

Why are we going to Laos?

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From February 18th – 21st, 2010, 25 graduate students from the “Culture and Development” program of RILCA (with 4 “Rural Development Studies” students) went on a field trip to Laos. When I taught “Rural Development Studies” students before this trip, there were many questions such as “What will you learn after going to Laos?” “We have changed our institute’s name to the Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia, so do we have to reach out to Asian people?” “Were there any changes in Laos after hosting the of 25th SEA Games?” These were the questions for which we would find answers in Laos.

We took an Express train from Bangkok early in the evening. The train departed on time but arrived in Nong Khai very late. It seems like this delay has become a Thai train custom (the result of a government monopoly service). When we decided to take the train, we tried not to expect too much because we all knew about the news of train accidents and many train strikes. We couldn’t avoid it so we had to accept it quietly.



“Rural Development Studies” students on this trip

We arrived in Nong Khai at 9 am and the weather was very nice. We hoped to escape the Thai political problems and relax in Laos (but failed to do so because every Laos channel broadcast the Thai political news). We took another train from Nong Khai to Tha Na Laeng in Laos. There are 4 trains per day and it takes only 15 minutes from Thailand to Laos. However, we had to wait 1 hour for immigration in Thailand and another 1 hour in Laos. (Oh dear.. who wants to take them?) So, it took 2 hours to travel only 10 kilometers.



Tha Na Laeng train station, Vientiane suburb

Tha Na Laeng is a suitable name for this place because it is very dry (Leang (ແລ້ງ) = dry). It is about 15 kilometers from Vientiane. We began to see factories, modern buildings and streets when we approached the city of Vientiane, especially in the heart of the city where the arch of triumph is located. Laos has developed and created new landscape in this area. The streets are wide. Government buildings nearby are beautiful and not cramped together. We checked-in to a mid-range 3-storey hotel. The rooms, with air-condition, refrigerator and TV, were 800 baht per night. (the same as a provincial hotel in Thailand but the rate was a bit expensive.)

What did we see in Laos?

The first thing we saw was “modernization” of the city as in other big city; cars and buses, traffic jams during rush hours, tall buildings, department stores, factories, entertainment venues, expensive goods and food.

(small bowl of Phở = 60 baht, big bowl = 80 baht, compared to Vientiane wages which are not more than 100 baht per day)



Thai and foreign tourists crowding into Wat Phra Keaw



Wat See Sa Ked, ancient beauty in the middle of Vientiane

In the morning, we had coffee and congee for breakfast near the hotel. We heard local people complaining about how many capitalists had built new factories near the river and discharged toxic waste into it. Many animals; shrimps, shellfish, crabs and fish, in the river had died so people had to buy food from the market. They couldn't go into the river because it was contaminated and burned their skin. Also, they couldn't use water from the river. (I'm from Isaan, born in the Northeast of Thailand, so I could understand their accent). They also complained about young women students who had abandoned their traditional dress and sneaked into pubs at night.

There were also many other complaints which raised the question "Modernization is only a deceptive word to lure Laos into becoming victims of modern consumption!!! Where can we find generosity and hospitality? (Please answer me!) Lao vendors think tourists are treasure troves? Will we develop the country according to this modernization concept? Laos today is different from in the past and can't be the same because I believe in the true nature of change. But change should lead to a better way of life for all of society, not just for a few limited people who can become rich. Local people remain poor and only small groups of international businessmen and investors get the

benefits. Laos should find their own means of development which is suitable for their social structure and culture, without losing their positive identity.



Gentle and beautiful performance by Lao art students

Lao enchantment...from the question “Why are we going to Laos?”- I got the answer from what I saw on this short visit. The charm of Laos is in their Buddhist beliefs reflected in their daily lives. I saw many enchanting temples. People live simple lives and visit temples very often. Working class residents and students wear traditional dress to work and school. During the time we stayed there, many temples were preparing religious ceremonies (Boon Phra Vess). Some temples were waiting for groups of Thai Buddhists to make off-season offerings of robes and other needs to monks. We heard the songs of the famous northeastern-style singer, Por Chalardnoi, from big speakers near Wat Phra That Luang. Many tourist attractions such as Wat Phra Kaew, Wat Phra That Luang and shopping centers were crowded with Thai tourists from the northeast, mostly from SAO office in Thailand. This can be considered the best example of the close relationship between Thailand and Laos - the unbreakable bond between people across the Khong River that comes from similar cultures and ways of life, friendship and close relations. I wish Laos could preserve its beautiful cultures and traditions because it is an incalculable treasure. In the future, people from all over the world may wish to visit or study Laos’s social development model. We have already seen modern development plan, focusing only on modernization without concern for the environment and humanity, which leads to the destruction of nature and culture domination, causing self-alienation in society.

People in society keep their distance from each other and lack friendship. Everything has its cost and has to be traded with money. People think only of themselves and their friends. They don't care about others or their community or nation. How can we preserve national assets for the next generation? It is not too late for Laos to develop their country into a secure and peaceful place that everyone wants to visit.