Good deeds.

(5) Good thinking (good thinking and ideas).

## 5. Conclusion

To maintain the residents is one of the first step of cultural protection. Original residents are the creators and owners of the history and culture of the ancient city, who determined the past of the culture of the ancient culture and will create the future of the culture of the ancient culture. Of course, only when owning enough cultural confidence and cultural consciousness, they have the ability and courage to pass down the culture.

All in all, in order to protect the ancient city of Luang Prabang, the original appearance of the ancient city, the peaceful and relaxing atmosphere should be maintained, where the tourists can feel the uniqueness of Luang Prabang.

Meanwhile, it is also necessary to protect the special behavior modes of people in the ancient city, the special cultural temperament of people, protect and extend their spirits as well as folklore, customs, language, music, dance, rites, festival, eating culture and traditional medicine of Luang Prabang, which is part of the culture of Luang Prabang. Only with the protection and inheritance, the ancient city can be keep with vitality of growth, the unique characteristic, and charm of Luang Prabang can be maintained and expanded.

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