

## **Luang Prabang, Economy, Society and Culture**

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**Abstract:** Laos is a nation rich in historical background and culture. The earliest evidence of a united nation is during the ancient Laos kingdom of *Lan Chang*. Major changes in government occurred in 1975 when the government changed to Socialism bringing in Socialist economic policies and Communist ideology. Trade and commerce was mostly with Communist governments and allies. New economic policies were introduced in 1986 due to the collapse of the Soviet Union. The implementation of New Economic Mechanism has brought many benefits to communities, raising the level of income and a growing tourism industry. The economy is advancing with the rise of both imports and exports. Laos has opened up and accepted foreign aid and many joint projects and investment ventures with >30 foreign nations. Educational system development is progressing but needs continued support and financial resources. There are 20 educational projects funded by foreign nations and international groups to develop and modernize educational systems. *Luang Prabang* is Laos 4th largest city and is recognized by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. The city is famously known as the Best preserved City in Southeast Asia. *Luang Prabang* has many cultural tourist attractions and beautiful natural surroundings. Thailand and Laos are neighbors and have close relations with one another. Thailand is also a preferred choice and destination for Lao students seeking degrees in many campuses and studies. Cooperation between both countries will contribute and benefit the society, culture, economy and tourism bringing prosperity to both nations.

**Key words:** Laos, *Luang prabang*, society, economy, culture, education development

### **INTRODUCTION**

Laos is a country rich in history and culture. Historical evidence can be found in valleys where important rivers basins such as the Mekong, Kahn and Ooo river. Bronze drums or Frog drums have been found near the *Dong* river south of *Luang Prabang* symbolizing the cultural connection with the *Dong Son* Culture discovered in North Vietnam (Boonpraset, 2005). Earliest archaeological evidence of a united Kingdom emerged in the early 14th century when King *Fa Ngum* established the Kingdom of *Lan Chang* by uniting the 3 ancient kingdoms of *Vientiane*, *Champasuk* and *Luang Prabang*. The kingdom of *Lan Chang* flourished for centuries and was then annexed by Thailand and later governed under French Colonial rule. Uneasy democratic government and instability following freedom from France eventually led to civil war. Laos was liberated in 1975 by Lao freedom fighters and united the country under the name Lao People's Democratic Republic or Lao PDR on December 2nd 1975. Socialist economic policies were instigated to develop the country and trade was primarily with socialist governments and communist allies. The fall of the Soviet Union in 1989 influenced change in economic

policies and Laos has responded to the phenomenon by initiating new economic policies and management. The nation has opened up to foreign trade and investment, which has helped developed a market economy, modern education and prosperous society.

Thailand and Laos are neighboring countries with related historic backgrounds. Relationships have strengthened and both are at peace with each other. Many joint ventures and cooperative projects have been made between private and government organizations. Most apparent is the exchange in education. Continued cooperation and support between Thailand and Laos will greatly benefit the economy, society and preserve the cultures of both nations.

### **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Research area and methods:** The research is a qualitative research conducted during January-October 2007. Field study and data collection was carried out by methods of field studies, interviews with documented questionnaires and surveys. Document analysis was applied to gain external data to comprehend the findings and Descriptive Analysis was applied to verify the findings and present

the final analysis. The main purpose of this research is to provide a knowledge base to extend the understanding of Laos in aspects of the country's history, economy, society and culture and to introduce the cultural beauties of *Luang Prabang*.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Government and administration:** The government consists of 3 main principle institutions.

**The Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP):** The LPRP adhere to Marxist-Leninists Political Philosophy and is the highest body elected by the people. All policies and management are overlooked by the Military, which include all institutions such as ministries, schools, hospitals and municipals throughout the country.

**Central government institutions:** Consists of 3 institutes and local administrations, which include. The Supreme People's Assembly or SPA, which represents all citizens. The SPA is responsible for drafting and approving Legislature, Constitution, Economic Policies and the National Budget, Congress is the highest management institution providing for all citizens and the management of 13 ministries and 3 organizations. The People's court exercises and enforces the law throughout the country, Laos local administrations are established by the factors of economic, tribal origins, management and historical origins (Committee, 2005). Currently, there are 16 *Kwaeng* or Provinces, 141 *Muang* or cities and 10,547 villages in modern days Lao PDR .

**Public organizations:** Are the collective assemblies from the general public, that have joined together to fulfill the needs and responsibilities to society. These groups are formed by the LPRP and supported by the central government. These groups include:

- Laos Revolutionary Youths (*Klum Yaowachon Patiwat Lao*), which follow directives from the LPRP to protect the nation, develop the economy and support socialism.
- Laos Labor Union responsibility is to study and train important labor resources and to help and develop the livelihood of labor forces to protect the nation.
- Laos Women's Union is responsible for the study and development of women, upholding women's rights and protecting the nation.
- The Laos Front for National Construction is the largest organization, which overlooks all genders,

ages, tribes and religions. The group's responsibility is the building a solid foundation of human resources to govern the nation, keeping the peace and maintaining Laos culture and education. Other responsibilities include upholding the unity between tribes and to support religious freedom and the equality of all citizens to have faith in Socialism under the guidance of the LPRP.

**Economy:** The Development of Laos economy can be divided in 2 periods:

- Freedom movement-Socialist economy (1975-1985).
- Socialist economy-Market Driven Economy (1986-current).

**Freedom movement-socialist economy:** After the change of government in 1975, Laos maintained socialist economic policies for a long duration from 1975-1985. Economic relations were mostly with communist and socialist governments. Trade and commerce was neutral until the breakup of the Soviet Union. The economy afterwards staggered and went into decline. Struggles, lack of commercial goods, inflation, management and inefficiency created widespread hardship. The government of Laos therefore decided that change was needed and reconsidered new economic policies. The New Economic Mechanism plans or NEM were drafted in 1981 and implemented in 1986.

Intermittent, medium and long goals were set to develop the country to be exempt from being an underdeveloped country by 2020. Goals included that average incomes in 2020 will be tripled of 2001. GDP no smaller than 7%. Elimination of mobile plantations and slash and burn farms within 2005. Lower the poverty rate by 50% within 2005. Eliminate the growing of Opium within 2005. After NEM policy was introduced, Laos has officially opened up trade negotiations with over 30 countries. Imports almost double the amount of exports. Most of the imports, are from Thailand and trade and investments have expanded with other Asian nations. Laos was accepted into the ASEAN organizations in 1977. Followed by registering on November 19, 2004 to become a member of the WTO. The Congress of The United States of America has also approved Normal Trade Relations (NTR) with Laos, which has benefited exports to America. Laos exports include textiles, electricity, forestry products, gold, coffee, minerals such as gypsum and lead and handicrafts.

**Education:** Laos education originally originated from Buddhist teaching systems during the period of the *Lan*

*Chang* Kingdom. Two kinds of schooling existed then. Religious studies called *Kadee Dharma* and Urban studies called *Kadee Lohk*. Monks and laymen's would study both courses. Basic studies would be held in temples and monasteries. Officials and the upper class would receive their education in the palace. Laymen and regular citizens would also be allowed if they showed determination. The building of temples would be interpreted as expanding educational institutions. Monks were teachers and Buddhist novices were students and cared for other ordinary citizens who were staying at the temples to study. Many levels of citizens were dependant on Buddhist temples and would stay until they finished their education. Monastery education in this form continued for many centuries. After the change to a Socialist government, Laos educational system changed to 3 levels, which are Elementary, Secondary and Graduate programs. Educational systems for Monks and Buddhist novices are also separated into 3 levels of Elementary, Secondary and Graduate studies. All educational levels still lack teaching facilities and campuses. There is only 1 Graduate institution for Monks in Laos located at the *Srang Kru Song Wat That Luang*. Laos has addressed this issue by allowing Monks and Novices to attend class with public citizens in primary schools in the Province of *Kwaeng Luang Nam Ta* in Northern Laos (Chantachon, 1998).

#### **Educational policy**

**Quality:** All levels of education must emphasize quality at all levels. Management and educational systems must be elevated to international standards.

**Participation:** Emphasizes public participation at all levels of education. Private and government organizations must all participate in the development of Education.

**Concept:** Laos promotes Socialist notions and order.

**Continuation:** Laos has a policy of continual education by expanding educational opportunities to all citizens to be able to attend Elementary, Secondary through to University level.

**International cooperation:** Laos promotes and accepts educational cooperation's and support from foreign countries and international organizations.

Elementary level is mandatory for all citizens, but the lack of funds has caused management problems and delayed development programs. Currently there are 10,697 elementary and secondary schools. But there are only

adequate books for 5,737 schools (Naetawong, 2000). Foreign financial services were utilized by borrowing from The World Bank, The Asian Bank, Private Funds and from foreign lenders. Laos has received foreign loans of >100 million dollars to finance 20 education projects (Papasarang, 1995).

Laos educational policy is in accordance with new economic policies by giving importance to expanding education to all levels of society with efficient management. But Laos is still limited in higher education institutions such as graduates studies and University campuses. Government officials especially in border provinces have been sent to study abroad in Thailand. Many of these students from 1976-2001 come from the Province of *Savannakhet*, *Champasak*, *Vientiane* and *Xaiyaburi*. Within the last 25 years there has been a steady flow of students from Laos enrolled in graduate studies and degrees in Thailand. But there are very few graduates of Doctorate degree. Thailand is 1 of 5 educational destinations for Lao students.

**Religion:** Earliest evidence of Buddhism in Laos starts from the Kingdom of *Lan Chang*. *Lan Chang* citizens acknowledge Buddhism as their religion, while tribal communities continue their beliefs in Animism. Many Buddhist institutions and temple yards were constructed during this period. Temples and monasteries were molded into the lives of ancient Lao communities.

The development of Buddhism in Laos is closely connected with Northeast Thailand. Evidence of pilgrimages of Buddhist monks from Laos in Northeast Thailand date's back as early as 478-541 AD. Historical texts have record the pilgrimages of Buddhist Monks titled *Phra Maha Rattana Thera*, *Phra Maha JularattanaThera*, *Phra Maha Suwanna Prasart Thera* and *Phra Maha Sanga Wichot Thera* travels in Northeast Thailand.

**The city of luang prabang:** *Luang Prabang* was once an independent kingdom and the capitol of ancient Laos. Today it is the 4th most populated city in Laos. The city's population is made up of 46% *Lao Therng* or Lao Highlanders, 40% *Lao Lum* or Lao Lowlanders and 14% are *Lao Soong* or Mountain Laos.

**Lao soong:** Are citizens that live in mountainous areas 1,000 meters above sea level. Most belong to Tibeto-Burmese and Sino-Burmese ethnic group. The most populous are *Mong* or *Maew*, which are divided into 4 groups called Red *Mong*, White *Mong* and Black *Mong*. Their tribal names come from the color of their native

clothing. Most live in Northern Laos and in the Province of *Bolikhamxai* in Central Laos. There are also groups of smaller tribes consisting of *Mien* or *Yao*, *Halu*, *Aka*, *Punoi*, which live in the Province of *Luangnamtha*, *Luang Prabang*, *Bokeo*, *Oudomxai* and *Phong Sali*.

**Lao therng:** Are citizens that live in the plateau or highland about 300-1,200 meters above seal level. Most live in Northern Laos and belong to the Mon and Khmer ethnic families, which include tribal *Kamu*, *Tin*, *Lamed*, *Bru*, *Katu*, *Katang* and *Ahluk*. The tribes are sometime referred to as *Kha* and commerce with other groups by trading metal tools, which is their specialty. It is believed that many of these tribes migrated from ancient India in the 4th century and eventually moved into *Suvannapoom* or Southeast Asia and finally into Laos (Vouthisouk, 2008).

**Lao lum:** Are citizens that live on the Mekong river basins and flat lands. Most are Tai-Lao ethnic groups, which are indigenous to Southeast Asia, Southern China and Northeast India in Assum.

Many *Luang Prabang* citizens are Buddhist, Animist and worship spirits and ghosts. Other cultural traditions practiced include the 12 monthly celebrations, Laos New Year and merit celebrations. Merit celebrations or *Boon* traditions that are followed include *BoonPrawet*, *Boon SankahnKeuhn*, *Boon Pee Mai*, *Boon Kao Parnsa*, *BoonLai Rua Fai*, *Boon Katin* and *Boon Wai That*. Beautiful customs such as *Karn Tuk Baht Khao Niew* or Putting alms for monks is unique only to *Luang Prabang* in which hundreds of monks will walk the streets in the early hours and Buddhist worshippers of every household await to give alms. Many Lao and Thai traditions are similar where people are gentile and polite, elders are respected and hand gestures are unanimous at greetings. Putting the palms of heads together at the chest of forehead is called *Nob* in Laos and signifies respect and warm greetings. In modern times it is usual and common to see modern handshakes followed by *Nob*.

*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. Its unique, remarkably well-preserved townscape illustrates a key stage in the blending of these 2 distinct cultural traditions (United Nations, 2008). November through January is when the weather is best for touring *Luang Prabang*. The beautiful scenery of natural surroundings and cultural treasures is guaranteed to satisfy local and foreign tourists. Temples, Monasteries and numerous *Luang*

*Prabang* architectural styles is fully preserved. UNESCO in 1995 recognized *Luang Prabang* as a world heritage site and many consider the metropolitan to be the best preserved city in Southeast Asia.

## CONCLUSION

Laos economy has advanced towards a market economy and is expanding with the help of private and foreign investments. Exports to Vietnam, Thailand and The European Union have increased dramatically. Tourism has substantially increased and agriculture exports are ascending due to good environment and support from Thailand's economic policies.

Education in Laos has progressed along with successful New Economic Mechanism policies, but there still is a lack of school facilities and universities. Thailand currently offers many levels of studies from private and government institutions, which have provided Lao students a choice for extending their education. The Research Institute of Northeastern Arts and Culture Maha Sarakham University has been in constant contact and good relations with Laos Ministry of Education and institutions such as The Laos National Library and Laos National Museum. Many joint projects have been coordinated between each other and educational exchanges have benefited both parties. Laos Educational system still needs much support and Thailand has provided a choice for numerous graduate programs.

The Peoples Democratic Republic of Laos and Thailand are brotherly neighbors with connecting borders. The development of education, religion and traditional culture are very similar. There is constant commerce between each other and cooperative tourism within the region that produces income in both countries. Relations between Laos and Thailand have strengthened and both are at peace. Cooperation between both countries will greatly contribute to and benefit the society, culture, economy and tourism, bringing prosperity to both nations.

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