

**LAOS NATIONAL IDENTITY CHANGE IN PERSPECTIVE OF  
RE-ORIENTALISM: A CASE STUDY OF  
THE 2020 LAOS NATIONAL TOURISM VIDEO**

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**ABSTRACT**

The formation of national identity by the Lao government has been unsuccessful due to globalization since 2000. The Lao government realized this and decided to shift its focus to the economic dimension as a means to unite the Lao people. In the 2000s, the West had a major influence on Laos representation, but after the 2008 economic crisis in the United States, Laos prioritize the trade with China and South Korea. As the global economic environment changed, Laos needed to attract the attention of Asian tourists. In this situation, re-orientalism becomes a cultural strategy exclusive to Asian countries. Simultaneously, re-orientalism shows a shift in the nature of Laos' national identity; from essentialism to pragmatism. As the study case, the 2020 Laos national tourism video shows that re-orientalism emphasizes primitive images and simple pleasures to reproduce a common representation of Laos as a spiritual and asexual Beautiful Buddha country. Each of these re-orientalism tools, directly and indirectly, affects the economic benefits of Laos.

**KEYWORDS:** National identity, Laos, Re-Orientalism, tourism

**INTRODUCTION**

“Laos simply beautiful”. This slogan has been promoted by the Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism of Laos since 2006 to promote national tourism. This government institution has long been responsible for the promotion of tourism and national culture through various social media including Instagram, Youtube, Facebook, and others. Social media is useful in disseminating government input in a semiotic manner because of the functions of uploading photos, recording videos, editing images, and providing text (Poulsen et al., 2018). Through the function of social media, social agents in the digital era, either it is individuals or institutions can express themselves and produce their own images without temporal boundaries (Thompson, 1995). Self-representation on social media by social agents can be regarded as an 'exclusive identity' (Hallett and Kaplan, 2010).

When a social agent is a government, an exclusive identity is linked to high culture. High culture must be able to display a glorious national cultural status and differentiate its identity from other countries. Therefore, high culture usually comes from a group of national elites including traditional kingdoms and dominant tribes. The elite group is involved in the management of

national identity by selecting quality cultures (Mangattu and Tessa, 2017: 25). In connection with this thought, Earnest Gellener argues that high culture enhances national identity. High culture contrasts with agrarian culture. In the early 20th century, most Europeans were farmers. In other words, high culture is identified by the high class, not the common people. In line with this, Leavis also saw high culture as opposed to the general taste of the majority of the population. Thus, high culture is closely related to national identity.

However, Laos tourism videos deviate from that thinking. The representation of Laos in the national tourism video differs from the classic description of national identity. In the video, Asian culture and cultural stereotypes are shown randomly. The representation of Laos identity is very orientalist as the West has done in the past. Why did the Lao government choose this representation?

According to Lau et al. (2011), the theory of re-orientalism pays scientific attention to the articulation of culture and images of orientalism by oriental parties, namely social agents originating from Asia. Social agents can be writers, commercial companies, or institutions. Oriental parties deliberately spread the image of orientalism through a cultural product including novels, films, and others. According to Lau et al. (2011), social agents only refer to East Asian origins. The goal of re-orientalism is to appeal and market products or self-orientation to the non-Asian countries' market. However, this case study shows the possibility that Southeast Asian countries could also become a re-orientalist for economic purposes, especially toward the Asian countries. In addition, Re-orientalism in Laos is led by the government because Laos politics tends to communism, which is one of the strongest forms of authoritarianism.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

This study uses a qualitative method with re-orientalism theory (Lau et al., 2011) to explore the context and meaning of unique representations. The object of study is a tourism video with approximately 5 minutes of duration uploaded on the official YouTube channel of Laos tourism in 2020<sup>1</sup>. The video consists of recordings without linguistic or audio texts. The resulting text of this type is called "picture-picture contexts" (Winfried, 1995). In this case, the analysis of the text or its interpretation is potentially polysemic. When these deficiencies occur, contextualization is useful as a subordinate method (Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2001; Nöth, 1995). Contextualization allows a diachronic and synchronic understanding of the surrounding conditions including social, political, and cultural dimensions. In other words, through contextualization, the situation in the time period studied along with the related place can be understood simultaneously (Endacott and Brooks, 2013). At this point, contextualization will help to understand the cultural and social context of the Lao's manner towards re-orientalism for economic purposes.

## **NATIONAL IDENTITY IN LAOS**

National identities are often problematic due to inaccurate definitions and too broad a range of concepts; For example, regarding the nation, nation-state, national identity, nationality, and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=whkR35oi4Ns>

nationalism (Hobsbawm, 1972). Each of these concepts does not have a fixed definition but distinguishes its meaning depending on the context in which the concept is used (White and Frew 2011: 5). National identities are often fickle chameleon-like (Smith, 1991).

In Southeast Asian studies, national identity is usually dichotomously distinguished between constructivism or essentialism (Colin and Sweet, 2006). Essentialism is understood as mainland Southeast Asia's style of nationalism. The essential factors, things that have been given since birth, such as ethnicity, reach the most important dimensions in this type of nationalism. Naturally, national identity in Laos is also seen from essentialism. Centered on the dominant tribe of Lao, more than 300 different tribes are united. The history of Laos shows that the unity of the people is often threatened by ethnic diversity, which has resulted in violent wars.

However, at the end of 1975, Laos succeeded in producing one people political party, Lao People's Front (It replaces the monarchy with a communist government). Since then, under the aim of stabilizing the state, the nation-building process has centered on the national meta-narrative. For example, the Lao regime attempted to interpret history differently than the previous regime. Meta-narrative reproduction involves reinterpreting history and building the myth of national heroes in society (Evans 1998, Jerndal and Rigg 1998: 810-811).

The government's move was no longer effective. The failure of this nationalism project becomes more vivid along with globalization. Most of the people of Laos suffer from poverty. Laos is the one of the poorest country in Southeast Asia in 2018<sup>2</sup>. Laotian people want to get more stable and better quality job opportunities. Therefore, most people do not have time to pay attention to matters of ancestors and traditions because it does not practically help them. Furthermore, the young generation in Laos is also more interested in the modern lifestyle and global culture than in the history and traditions of the country (Evans 1998: Yohan et al. 2011). Based on this explanation, the classical dichotomy of national identity lags in taking account of national identity changes in complex international contexts.

Based on this understanding, globalization and national identity are not understood as opposing concepts. According to Cook and Crang (1996), efforts to define a purely national identity or culture are very shallow. If we look at the examples of Lao food such as Lao-French or Lao-Thai, the pure element of Laos cannot be determined. Besides, this zeal for purity is related to the ideology of Western enlightenment and orientalism that had tried to find the real origin and the progress by Western civilization. Furthermore, 'true Lao in the post-colonial era' is a hybrid of local and global conceptions (Creak 2013: 113). The Lao government has manipulated parts of the national culture in order to meet economic benefits with UNESCO. Thus, Laos' national identity in the digital era is no longer explicitly visible in internal circumstances such as ethnic issues and national integration, but in the international cultural-economic context.

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<sup>2</sup> Cook, E. (Feb, 2018). Why the Laos wage hike debate matters: A closer look at an important issue for one of the region's poorest countries. (Accessed 10 Des 2020)

<https://thediplomat.com/2018/02/why-the-laos-wage-hike-debate-matters/>

## LAOS CULTURAL-ECONOMIC CONTEXTUALIZATION

### 1. Economic Crisis in 1997-2000

This chapter will discuss the cultural-economic context after the Asian economic crisis in 1997-2000. Since then, Laos began to accept a part of the economy of capitalism through partial reforms. According to Felker, the globalization of capitalism allows Southeast Asian countries to accept the ideology of partial-development or quasi-developmentalism against external dynamics (Felker 2009; 46-8). In line with this understanding, the Lao government has also adopted a strategy of economic modernization to leave the status of the poorest country by 2020. According to the Five Meta-Trends Changing the World<sup>3</sup>, the Lao Government has achieved three conditions, namely cultural modernization, economic globalization, and social adaptation (Michael, 2009: 130). In particular, as a key route to the modernization and globalization of Lao culture, the Lao government is investing the most in the tourism sector.

At the same time in the West, especially in the United States, consumerism and capitalist culture have been strongly criticized. Before long, that criticism of consumerism benefited the Buddhist countries of Mainland Southeast Asia. In 1973, Schumacher published a manifesto of "Buddhist economy" - Small is beautiful – which becomes highly influential and popular in the 1990s. As a cultural discourse, the manifesto raised suspicions about Western values about economic progress. At that time, Western society believed in the myth of 'more is better' and prioritized economic efficiency. However, Schumacher emphasized that even though Western societies appear to be more prosperous materially, these Western myths result in the loss of the natural environment and the human spirit that prioritizes progress. Therefore, he proposed that Buddhist thought and lifestyle be applied to Western culture. Buddhist thought would enable a sense of mutual cooperation within the people on a local scale. The sense of mutual cooperation supports the people's cooperation with their neighbors and the surrounding environment and does not dominate it (Schumacher, 1973: 48).

In the development of spiritual and religious values, especially Buddhism, the Lao government discover the chance in terms of economic development. The government began to open opportunities for economic trade in order to increase foreign exchange earnings. Western tourists were first allowed to enter Laos in 1998, although there were only 600 visitors. In the early 1990s, there were limited places foreigners could visit. But in the late 1990s, Western backpackers and tourists were free to travel wherever they wanted. On the other hand, in 1994, Thailand, a neighbor of Laos as well as a major Buddhist country opened its country to foreign visitors with financial support from the United States. As a result of the development of tourism in Thailand, Laos, and other Indochina countries, including Cambodia and Burma, began to develop. Subsequently, the Lao government announced 2000 as the "Year to Visit Laos" and reached 1 million foreign visitors. In the tourism sector in 2000, the Lao government earned more than 110 million dollars making the tourism sector the largest foreign income earner in Laos apart from exports of hydropower, timber, and textiles.

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<sup>3</sup> An article written by David Snyder, published on Edition 21 of *Global Issues* 05/06 in 2006 (Michael 2009: 134).

As Thailand received support from the United States, Laos began to be supported by France nominally under the name of colonial compensation. Above all, with assistance from French government, the city of Luang Prabang was designated as a cultural heritage site by UNESCO in 1995. On the other hand, the French government and the revenue from UNESCO are increasing in Laos. The impact continued for a decade since 2000. Luang Prabang was becoming a tourist destination with an increasing number of Western visitors. For visitors from the West, Laos' tropical natural environment is relaxed and affordable in comparison to other countries. In fact, the city of Vang Vieng became the biggest entertainment venue for visitors from the West. Along the Nam Song river in Vang Vieng, Western restaurants and bars were established and every night there were hedonistic parties.

## **2. Influences from China and South Korea**

However, the Western-friendly environment changed significantly due to the Subprime mortgage crisis in the United States which impacted Europe in 2008. Along with weakening economic conditions in USA and Europe, Laos began to interact with countries in East Asia, especially South Korea and China. For example, China became the largest foreign investor country (US\$ 5 billion) in Laos in 2013. Chinese investment makes up about a third of the dam industry in Laos. Chinese companies, mostly state-owned and financed by China's EXIM Bank and China Development Bank (CDB), are involved in 14 state projects in Laos. Then in 2014, China CAMC Engineering built the largest commercial site in Laos near the Laos Mekong river. The commercial complex is known as the 'New World Vientiane'. The Chinese state-related projects included the construction of modern shopping centers, department stores, supermarkets, and amusement parks. The city of Luang Prabang is also filled with the luxury spas and resorts funded by the Chinese capital (Ku, 2014: 217). As Chinese investment increased, the democratic interactions between the two countries also increased rapidly.

In contrast to China, South Korea's interest in Laos started at the bottom. It so happened that before 2014, Laos was a country that was less well known to the people of South Korea. But in 2014, a television reality show called "Youth Over Flowers" which was held in Laos became very popular in South Korea. The broadcast of this event was significant momentum in raising awareness about Laos in South Korea. As a result, in 2017 more than 170,000 South Koreans visited Laos for tourism purposes. South Korea ranked 4th in the largest amount of foreign visitors in Laos after Thailand, Vietnam, and China<sup>4</sup>.

This extraordinary popularity is due to the "Healing culture discourse" in South Korea. After the economic crises in 1997 and 2008, the social and economic environment was reconstructed with a focus on the rules of neoliberalism. To leave poverty status, diligence and hard work became ideal values. This has left South Korea trapped in socioeconomic polarization. Although the discourse on the recovery culture did not target specific groups, the generation of 2030—people aged 20 to 30—became the most affected group (Park 2016: 378). Among the 2030 generation, a new social consensus was emerging: Even though we strive for

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<sup>4</sup> Kang, Tae-jun, (2018), *South Korea, Laos Move to Solidify Ties*. [Online] Available: <https://thediplomat.com/2018/12/south-korea-laos-move-to-solidify-ties/> (September 27, 2020)

everything, the results are not worth the effort. This cultural consensus created new cultural trends that are ecological and non-materialistic. Rather than pursuing material wealth, the 2030 generation prefers specialized experiences. Rather than spending a lot of money and working long hours, the younger generation prefers exotic experiences and high satisfaction. This was the reason why the small towns in Laos have suddenly become a popular tourist destination in South Korea. This non-materialistic aspect contains a sense of despair and deep exhaustion from society. If a person is generally unlucky in capitalism, s/he wants to choose something different from the dominant one in order to be exclusive (Park 2016). In an environment of increasingly burdening neo-liberalism, the younger generation takes advantage of the new logic as micropolitics. In this cultural context, the Lao Government actively exploits this cultural interest. This cultural interest was seen as not only for South Korea itself, but also can be adapted to other Asian countries which has progressed rapidly. The Lao government takes the concept of "healing" and named the various tourism projects "healing tours". Exploration of healing (e.g. exploration of non-materialistic aspect which belongs exclusively to Laos) shows orientalism.

### **REPRODUCTION OF ORIENTALISM**

The Lao government has not showed its creativity in representing national identity. Rather than, the Lao government only reacts passively to external economic conditions. To attract young Asian generations outside Laos, the government invested a lot in the design and development of an oriental image of Laos that is different from other modern Asian cities. As previously explained, this image is heavily related to natural primitivism and simple pleasures. Re-orientalism can be achieved in various ways. This includes the over-simplicity of the national history or over-emphasize the cultural factor (Lau et al., 2011). The common thread of re-orientalism is '**excess**'. In the video, almost all the video players are people of Asian origin. Westerners appear only temporarily for a few seconds. Then, the main image of the people of Laos is characterized by smiling young single women wearing colorful traditional clothes. Laotian women are usually presented 'dressed in colors, giving a soft and delicate feeling'. Then, the audience can take a tourist's gaze because the eyes of the women continued to be directed towards the audience. The gaze of women serves as a visual form of recognition of the presence and participation of the audience in the event. The promotion simplifies the Laos image into a gentle and delicate female image (Figure 1).





*Figure 1*

Laotian women often perform in traditional dances and religious practices. Collective dance is performed in seemingly public and historical places. As viewers are perceived as tourists, their performances are easily witnessed and clearly captured. For example, in *Figure 2*, there is a group of women who wear various traditional clothes. They stand in a well-organized line and face the audience. An expression with a smile forms a positive image for the audience. This representation allows the audience to feel like they are taking a real trip. Visually, one-way travel routes organized in the video form a certain cultural nuance to a certain place (Edensor 2002: 86).

On the other hand, the constant appearance of women eliminates other genders including men from the imagination of Laos. Men only appear as a group of monks performing religious rituals. In Laotian society, Lao men serve monks. Buddhist men are obliged to spend time as monks for a certain period of time before the wedding. Monkhooood for men gives a feeling of asexuality and is highly respected socially. When discussing the difference between high and low cultures, it is often related to the configuration of knowledge and power in society. In other words, the ability to access knowledge shows strength. Taking into account the status of a monk in Laos, the male figure implies a high and respectful cultural image in Laos. In turn, it contributes to the creation of a national image safe from sexual harassment and harm when a foreign woman travels to Laos.



*Figure 2*

However, the appearance of bodily practices can lead to the reproduction of stereotypes about primitivism (Edensor, 2002). For example, Figure 3 shows how the practice of the body in religion reinforces a simple, mono-dimensional image of Laotian society. In the video, you can see the Lao people collectively participating in prayer and traditional rituals. Primitive images are

related to things based on kinship, tradition, custom, superstition, religion, non-differentiating, and group-oriented (Myers, 2001). This contrasts with modern qualities which are rational, directed, individual, and secular. Through a series of presentations on folk practices, primitivism has the impression of being the original and pure face of Laos.



*Figure 3*

In addition, contemporary activities and venues for foreign visitors also reinforce the oriental, exotic, and adventurous image. The video features a variety of activities including river tubing, canoeing on the river, camping in a treehouse, swimming in waterfalls, and zip lines. Apart from that, new modern facilities are also frequently seen, such as hotels, swimming pools, and bars. Natural adventure activities and modern lodgings serve as stimulants of a break from post-modern realities. Pre-industrial society found it difficult to separate work from play because thoughts about the value of leisure had not yet been developed. Meanwhile, post-industrial society is characterized by pleasure and rest. Thus, it shows that a society with highly developed economy and industry is more advanced, as happened in post-industrial society (Turner, 1974). Apart from busy life, modern activities in a natural setting plays very effectively in emphasizing simple and positive pure emotions, as well as in planting expectations on ‘healing’.

## CONCLUSION

Laos national interests are shifting towards the economic sphere. This is realized through the development of the nature-friendly tourism sector and by exhibiting Laos’ special national cultural products in the global market. However, Laos is very vulnerable to the socio-cultural environment that has been unpredictable since 2000. After experiencing the dynamics and changes in the economic environment around Laos, the Lao government has focused on the Asian market, especially China and South Korea. In order to accentuate the Lao identity, the Lao government chose re-orientalism as an effective marketing strategy. On the other hand, a similar representation of re-orientalism deviates from classical scientific thinking about national identity in Southeast Asia. Previously, national identity was thought of as the result of the unity of diversity within the country. Along with the spread of neo-liberalism, Laos national identity is no longer explicitly seen in internal matters such as ethnicity and national integration politics, but rather in the international cultural-economic context. This shows that Laos is an independent subject that represents itself towards orientalism.



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