

The Impact of Tourism on the Monks of Luang Prabang

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Abstract. The attractiveness of Luang Prabang's temples for both heritage and religious tourists reflects their profound embodiment of the spirit of the place, yet tourism can also be seen as a threat to this very spirit. Exposure to tourism and social contact with tourists is influencing the values and aspirations of the city's many monks, as evinced by trends such as monks eschewing the study of traditional skills in favour of foreign languages to help them enter the tourism industry. This paper explores the effects that contact with tourists has on the values and practices of the monks of Luang Prabang and, in turn, how these changes have affected the spirit of the place. It is based on on-site observation, surveys of monks and tourists, as well as elite interviews with religious leaders.

1. Introduction

Tourism is a cultural phenomenon in which two broad cultures, that of the host and that of the tourist, come into contact. Although both parties in this exchange are affected in some way, the "impact" of this contact is usually more pronounced on the host culture than on the tourists, because the practice of tourism takes place in the host's home territory. The potential for cultural impact and even conflict increases when tourism comes into contact with religious sites or practices, especially when the tourist and the host do not share a religious faith.

The northern Laotian city of Luang Prabang is famous for its well-preserved colonial atmosphere and especially its many UNESCO listed temples, which make it both an important center of Theravada Buddhism and a popular tourist destination, attracting visitors of both

religious and non-religious natures. Increasing numbers of tourist arrivals in recent years have brought new challenges to Luang Prabang. Buddha images and even architectural elements are being plundered from temples to sell to tourists, many old families have sold or rented their properties to entrepreneurs who use them as guesthouses, restaurants or for other tourism-related uses, and religious practices such as the giving of alms have become components of commercial tour packages. The incidence of contact between monks and tourists has also increased, which can be seen as having both positive and negative influences on the monks' lifestyle. Through on-site interviews and surveys conducted with monks, supplemented with personal observation, desk research and interviews with tourists, the researcher aims to identify the current impacts of tourism on monks and to investigate the perceptions of the monks regarding tourists and tourism development.

2. Luang Prabang's spirit of place

The spirit of place of Luang Prabang is largely influenced by its rich cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible. With its concentration of religious culture, its many temples and monks, it is historically a place of high spiritual significance for Buddhists.

This paper addresses a group of inhabitants of Luang Prabang that are associated closely with the spirit of Luang Prabang in many senses: the many monks that live in the city's temples. They represent an important element of Luang Prabang's spirit for tourists and religious adherents alike, and are closely associated with the spiritual practices of the city. By gaining insights into the ways in which the changes brought to Luang Prabang by tourism are perceived through the eyes of monks, the author hopes to make a contribution to the understanding of the relationship between tourism and spirit of place in this particular context.

3. Religion, heritage and tourism in Luang Prabang

On the strength of its unique and well-preserved architectural heritage, including its many fine temples, Luang Prabang was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1995. Luang Prabang town alone has 34 temples. The advent of tourism has led some in Luang Prabang to re-contextualise their understanding of their tangible religious heritage

in terms of their value within the tourism industry, rather than within the local society. This has led to some negative side-effects, such as the stealing of Buddha images and even architectural elements from temples to sell to tourists (UNESCO, 2007). There have been uncoordinated attempts to beautify temples since Luang Prabang's listing, in part to attract more tourists to the smaller and less well-known of the city's many religious sites. Although they may be well-intentioned, these measures have compromised the integrity of some of these temples (UNESCO, 2004: 45).

In 2006, Luang Prabang received 151,703 tourists compared to 51,207 in 2001: a 200 per cent increase within 5 years. For accommodation, in 1997, Luang Prabang had 29 establishments (UNESCO, 2007: 61) and in 2006, the number of establishments had increased to 173 with 1,808 rooms (LNTA, 2007). Twenty-eight per cent of international arrivals are Asian and 72 per cent are Western tourists. The majority of tourists are backpackers (Ashley, 2006: 59). According to Travers, tourists are attracted to Luang Prabang mostly because of the relaxed lifestyle, friendly people, and peaceful and beautiful landscape (2008: 111). These statements match the findings of the survey of tourists conducted by the author.

Theravada Buddhism has a profound effect on the intangible heritage of the city as well, and has formed the anchor for the daily rhythms, systems of belief and social and cultural practices of the citizens. While the World Heritage listing has catalyzed efforts to preserve the tangible heritage of Luang Prabang, this does not necessarily translate into a preservation of intangible heritage. In some ways, the tourism industry that focuses on these heritage buildings poses a threat to traditional ways of life and traditional skills, as people leave traditional occupations to take jobs in the more lucrative tourism trade. This has a secondary side-effect, as these jobs often keep people so busy that they often do not have time to give alms (UNESCO, 2007). Also, many old families have sold or rented their properties to entrepreneurs who use them as guesthouses, restaurants or other tourism-related uses (Mydans, 2008). The new tenants are not in the habit of contributing alms to the temples, as the old families did, and as a result fewer monks can be supported (Gray, 2008). The most evident aspect of positive impact is income obtained from the tourism industry, strengthening the pride of local people, providing funds for the preservation and conservation of local heritage

and the revitalization of traditional skills. According to Ashley, tourism in Luang Prabang is proved to be alleviating poverty (2006).

As for the issue of commodification, some festivals and events are being scheduled to meet the needs of tourists rather than the cultural calendar, or repackaged as commercial endeavors by locals themselves, threatening the perceived relevance of these events in the lives of the local people. There was even an attempt to exclude girls not wearing Laotian traditional dress from participating in the *pimai* festival (UNESCO, 2004: 45-72). Francis Engelmann, a former UNESCO expert and Luang Prabang resident, has been quoted as saying “we have saved Luang Prabang’s buildings, but we have lost its soul”, claiming that tourism is accelerating the dissolution of traditional ways. He cites the closure of one monastery due to diminishing income from alms, the intrusion of tourists into temple life to take snapshots uninvited, and the appearance of petty crime, drug use and sex among young novices, unheard of before their exposure to tourists (Gray, 2008). As a Buddhist, the author always believed that the temple is one of the safest places from petty crime or robbery. However, during this field study, this belief was proven wrong. While visiting the abbot of a temple, the researcher parked a bicycle unlocked in front of the *Khuti* (monk’s quarters). One hour later, the bicycle had disappeared. Later, the author was told that temples are now good spots for robberies as there are always many tourists visiting them. The abbot jokingly told the researcher “this is also a finding for your research on the impacts of tourism”.

Clashes between tourist and host cultures occur in most tourism destinations to some extent. A lack of knowledge or sensitivity to the local religion leads tourists in Luang Prabang to do things that are not intended as offensive and may seem normal to them in the context of their understanding of tourism, but which may be deeply offensive to the religious sensibilities of locals, such as consuming alcohol on Phousis mountain in Luang Prabang. For tourists it is a popular site for beautiful views of sunset, but for locals it is the site of the sacred That Chom Si Temple (UNESCO, 2004: 58).

4. Monks' perception of the effects of tourism

4.1. PROFILE OF MONKS

About 87 out of the 152 surveyed monks and novices are between 16 and 20 years old, representing a majority of the sampling. One hundred twelve come from Luang Prabang Province, the rest from provinces to the north of Luang Prabang. About 48 per cent of monks and novices have been at the temple for two to three years, 23 per cent for up to one year, and another 23 per cent for four to six years. In total, then, 94 per cent of all responding monks had been at the temple for six years or less, indicating that very few monks remain at the monastery into their middle age, leading to a large age gap between the young novices and the few elder monks who still remain.

As for the question of why they decided to become monks, "I always wanted to practice Buddhism" was chosen 122 times, followed by "*Thodtan Bounkhun*" (gratitude to parents) 95 times. The answer "I would like to study so I can get a job when I leave the temple" was chosen only 19 times. However, an elder abbot revealed that he believed that the primary reason for young men coming to temple was to obtain an education (interview, 2008). This seems to be confirmed indirectly by monks' answers to another question. When asked why they had decided to become a monk in Luang Prabang, the most popular choice was "I can get a better education in Luang Prabang" which was chosen 95 times, followed in prevalence by "Luang Prabang is an exciting town with a lot going on", chosen 52 times. Very few (14) chose the reply "Luang Prabang has a lot of tourists".

4.2. MONKS' VIEWS ON TEMPLE LIFE

As for the question "what are your favorite subjects studied at the temple?", the Buddhism subject was selected 117 times and the second choice was English with 97 times. Conservation and preservation was mentioned 43 times. Traditional arts and crafts (chosen 12 times) were less popular than mathematics (22 times). Once more, the top answer seems to be what the monks felt obliged to say, rather than what they felt. This supposition seems to be supported by the answers to another question. When asked in what subject they would like to receive more education, English was the most often

selected with 113 mentions, followed by Buddhism (89 times), Laotian culture (54), conservation and preservation (34), accounting skills (19) and business skills (18). Traditional arts and crafts, however, were chosen by only 7 respondents. One monk stated that he would like to learn more English so that he can spread Buddhism to tourists who visit Laos. A principal of a monk's school (Interview, 2008) confirmed that students preferred learning English to learning the liturgical language *P_li*, because English was seen as having more relevance in qualifying them for employment. The abbot told the author that *Dhamma* (teachings of the Buddha,) can be difficult for young monks to learn. The most obvious context for the use of English in Luang Prabang is in the tourism industry, and it is logical to correlate a high incidence of interest in learning English with a desire to work in the tourism industry after leaving the temple. The UNESCO report has already stated this fact (UNESCO, 2004: 74). In informal discussions with shop and business owners in the town, the author learned that former monks are the preferred employees, because of their perceived higher sense of *vinai* (rules of discipline) and their good level of English proficiency.

For the question “what kind of skills learned at the temple do you think will be useful after you leave the temple?”, English was selected 104 times, conservation and preservation skills 30 times. Only eight monks believed that traditional arts and crafts skills would be useful to them in their secular life. This shows a low awareness of the importance of these skills relative to English, likely in part because the teaching of these traditional skills is becoming increasingly rare in temples. To learn these skills, monks would have to attend a separate school outside the temple.

4.3. MONKS' RELATIONS WITH TOURISTS

Twenty-eight monks don't agree with the statement that tourists consider monks as objects or attractions. An almost equal number of 26 agreed with this statement, but the majority, 78 of them, said they don't know. The monks who agree with the statement were asked to explain why they think in that way. Examples of the explanations offered include: “Maybe in their countries, there aren't monks, and that's why they are interested and want to know more about Buddhism”, “Buddhism, monks and temples are important and tourists want to see”, “If there weren't monks, temples and local people,

tourists wouldn't be interested to visit the town", "Some tourists might have never seen monks and want to see us" and "Because we are different in their eyes". The tone of these answers shows a level of acceptance of the differences between tourists' nature and the local cultural norms. Buddhism's great tolerance for non-Buddhists and other outsiders has also been mentioned by Hall (2006: 180).

Ninety-three of the respondents stated that they don't mind when tourists take their pictures. Twenty-four monks said that they feel annoyed, but cannot do anything about it. Only ten monks chose "I don't like it at all and I refuse tourists". About 20 monks wrote their opinions about this issue, which for the most part indicate a shared opinion among the monks that tourists should ask them for permission first before taking pictures. A few monks told the author that sometimes tourists came when they were having a meal and took pictures of them eating food. Another recounted that tourists arrived when he was in his bedroom, which he shared with many other monks, and tried to take pictures. A younger novice recounted that a group of women ran to towards him, as they wanted to take a picture with him, which is inappropriate within the moral code of Buddhism.

However, despite some problems with tourists, majority of the respondents would like to see more tourists in Luang Prabang. When asked about their impression of the effects brought by tourists visiting their temples, 43 per cent said they do not see any great effect. About 31 per cent agreed that tourists make life in the temple more interesting. However, 11 per cent shared the opinion that if tourists come during their prayers and ceremonies, they would feel disturbed.

As for the question "Do you think temples should do more to accommodate tourists?", about 65 per cent replied in the positive. When the author asked them to be more specific about what kind of measures could be undertaken to better accommodate tourists, educating tourists about Buddhism was the most often chosen (49 per cent), followed by giving more information for tourists about the temples and Buddhism (29 per cent). Only 12 per cent would suggest allowing tourists to participate in part of temple life.

Fifty-nine per cent of monks came to agreement that communication with tourists is important. In terms of the reasons why they believe this is important, 46 per cent would like to give tourists a better appreciation of Laotian culture, traditions and Buddhist religion, 26 per cent see it as a way to practice their own language skills and 19 per cent would value this contact as a way to find out about other parts

of the world. Only 11 per cent don't agree with the initial statement. Eighty-eight monks replied that they have talked to tourists. Forty-seven of those have exchanged emails with tourists. Of the 59 responding monks who have never talked to tourists, 37 would like to talk to tourists but cannot speak English. Nineteen would like to talk to tourists, but believe it is inappropriate.

4.4. MONKS' VIEWS ON TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

A question regarding monks' opinion about tourism development in Luang Prabang proved to be difficult for the monks to answer. A large number of monks expressed their concerns such as "A lot of tourists see temples as places to visit, but do not see any importance and meaning in them", "If there are too many tourists in Luang Prabang, local people will be busy and won't give alms", "As many tourists stay in town and locals have to move outside the town, there will be less local people in Luang Prabang", "Tourists and we need to understand each other's cultures more", "Many tourists give alms without understanding the meaning of it. They need to dress properly and have good manners", "Tourists should help Luang Prabang preserve Lao culture and tradition for the younger generation, and dress properly. Even when they talk in a different language, tourists can still use the Laotian way of talking". The majority stated that they wanted tourists to learn more about the local culture and Buddhism.

A famous aspect of religious practice in Luang Prabang is *binthabat*, which refers to the practice of giving offerings of food to monks, who form a long procession through the city streets with their alms bowls early every morning to receive these offerings from donors kneeling at the side of the road. This is an important practice for local Buddhists, who thereby gain merit, but it has also become known as a spectacle and an activity among tourists, who rise early to photograph the event or to participate themselves in the giving of alms. An elder abbot told the researcher "Some tourists regard *binthabat* as an activity. They want to have their pictures taken while giving alms. Some tourists don't dress properly. They look like they just got out of bed. I don't like seeing that and I don't even feel like eating food. If they want to do it, they should follow our way of doing it" (Interview, 2008). Another young novice said "We are actually happier when we see local people giving alms in the morning".

5. Tourists' attitudes and perceptions

5.1. TOURISTS' VIEWS ON IMPACTS

The surveyed tourists in general took a critical view of the cultural practice of tourism, and its effects on the host culture. When asked if they think that tourism is bringing negative impacts to Luang Prabang, 55 tourists said yes, 17 said no, and 12 tourists were not sure. The most prevalent negative impacts that tourists believe are being brought to the town by tourism are commodification (selected 34 times), loss of authenticity (28 times), and loss of spirit of place (20 times). As for the question whether they think that tourism might influence the monks' lifestyle, 44 tourists agreed, 23 didn't agree and 16 chose not to give any opinion on this issue. One tourist wrote that "Some people have requested me to give alms, or light incense when it is not my religion, thus it become commercialised". The term commercialization was used repeatedly by other tourists as well. Another noted that "I don't like tourists go to the alms giving, like in a zoo".

In an article on Luang Prabang from The New York Times, dated 27 March 2008, Mydans wrote: "As the sky grows light along the Mekong River here, it is no longer the quiet footfalls of Buddhist monks that herald the day but the jostling and chattering of hundred of tourists who have come to watch them on their morning rounds... Here they come! Here they come!" a tour guide cries over his loudspeaker. "Hurry! Hurry!".

This writing clearly illustrates an almsgiving scene in Luang Prabang. A local compared this practice to a safari and said that tourists look at the monks the same as at monkeys or buffalo (Mydans, 2008). This attitude was reflected on a travel blog the author came across, by a woman who participated in giving alms while in Luang Prabang. Under one picture of her waiting with food for monks to arrive, she wrote "This is me waiting to feed the monks".

The survey asked tourists to express their opinion about tourists taking pictures of monks. "I find it a bit irritating, but I do it myself" was selected by 18 respondents, and the same number of respondents chose "I don't like it at all and don't want to do that." "Nothing wrong with that, I do it myself" was selected by 14 tourists. Thirty tourists opted for writing statements on this topic. Most of the statements illustrated similar opinions about this issue. They noted that they find taking picture of monks is fine as long as you do it with respect, keep

distance, and always ask for permission first. One tourist stated that “I definitely feel a bit wrong about it but I want to show my family back home.” Another one said that “I did it with respect, but I would take a picture because I am in awe of them” Interestingly, most of statements appeared to be self-defensive in tone, “I took 3 pictures at morning almsgiving, from at least 60 meters away.”

5.2. TOURISTS’ VIEWS ON CONTACT WITH MONKS AND BUDDHISM

Forty tourists don’t like to enter to temples while the monks are praying and mediating. Ten believed “Nothing wrong with that, I do it myself”. Others replied “No opinion” (13), or “I find it a bit irritating, but I do it myself” (8). Twenty-two tourists chose to elaborate further on this concern. Again, most of the statements stated that if tourists do it with respect, it should be acceptable. One tourist said, “Try to sit in the corner and try not to disturb.” However, it might be difficult to define a common understanding of “respect” from the point of view of the monks who are either mediating or praying and the tourists who are curious about the practices.

When queried about their level of curiosity about the Buddhist religion, majority of the respondents replied that they are curious to know more about Buddhism. The author then asked further if they think temples should accommodate tourists more. Forty-nine per cent decided for “No”. Only 29 per cent opted for “Yes” and 22 per cent of the tourists gave no opinion. It is interesting to see that even though the majority of the respondents are curious to know more about Buddhism, they do not think that temples should accommodate tourists more. Among the stated reasons for positive responses are: “It is good to show the lifestyle of the Buddhist” , “Tourists need to be more educated, then they will have a better appreciation”. The reasons given for “No” include that temples are places for worship, that tourism and religion do not belong together, and that temples are places to observe only. The main reasons can be summarised as reflecting an attitude among tourists that the only persons who should be accommodated by temples are local people, people who study Buddhism and tourists who practise Buddhism, with the implication that otherwise this activity will become commercialised. This reiterates the “hands-off” attitude of tourists to closer involvement in the temples.

6. Conclusion

The attitudes expressed by the majority of tourist respondents to the questionnaires indicates that they have a curiosity about the culture of the temples, but also a respect for propriety when dealing with religion in the host culture, and a concern for drawing the line between acceptable and unacceptable tourist behaviour.

In the responses to the questions asked of the monks and the tourists, there are indications that members of each group are making an effort to moderate their own statements through an attempt to empathize with the point of view of the other. Thus, tourists express curiosity about Buddhist life but are cautious about infringing on the territory of the temple. Monks may not be pleased with certain tourist practices, such as photography, but express an appreciation of the meaning and value of photographs for the tourists, on the basis of which they accept such practices. In general, monks' understanding of tourists seems to be more insightful and nuanced than tourists' more simple "hands-off" approach to showing respect to religion. The reasons for this may be explained partially by Maoz (2006: 229), who discussed the construction of the "gazes" of tourists and hosts, remarking that the gaze of the tourist is mostly constructed through their exposure to media images of the destination, before their actual travels. Locals, on the other hand, build a richer and more "real" image of tourists iteratively, through repeated contact with tourists over time.

Travers (2008: 111-113) has remarked that the success of Luang Prabang is due to its offering of a sanitized and increasingly Westernized heritage "experience" that is heavily influenced by attempts to create an atmosphere that corresponds to tourists' romantic images of the city's past. The high proportion of tourists who came to Luang Prabang with a pre-formed conception of the city attests to the wide dissemination of these media images, and the large percentage of these whose expectations were met or exceeded by their actual experience in the place lends credence to Travers' statement regarding the city's successfully-engineered tourist product, of which the religious tangible heritage (including the monks themselves, seen as a spectacle) form an important component. Ironically, though, the surveyed tourists were cognizant and concerned about Luang Prabang's perceived loss of authenticity due to the commercialization

and other ills brought by tourism (although most of the respondents very likely never knew the pre-tourism Luang Prabang first-hand) and expressed a sense of guilt at their admissions that they see the monks as part of the tourism product to be seen and photographed. The complex relation between tourists' perception of a loss of authenticity in Luang Prabang, the realization that they themselves are participants in this loss of authenticity, and the nonetheless highly successful projection of an image of a sense of place is an interesting topic for further research.

Monks were far less likely to express that they felt a negative impact on their way of life from tourism. Nor, however, were they unreservedly enthusiastic about tourism. The general attitude seems to be one of acceptance of tourism, with an expectation that tourists also respect simple boundaries. Tourism certainly cannot be completely blamed for the difficulties being met by the temples in changing Laotian society, but it does introduce another contextual factor that makes monks think differently about their life after the temple, which can affect their choices while in the temple. For example, the most popular subject the respondents would like to learn more is English, and they also believe that English is the most useful skill when leaving temples. The majority of monk respondents would like to see more tourists and agreed that tourism does not bring great negative effects to their lives, but actually make life in the temple more interesting. It can be said that, just as monks are a distinctive element of the image of Luang Prabang for tourists, tourists are also an important characteristic of the city's image from the point of view of the monks.

Tourists see the spirit of the place of Luang Prabang in terms of a consistent and nostalgic image, even before they arrive, and are sensitized to any threats that they see as diluting that image. For the monks, the city is the lived environment of their lives for a number of years. They also see changes, but do not necessarily see them as threatening. Contact between these two groups will only continue to intensify as tourism development in Luang Prabang continues, and their respective images of the city, by which the spirit of place of Luang Prabang are represented and understood, will continue to evolve.

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