

## Reproduction of the Art of Luang Prabang as a World Heritage Site

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**Abstract:** This study reflects the materialization process of cultural identity to commodity and the reproduction of the art of Luang Prabang as a World Heritage Site. This is part of a qualitative research titled “The Art of Luang Prabang: the Identity and Process of Reproduction as a World Heritage Site.” The researcher introduced the concept of cultural reproduction, Marxist concept of culturalism and the concept of power relationship in the view of Antonio Gramsci as a framework for analyzing the phenomena that occur with the art of Luang Prabang. The study found that the process of altering the capital's artistic identity consists of commoditization marketed to the tourism industry, the market system and the capitalist movement that comes with being a World Heritage Site. It has created many production processes as well as marketing conditions of the tourism industry, utilizing the cultural capital of Luang Prabang, according to the concept of political economy which affects the domination of thoughts and cultural production of Luang Prabang.

## INTRODUCTION

This study aims to present the reproduction process of the art of Luang Prabang as a World Heritage Site with related information from the history of Luang Prabang and the identity of Luang Prabang included in the analysis to compare the differences from the past to present. This will lead to finding the answers, characteristics and the reproduction issues of the art of Luang Prabang. In this study, the researcher has integrated Raymond William's cultural reproduction concept and Marxist concept of culturalism including both mass culture, culture from the power relationship and culture of the illusion. In addition, the integration of Antonio Gramsci's concept of power relationship is emphasized by focusing on the totality. To

analyze the art of Luang Prabang as a World Heritage Site, the view that art is part of culture as well as a way of life is applied in this study, whether it is material, intellectual or spiritual life with importance given to the values that support the righteousness of the ideological structure that exists in each work of art.

## REPRODUCTION OF LUANG PRABANG FINE ARTS IN MASS CULTURE

Mass culture is a subject that most of the academics in the late 19th century to the early 20th century paid attention to. This was due to industrial revolution this leaping situation caused the phenomenon of trade and production expansion. Many products have been

manufactured to meet the needs of consumers, even cultural products that included works of art. This event spread to all regions of the world under the market and capitalist systems.

Changes in the policy of the public administration of the Lao people's democratic Republic, since, independence, have resulted in a change of the government. Although, at the beginning, governance in a new social system came out in a form of political power centralization; it was an attempt to dominate the country economically and socially. Until a phenomenon called "Lao Socialist Culture," there was an attempt in the relocation of the elite as well as the group of old capitalists, into a political seminar camp. The purpose was to educate them on new political ideologies as well as to criticize the old government policies. This also witnessed to have a number of people arrested and sent to attend the seminar. This phenomenon created a climate of panic and suspicion in the society. In addition, to enforcing the rules in both at the individual and economy levels, there were attempts to call people into action of the "Progress" ideology. Publication has been shut down; news and information were strictly controlled. Laos was also supported by communist countries such as the Soviet Union with financial assistance that led to the economic collapse. Moreover, Buddhism has been pressured by the party's policy trying to destroy monk's credibility such as actions that prevent the Buddhist from celebrating ceremonies, threats to the monk's practice such as alms-giving, changes in the monk's routine to labor in production, the insertion of Marxist ideology in teachings. Although, Laos has a socialist regime, there were attempts of the government to change their socialist development to a "New Imagination Policy" in 1986. This policy was followed by a new policy of reform or innovation. One of the main aims of the reform policy is to link the economy of Laos more to the world's capitalism in order to drive Lao economic progress quickly. For the social, cultural and living conditions of the people, the government relaxed the policy and tended to be more compromising. There was also a regional co-operation the mainstream political trends of the 19th century, to secure power in Southeast Asia of which Laos was part of the regional drive and cooperation, resulting in the production to serve the market. In the early stage of the country, important cities such as Luang Prabang, Vientiane and Champasak were based areas for the distribution and income generation<sup>[1]</sup>. Products and services were produced to meet the needs of the people in the country as well as the tourists.

After the change of government from socialism to a free market economic country, in 1986, the New Economic Mechanism (NEM) resulted in social culture and the style of art addition long collected since the old days being destroyed by mass culture. According to Dwight Macdonald, mass culture is a concept that can

destroy the old belief system or gradually bring the elite culture to death<sup>[2]</sup>. This has resulted in a number of productions of art in Laos, especially in Luang Prabang. Works of art were reproduced in various forms for collection purposes and for normal uses or even mock-ups of forbidden art and those works of art exclusively belong to the elite in the past. For example, Phra Bang, a Buddha sculpture that is a symbol of the Buddhist beliefs and the dynasties was reproduced to support the marketing and capital systems. However, this idea was attacked by Ernest van de Haag who believed that the concept of mass culture for the art and culture was a degeneration of the society. It is the only action based on satisfaction while Leslie Fiedler views that the concept of mass culture for the culture and fine arts can occur anywhere as long as culture, customs and works of art are made with functions of social stratification. Considering the culture of art from the views of social classes, the group of people who believe themselves superior than other people see that their culture and art are at the highest class, most valuable and must be reserved only for the elite in which the other classes cannot consume or appreciate. Although, there is a process of reproducing art, so that, all people have the opportunity to appreciate the artistic aesthetics but the class culture also believe that whether it is art, culture or consumption, art of the elite is still regarded as true art, unlike the reproduced mass art which is merely a counterfeit of art that lacks beauty and aesthetics.

The reproduced art of Luang Prabang is still not able to defeat the stereotype rooted in the class culture for a long time. However, the cultural reproduction process on the works of art of Luang Prabang has raised a question what essence of beauty and aesthetics of the art of Luang Prabang truly is. Difficulties of this definition are seemingly from a social perspective that beauty is something a person defines. According to the post-modern concept, beauty and aesthetics do not exist that particular art cannot identify or distinguish clearly which culture of the elite truly is or which art belongs to the lower classes as culture is dynamic and has borrowed from different sources all the time including as well the meaning of the art of Luang Prabang.

### **REPRODUCTION OF LUANG PRABANG'S ART IN THE CONCEPT OF POWER RELATIONSHIP CULTURE**

Power relationship involves and interacts with mass culture as cultural reproduction is linked to capital, marketing and industrial systems which all reflect the process of the relationship between a group of capitalists or business owners with the labor group that results in the power of those who play an economic role have the production power and can lead the social thoughts while other groups are poor workers who process no power and no control in capitalism.

This phenomenon between capitalist and labor relations is a power relationship. Thinkers at the Frankfurt School are grounded in the exploitation of labor and the view that the group of capitalists will benefit from the production process. The Frankfurt School's popular cultural studies include such prominent thinkers as Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Leo Lowenthal and Herbert Marcuse<sup>[2]</sup>. They believe that culture industry can be applied as a framework for describing reproduction in view of outputs from the cultural industry are derived from the homogenization of cultures such as movies, radio, magazines and even imitations.

For the study of power relationship, Antonio Gramsci, a theorist who plays a prominent role in the definition and analysis of this relationship, focuses on issues of hegemony that refer to cultures derived from the thought leaders, influencing other people. This includes the meaning of the art of Luang Prabang where the authority is the ruling class or government against the indigenous people. This theory is introduced here in order to describe the reproduction of the art of Luang Prabang and found that the development of a fighting culture between the indigenous people and the ruling class or the government, including fighting with government officials, educators as well as the intellectual leaders who attempt to control and organize the society. It can be clearly seen from the phenomenon that occurred with the preservation of the architecture of Luang Prabang, the works of art, created during the colonial period or during the French colonization, are seemingly the Western-style. A number of such works of art can be found on Sisavangvong Road and Sakkarin Road. According to the study, the average age of the buildings along these roads is similar. However, in the opposite direction, the attempts to conserve and make full use of this area have caused the local people to be driven out of the area, opening an opportunity for a group of capitalists or government officials to organize, trade and invest in the area as a tourist attraction that reflects the past of Luang Prabang. This also affects the indigenous people and people in the neighborhood who cannot improve the houses and buildings with the budget limit or at the amount that they want. This is done to support the preservation of the original conditions introduced by the ruling class and the selection criteria for a cultural heritage site of the UNESCO (Fig. 1).

However, based on Gramsci's Hegemony concept which influences the study of "Cultural Studies" though, it cannot be denied that the Hegemony concept plays a role in the study of cultural processes which should as well pay attention to the power relationship between social leaders and the people under. This is the same phenomenon that happens with the city of Luang Prabang, especially when Luang Prabang is recognized as a UNESCO's World Heritage Site. The relationship and



Fig. 1: Colonial buildings in Luang Prabang

reproduction of the art are based on production and consumption under capitalism. Anyway, when the time changes with the government's tourism promotion policy, it can be said that the native people of Luang Prabang themselves are not actually the mainstays of retaliation for this power interaction process. On the contrary, they take an important part in pushing and creating the meaning to the art of Luang Prabang under the emerged power relationship.

For social relations in capitalism, especially, the goods and the exchange value, one important thinker, Theodor Adorno, believes labor in capitalism represent their social space by producing goods. Therefore, capitalists are related to labor in the aspect that production processes done by labor; the relationship between capitalists and labor comes from production then. This is similar to the art of Luang Prabang where the social or governmental authority is associated with indigenous people as capitalists and manufacturers. This relationship has been implemented through tourism promotion policy. This concept of Adorno is part of the Marxist concept that focuses on the exchange value and the use value to describe the state capitalism. In cases this idea is to explain the phenomenon of reproducing the arts of Luang Prabang, according to Adorno's concept, the exchange value of Luang Prabang's art is the price of goods itself which is what the government prefers or gives priority to, than the use value or the aesthetics of the art of Luang Prabang. For clearer example, the reproduction of art like Buddha sculpture, a sacred object that originally represents the important symbol of Buddhism, a symbol of worship and respect. However, for the reproduction of this type of art has been done to meet the needs of the market where many Buddha sculptures were created, not for a symbol of holiness but a memorial symbol of the city of Luang Prabang, regardless the purposes of those who buy the Buddha sculptures. This causes a change in the role of Buddha sculpture from worshipping purposes to a product that can be traded in general with a variety of designs and so many prices to choose as much as the customer needs (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2: Art of sculpture of wooden Buddha image reproduced and distributed in Luang Prabang

From Adorno's viewpoint, it results in that the art of Luang Prabang becomes a culture industry which refers to the production of the works of art in capitalism art rather becomes a product valued at the market price than the traditional meaning. Product pricing is structured for maximum profit. The art of Luang Prabang is considered a cultural industry by the government's policy of tourism promotion, trade and investment. It is also considered the direction of economic development. However, the power that affects the reproduction of the art of Luang Prabang was not limited to just the capitalists or the government itself but tourist consumption is another factor that affects the reproduction process, i.e., consumers interact with the goods and services as well as the manufacturers have part of the bargaining power over the consumer's needs.

Adorno's concept may have resulted the art of Luang Prabang to become a culture industry of which components are manufacturers and consumers though, another thinker; Louis Althusser does not believe that only the production can have an influence on the reproduction of the art of Luang Prabang. According to Althusser, the reproduction of the works of art consisted of economy, politics and concepts. Therefore, the reproduction process of the art of Luang Prabang is not dependent only on the political power and the government's policy but it also depends on the economic model<sup>[2]</sup>, that each of the reproduction itself doesn't have the only one meaning but each type or each piece of art can have various meanings based on the experience of the person who defines it. In other words, it is difficult to have only one truth and it is difficult to distinguish which art is high for the elite or which one belongs to the lower classes.

### **REPRODUCTION OF LUANG PRABANG FINE ART IN THE WORLD HERITAGE SITES PERIOD**

Luang Prabang was registered a cultural heritage by the UNESCO in December 1995, for the reasons that

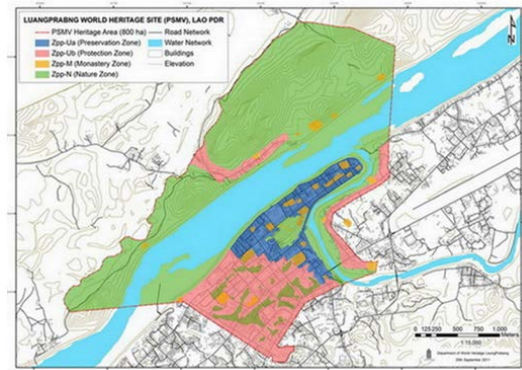


Fig. 3: Map of Luang Prabang World Heritage Site<sup>[6]</sup>

there are many ancient temples in Luang Prabang and unique colonial-style houses, the city is located along the Mekong River and Khan River's meeting point surrounded by beautiful nature in line with the UNESCO's criteria of World Heritage Sites as follows:

To exhibit an important interchange of human values, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world.

To be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history.

To be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land-use or sea-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures) or human interaction with the environment, especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change.

While other World Heritage sites may be specifically registered either in the cultural or natural criteria, Luang Prabang, however has been registered as a heritage of all mankind and also considered to be the best preserved city in Southeast Asia (Fig. 3).

The reproduction process of the art of Luang Prabang was made under the emerged changes of identity and the meaning of each type of the art to support the capital and economic system that come with Luang Prabang as a World Heritage Site. To consider this phenomenon based on Bourdieu<sup>[3]</sup>'s concept, the process of cultural reproduction does not differ from the production of industrial goods. There are similar processes, such as product making which the production processes of cultural goods of Luang Prabang is also similar to an industrial product. In other words, even culture which is normally considered abstract, can be processed to become a product or being produced as a product. With the knowledge in art production of the craftsmen of Luang Prabang, the production process is standardized as well as





Fig. 4: Luang Prabang Handicraft group sign, reproduction mechanism for the tourism industry as a World Heritage Site

the industrial process. This is the culture that reproduces outputs with the same standard. For instance, pedestal trays, bowls and Krueang Nam Kliang which are made by factory production and have the designs that imitate the handmade crafts of the people of Luang Prabang. Moreover, there are many video productions about lifestyle in the community on the internet as well as a number of productions through manufacturing plants which can be compared to an industrial system that is quantity oriented, in order to lower the prices and output a large amount of products. This phenomenon influences the works of art that used to be a traditional production, taking a lot of time to produce, to become a fast-paced industry. Even the indigenous people, they have turned to order traditional handicrafts from an industrial plant to sell instead of traditional ones.

When Luang Prabang is registered a world heritage, it results in clarity of the new meaning and the change of the art identity. At the beginning of Luang Prabang as a World Heritage Site, its art was under the hegemony of a group of stakeholders in the development of the economy through tourism and conservation policies including the profit taking from Luang Prabang as well. Gramsci *et al.*<sup>[4]</sup> states that the power of cultural actions is driven by ideological mechanisms and the power elite in the mechanism of production. Gramsci believes that those who have the power to produce have the power to control thoughts as well. When analyzed through the mechanism of reproduction of Luang Prabang's art, it can be said that this reproduction has been done by the government. At the beginning of the World Heritage-listed site, it was the state itself who controlled the production factors. For this reason, the process of creating meaning and identity of the art for the reproduction is determined by the decision of the state and transferred through the development mechanism into the area of Luang Prabang. Those who are affected by the reproduction of the art of Luang Prabang are inevitably a group of indigenous people,

especially, the ethnic groups whose culture has been used to support the tourism industry. This cultural commoditization includes the creation of works of art, producing sculptures by craftsmen, paintings and crafts which the ethnic groups cannot express freely at work but are restricted to producing the same standard. This includes performances during the production of the work in front of the tourists (Fig. 4).

Reproduction of Luang Prabang's art is part of the circuit of culture which is produced, consumed, regulated and meanings created for the art of Luang Prabang. Apart from the art that is reproduced the most in addition to religious architecture the Sim (temple) of Wat Xieng Thong which has been considered as the best tourism attraction often reproduced on brochures or Luang Prabang tourism billboard, there are also sculptures, paintings and handicrafts that are reproduced as well such as souvenirs, especially, the ethnic souvenirs, such as handicrafts silverware, Krueng Nam Kliang, bags, jewelry. These handicrafts are the production of the ethnic wisdom which in the past, the production was only for household purposes but when Luang Prabang becomes a World Heritage site under the tourism industry of capitalism, the production of art turns out to be for distribution purposes. Being manufactured in an industrial plant, many works of art become lower in prices. Anyway, it meets the needs of the tourists as they can purchase the counterfeit goods with the imitated art of the elite in the past to their own possession. However, the reproduction process of the art of Luang Prabang should pay attention to the preservation of the identity of traditional production in order not to lose the wisdom. The government has built a museum to collect traditional works of art including the development of the curriculum in the study to preserve the knowledge of the production of Luang Prabang's art in the traditional way as well as research study. This is another form of Luang Prabang art reproduction as well (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5: Luang Prabang national museum

Luang Prabang people nowadays have adapted a way of life to the currents of the World Heritage and tourism to support capitalism that comes with economic upgrading and monetization. Luang Prabang native people have managed their communities in a cooperative manner with local authorities. In fact, the native people of Luang Prabang who from the outside, look like the business owners but actually they have sold the ownership rights to foreign investors and become just managers taking care of the business. For this reason, trade and tourism are not the main occupations of the native people, rather career of capitalists who settled in Luang Prabang. The main occupation of the people of Luang Prabang is still farming, cultivation, especially, rice farming. Although, the World Heritage site is associated with the reproduction of Luang Prabang's works of art, the planning of the cultural resources of Luang Prabang does not properly cover the whole area. There has been a growth of the art reproduction only in areas designated as safeguarding and Preservation Plan (PSMV) of Luang Prabang World Heritage Site which is divided into four zones, Zpp-Ua, preservation zone, Zpp-Ub, protection zone, Zpp-N, nature and scenery zone and Zpp-M, monasteries zone only.

### **CONCLUSION OF REPRODUCTION OF THE ART OF LUANG PRABANG AS A WORLD HERITAGE SITE**

Definition, identity definition and reproduction of the art of Luang Prabang are emerged by the interaction between the groups of authority, manufacturers, the native people of Luang Prabang and the consumers who have the power interaction. These all result in the reproduction of arts in a variety of forms. Sometimes, it can be seen that the reproduction of art of Luang Prabang is promoting the economy, raising the level of income, especially, when the Town of Luang Prabang is registered the World Heritage Cultural Site. At the same time, reproduction of art has given a new identity and meaning for works of art.

Anyway, the identity of Luang Prabang is not lost but has been transformed into a new role for the world heritage and tourism business. This is due to the loss of skilled craftsmen. Originally, Luang Prabang had skilled artisans royal and folk craftsmen but the artisans have reduced in number and the rest is mostly old. This results in the native craftsmen who continue to convey wisdom and identity in the creation of skilled craftsmen of Luang Prabang in both forms and techniques to the works of art. For this reason, it is evident that the art of Luang Prabang has been partially borrowed from the culture of other areas. This may be assumed that the old identity has become less in power while the new identity is replaced by the integration of the new and original identities. As the identity of art does not have a fixed status does not stay still, this can be seen from the reproduction of the art of Luang Prabang that has a different development over time with the government policies and the changing social context.

According to Pierre Bourdieu's cultural capital concept, Raymond<sup>[5]</sup> cultural reproduction concept and Marxist culturalism concept including a mass culture, culture from the power relationship and culture of the illusion as well as the integration of the power relationship concept in the views of Antonio Gramsci, it can be concluded that the process of reproduction of the art of Luang Prabang is linked to the existing cultural capital of Luang Prabang. It results in the process of turning a relationship into a product, resulting in the class between capitalists and labor under the system of art production. This is in line with Marx's concepts in political economy of which hegemony and the ideological dominance by the group of power create benefits and economy through the control of power as a stakeholder in the work of art. It is believed that the whole city of Luang Prabang may have been dominated by the capital and tourism industry under the surface of its own World Heritage Cultural Site.

### **CONCLUSION**

In addition to the reproduced art of Luang Prabang, it is also found in the city of Luang Prabang, there is a reproduction of ideology and ideas for the indigenous people and ethnic groups in Luang Prabang as well. This is a gradual act; these groups have fallen under the ideology of the ruling class, unknowingly. Although, the nature of thought dominance in Luang Prabang is not in a compulsory way but the power groups like the government use a coercion act through the economic system and in the area identified as the preservation zone, the protection zone, the nature and scenery zone and the monasteries zone. To analyze the phenomena occurring

with Luang Prabang under Bourdieu's concept<sup>[3]</sup>, it is found that after the declaration of World Heritage Site, Luang Prabang has been under the hegemony of cultural capital of which these funds act in a way of life of Luang Prabang people at all time through the work of various institutions in the society that sustain this phenomenon of domination, not even the reproduction of the art of Luang Prabang in various forms.

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