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# ***Transformative learning in the hidden city: writing an interpretation plan at the Viengxai Field School in northern Laos***

**Jo Wills, Colin Long, Jonathan Sweet and Simon Wilmot<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Introducing Viengxai: a contested, revolutionary landscape**

The early morning mist gradually burns away as the sun rises, revealing limestone karsts hundreds of metres tall jutting abruptly from the verdant valley floor. The crisp air is enlivened by the laughter of children on their way to school. Water vapour hangs suspended above the lake, its glassy surface broken only where a woman kneels to wash clothes. This peaceful scene was once unimaginable, for here is one of the most heavily bombed landscapes in the history of warfare.

Forty years ago this landscape was the heart of the 'liberated zone' of the Lao revolution. Known as Viengxai, it was, from the mid-1960s until 1975, the base of the Pathet Lao leadership, housing the military and political command of the Lao communist movement. Until 1973, the revolutionaries used the hundreds of caves that honeycomb the limestone karsts as shelter from the rain of bombs and missiles hurled at them by American aircraft operating from bases in Thailand. After the ceasefire between the communists and their royalist opponents in 1973, houses and other structures were built outside the caves and a start was made on the construction of a capital for the liberated zone. The rapid collapse of US-backed regimes in the region, however, meant that by 1975 the communists had taken over the government of war-racked Laos. The leadership rapidly moved to the national capital, Vientiane, leaving Viengxai to sink into the twilight of military base and re-education camps.

Viengxai is in the northeast of Laos, close to the Vietnamese border. The region's mountainous, difficult terrain and proximity to northern Vietnam made it ideal territory for an insurgency. Even today it remains difficult to reach from Laos' main populations centres along the Mekong River. Communist forces were active in Houaphan Province, in which Viengxai is located, from the late-1940s, and the province was one of two areas given over as regroupment areas for Pathet Lao troops after the Geneva agreements that brought the French war in Indochina to a close in 1954. In the 1950s and early-1960s, Pathet Lao base areas were located in a number of different places within the province, while most of the fighting between communist and government troops took place on the Plain of Jars, over 200km to the west of Viengxai. Aerial bombardment of the Plain by American and government planes forced the Pathet Lao to concentrate their headquarters activities in Viengxai from 1964. There, it was also easier to

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<sup>1</sup> Cultural Heritage Centre for Asia and the Pacific, Deakin University.

maintain communications and supply lines with the North Vietnamese, whose support was crucial to the eventual success of the Lao communists.

Throughout the 1960s and into the early 1970s Viengxai was the base area of the Lao revolution. Some 20,000 soldiers and cadres and their families, as well as local people, sheltered in the caves, in what became an underground city complete with hospitals, schools, shops, living quarters and factories. Anti-aircraft gun emplacements nestled on the mountain peaks or on the valley floor.

After 1975 the area hosted re-education camps for officials, soldiers and employees of the vanquished Royal Lao Government. This dark period of history is not widely discussed in Laos today. This made Viengxai a largely off-limits place until recently. It is only in the new century that the town has been freely opened up to visitors.

### Integrating heritage interpretation into pro-poor sustainable tourism

The impetus for this opening comes from government and NGO efforts to reduce poverty in what is the poorest province of one of the poorest nations in the world. United Nations Office of Drug Control and Lao government efforts to eradicate opium poppy growing in the mountains of Laos left many villagers without incomes. While many farmers have been encouraged to take up different crops, the need to diversify Houaphan's economy and facilitate some development and investment in the province led to efforts by the Netherlands Development Organisation (SNV) to develop a tourism strategy for the region. SNV has concentrated its efforts on stimulating small-scale, pro-poor sustainable tourism, and on training locals working in the tourism industry, including Lao National Tourism Administration officials, and improving tourism facilities and attractions.

The caves of Viengxai are a remarkable heritage and tourism resource. They provide probably the best example of a revolutionary base area from the period of the great Cold War anti-colonial struggles that gripped countries in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and the Americas. As the birthplace of the contemporary Lao state and a primary site of the Lao civil war, they are clearly of national significance, even if this is contested by members of the Lao exile community. But as a revolutionary base area, and as a revolutionary cultural landscape – demonstrating the way that the landscape itself was integrated into the struggle – Viengxai is also of substantial international significance.

The Viengxai caves have been identified as the primary tourism attraction for Houaphan, and SNV, together with the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), embarked on a training and management and interpretation planning process to improve the caves as a heritage and tourism site. Deakin University was commissioned by SNV and UNWTO to provide training for staff from the authority responsible for managing the caves site, the Kayson Phomvihane Memorial Caves Office (KPMCO), in heritage

interpretation and management and to prepare an interpretation plan for the site. This paper discusses the Field School that staff from Deakin University's Cultural Heritage Centre for Asia and the Pacific (CHCAP) conducted in Viengxai in November and December 2006, emphasising the importance of heritage tourism and interpretation to sustainable development in remote regions, and highlighting the benefits of participatory processes and collaborative planning in heritage training.

### **The Viengxai Field School: applied learning in heritage interpretation**

One of the missions of CHCAP is to provide opportunities for cross-cultural engagement and cooperation in heritage management between professionals in the region. In particular, therefore, the Viengxai Field School responded to a desire to provide participants who were completing a Masters of Cultural Heritage degree with an opportunity for experiential learning within an international and cross-cultural context. However, it was also crucial in this project that Lao heritage professionals were active partners in the interpretation project and that they too would learn through interaction with their international colleagues. This gave the project a unique cross-cultural dimension, something the Deakin team and the international agencies were keen to develop.

In addressing these aims the design of the Deakin project at Viengxai built on earlier research work, and was also influenced by another model of learning through participatory cross-cultural exchange in a heritage management context. In 2001 Deakin staff conducted specific research into the practice of heritage interpretation in Laos PDR, supported by an Australia Research Council grant titled *UNESCO - Agency of Cultural Globalisation? Universal Values and Local Cultural Identity in the Asia Pacific Region*. An aspect of this research analysed the interplay between international and local historical and political interests and how this has shaped the contemporary heritage interpretation, which is evident at Luang Prabang. This study was critical and informed the management and expectations of the Viengxai project, as it provided knowledge about the distinctive role and function of heritage interpretation in Laos PDR, (Long and Sweet, 2006).

At the same time the Australia Research Council also supported another research project, which was aimed at developing cross-cultural heritage practice in the Asia-Pacific Region. This was also an important recent step in the process through which CHCAP has developed expertise in managing cross-cultural heritage projects. In this study, *Cultural Heritage Site Significance, Management and Interpretation in China and Australia: A Comparative Analysis in a Cross-Cultural Framework*, Australian based researchers undertook visitor research with Chinese colleagues at Chengde in 2002, and the following year they conducted a comparative study at Port Arthur. A paper on this research, *Preservation Knowledge Gap*, was presented at the 15th ICOMOS General Assembly, Xi'an, China (Logan, Sweet and Qian). This information

informed two key aspects of the Viengxai project: first, it raised awareness between heritage professionals of the different systems, values and priorities, which exist in contrasting cultural and political contexts. Secondly, it provided practical insights into the management of joint heritage projects, where it is intended that there is a high level of exchange and cooperation between participants.

Also important for this project was the model of cross-cultural experiential learning that has recently been utilized by the UNESCO/ICCROM Asian Academy of Heritage Management (Asian Academy for Heritage Management, 2007: website). Two of the Deakin staff who worked at Viengxai had been participants in these field schools. Furthermore, in partnership with the Hanoi Architectural University, Deakin University staff also designed the curriculum of the Asian Academy Field School held in Hanoi, Vietnam in 2005. This Field School attracted participants representing 12 different countries across the region, and for two weeks these young heritage professionals worked in small cross-cultural interdisciplinary groups to develop interpretation ideas for the Ba Dinh archaeological site in the city's citadel.

The challenge of the Viengxai Field School, therefore, was to combine the delivery of a multi-purpose teaching program with the production of an accessible and informed interpretation strategy for the Viengxai caves. Deakin University staff approached this task with the express intention of getting the Field School participants to develop sections of the strategy. This, we reasoned, would give participants an applied learning experience, a chance to implement the interpretative theory skills learned through the first section of the Field School program.

#### Recognising different learning needs: Field School participants

There were five key groups involved in the Viengxai Field School. Each of these groups had different hopes and expectations, and each influenced the Field School's delivery and outcomes. The first group comprised 14 postgraduate students who were enrolled in Deakin University's Cultural Heritage and Museum Studies courses. Many of these students already worked in the heritage field and hoped to gain a greater understanding of interpretation through the applied experience the Field School offered. The second group included Lao museum, heritage and tourism professionals from Vientiane who were keen to participate in heritage training, and learn more about the Viengxai site and its interpretive and tourism potential. The third group comprised teaching staff (from Deakin University and Tony Donovan from SNV), each of whom brought a range of experiences and perspectives to the project, and were focused on delivering the course and producing an interpretation plan for the KPMCO. KPMCO staff from Viengxai and tourism workers from nearby Xam Neua, the fourth group, played a crucial role as the project unfolded, and were keen to discuss the site and its significance and implement the interpretation plan. Finally, the fifth group

comprised three planners from the Melbourne-based Hansen Partnership planning consultancy. Their project to develop a town plan for Viengxai ran parallel with, though was separate from, the Field School. It aimed to provide the necessary town planning controls to protect the historic significance of the town, while allowing for future development.

### **Participatory practices at the Viengxai Field School**

The Viengxai Field School ran for 14 intensive days. Participants shared this applied heritage learning experience in a geographically challenging and remote location. Viengxai's remoteness promoted learning both within and between the different participant groups in a variety of different social and educational contexts. To discuss the participatory and transformative dimensions of this Field School three examples are explored below.

#### **Using Photovoice to promote cross-cultural learning and interaction**

The competing needs and interests of these groups created both problems and opportunities throughout the Field School. In an attempt to bridge the differences between the learning levels of the Lao and Australian participants, staff engaged participants in a "Photovoice" exercise during the initial tour of the Viengxai cave site. "Photovoice" is a participatory action research tool that researchers use to promote engagement and community empowerment, to gain insights into community perspectives, and to improve communications between communities and policy makers (Wang, 1998; Wang and Burris, 1994, 1997). In the Field School, this technique helped both Australian and Lao participants focus on the interpretative elements of the caves, and allowed them to visually articulate their understanding of the existing interpretation. As an exercise, "Photovoice" was a way of "kick-starting" the Field School and focusing participants on the site's interpretive potential and its material, spatial and historical dimensions. It engaged participants in a common task, promoted interpersonal communication and helped many overcome their initial shyness. Camera sharing, as many of the Lao participants did not own a camera, meant participants had to engage and negotiate which images they wanted to use for the subsequent presentation. Photovoice thus helped participants and staff to overcome language barriers, and participants were able to create site-specific teaching material to help begin the interpretation training.

Despite the success of this exercise, learning and language disparities became particularly apparent when participants presented their images to the group. Although an interpreter had been organised for the field school classes, he was needed initially to help set up the town planning project. This left Deakin staff, and SNV's Tony Donovan (whose Lao language skills did not extend to technical heritage terminology), with a major dilemma. We had anticipated Lao participants would have a greater knowledge of English but suddenly found we were only able to communicate with half of the participants. Two of the Deakin participants

spoke a little Lao, but not sufficient to aid general understanding. Fortunately two of the Lao participants spoke English, although neither had had extensive experience in translation. However, they agreed to translate for the Lao participants, and the class was then conducted in a more traditional and formal presenter/translator format. Initially, this arrangement proved to be more comfortable for many of the Lao participants. It emerged that many were intimidated by the expectations to present to the whole groups and that it was not Lao culture for them to speak about their feelings or make criticisms, particularly in front of their managers and supervisors.

The two provisional Lao translators also agreed to discuss the images they had taken of the caves to the whole group. It was significant when one of them chose to divert our attention from conventional interpretative site elements and focus on an image of the Deakin participants in the caves. The image generated humour, which in turn generated connection. The image represented foreigners engaging with and developing a better understanding of Lao history. This, in turn, triggered in the presenter a sense of pride and confirmed the site's cultural significance. Such a personal expression of cultural identity gave all participants and staff an insight into this individual's understanding of audience and tourism, and his appreciation of Viengxai's significance to Lao culture. It also helped to lift the mood after the initial language difficulties and confusion.

For some of the Deakin participants, however, the changes to teaching formats were frustrating. Some felt the rapid adaptation of teaching aids to simplify an understanding of the interpretative principles did not take into consideration their own learning needs and interests. On reflection, the focus on Lao learning needs was necessitated by the fact that there was only a short period of time to provide the training for the Lao participants: their access to Deakin's expertise would effectively cease at the end of the Field School. Our expectations for postgraduate students to be responsible for their learning were possibly too high, particularly given the isolation in which they were being asked to work and the new cultural environment to which they were being asked to rapidly adapt. However, rather than divide the class into two distinct language and learning groups, we decided to keep all participants together in an attempt to encourage cross-cultural communication and aid self learning. We asked participants to form smaller groups, each a mixture of Lao and Australian, and talk about the site using the images. Initially this was time consuming, but they began to break through communication barriers and converse through gestures and drawings.

This experience was a tangible example of how all parties need to be flexible and adaptable when undertaking fieldwork. In many ways, it is an example of the extreme experience of cross-cultural interpretation and teaching in the field – we had to seek new ways to deliver the principles and theories essential to interpretation that were appropriate to the working, environmental and cultural context. Deakin students were challenged to use the very important communicative aspect of interpretation to engage with their Lao colleagues, and

to engage with multilingual teaching and presentations. The Lao colleagues were asked to participate and try to impress upon the Deakin participants the importance of the site to the Lao people. Staff were forced to radically adapt the teaching program and identify different learning styles and needs among the participants. In many ways, therefore, it provided an excellent, though exhausting, applied experience of conducting heritage fieldwork in a cross-cultural context.

### Developing a cross-cultural understanding of Viengxai's significance

One of the most challenging aspects of the Viengxai work was linking an understanding of heritage significance to the site's political context. This issue is not unique to Viengxai: interpreting sites of trauma, pain and suffering, or sites of controversial political importance is always difficult. Sites as diverse as Gallipoli in Turkey, the Swan Brewery in Perth, the World Trade Centre in New York, and Buchenwald Concentration camp in Germany have all had their share of controversy because of the different meanings that these places are asked to convey by different interest groups. Viengxai is the most important historical site related to modern Lao history for the contemporary Lao government, but it is not clear that this significance is shared by the broader Lao population. Certainly it is likely to be contested by the Lao exile community. Many Lao, particularly in the Mekong Valley towns, did not fight on the communist side, and the large proportion of Laos' population that is below the age of 25 has no personal experience of the liberation struggle.

As with most national governments, particularly authoritarian regimes, the Lao government wishes to closely control the narrative expressed at sites of national heritage significance. This potentially narrows the scope of interpretation: there was, for instance, no possibility of dealing with the post-1975 history of Viengxai, when a number of re-education camps functioned in the region. Deakin staff were well aware of the political and heritage sensitivity of the Viengxai site, a sensitivity emphasised by the fact that approval and monitoring of the whole interpretation project was conducted by the Prime Minister's office.

The difficulty was exacerbated by our status as outsiders and westerners. It is completely legitimate for countries to seek to control their own sense of identity and heritage, and this meant a high degree of sensitivity on our behalf was necessary. Deakin staff and students all brought their own perceptions of Laos and its history, some with little knowledge of the country, some with long-standing research interests in its history and heritage.

As a means of negotiating the political and heritage sensitivities, Deakin staff found that the key concepts of heritage practice were extremely useful. We used the methodology identified in the Burra Charter (2001) to emphasise the importance of significance and authenticity to heritage interpretation. We collectively developed a statement of significance and intended to use it as a basis for subsequent discussions about the appropriate interpretation techniques

suitable for the Viengxai caves. In retrospect, however, our determination to quickly develop a significance statement did not allow for the philosophical and cultural discussions that the Lao participants needed in order to understand or agree to the statement. Thus, what we thought would be a simple process of translation turned into several days of intense work to explore and agree on the key elements of site significance.

Although all good heritage practitioners know identifying a place's significance is the first step to its protection and interpretation, how we reach an understanding of that significance is particularly important when working in an international context. The discussion about significance animated the Lao participants in a very concrete way, and we were careful, on several occasions, to sit back and allow them to debate the intricacies of their understanding in Lao. Time consuming as it was, it enabled Lao participants to actively participate in the rest of the Field School, particularly the applied learning via the development of the interpretation plan. The process demonstrated a sense of the Lao participants' engagement in the project, and also provided a valuable learning experience for Deakin participants and staff. Viengxai's significance to the Lao participants was intuitively understood, and in a very deep sense, but formalising it into a statement was a new experience for many of the participants. If significance is to guide preservation and interpretation work it must be explicitly recognised at the outset of all planning processes. This, therefore, became the focus of the first week of the Field School, with very tangible results.

While Deakin staff wanted the fundamental elements of significance to reflect Lao understandings of the site, we also felt it valid to bring an international perspective. After all, we believe that the Viengxai caves are of international significance as one of the best preserved examples of a revolutionary base area from the great Cold War anti-colonial revolutionary struggles. It was also useful for the Lao participants to know the international importance of their country's history: given that few westerners know that President Eisenhower once considered Laos the key domino in Asia, and that the tiny country received more US aid per capita than any other country in the late-1950s, it came as some surprise to the Lao participants to know that their nation was once at the very centre of Cold War antagonism.

The framework of significance and authenticity is not only crucial to sound heritage practice; it also helped to negotiate difficult cross-cultural learning issues. The result was a very good understanding of the significance of Viengxai that was shared by all participants, foreign and Lao. This established an excellent agreed base for the subsequent work in developing the interpretation plan.

#### Integrating community engagement into the interpretation plan

In 2005, SNV commissioned a report that recommended a collaborative management strategy for the Viengxai cave sites and surrounding areas. This

report highlighted the benefits of “a participatory co-management process for conservation” (2005:31). In addition, it recommended training requirements and proposed an implementation strategy. Community involvement strategies are also an essential component of any interpretation plan. They can include simple information sessions, consultative focus groups or active participatory projects, and are a means of collecting or distributing information. They are beneficial as a means of raising a community’s awareness of new projects or proposals, seeking their input and advice, and/or developing collaborative partnerships. Further, these strategies can be used to build community capacity, promote social interaction, and enhance participants’ skills.

Part of the Field School’s applied learning strategy was to include participants in writing the interpretation plan. It was divided into eight key chapters, and participants chose the subjects on which they wanted to focus (include ref to final interpretation plan, 2006/7). One of these groups focussed on community engagement, which is significant in itself, and reflects changes in approaches to heritage management, particularly those promoted by the Asian Academy of Heritage Management and ICCROM. The group comprised three Deakin students, three Lao representatives from the KPMCO, one female Lao representative from the Huaphan tourism office in the nearby town of Xam Neua and one Deakin staff member. The group’s task was to identify the different communities in Viengxai, and beyond, that might be affected by or be relevant to the development of the interpretation plan and caves site. Further, it was required to run a number of engagement sessions in order to integrate a community perspective into the interpretation strategy.

At the outset, only one female Lao participant spoke a little English, and none of the Deakin participants spoke any Lao. We had a dictionary on the table, and butchers papers on which to write our ideas. With such limited resources developing an inclusive engagement strategy in such a tight time frame seemed almost an impossible task. As the initial discussion progressed, we discovered that our translator understood more English than we realised but was nervous about speaking in public. Eventually the group decided to run two consultation sessions during the week: one with a school group, the other with stakeholders from the Viengxai community. The school group comprised high school students aged between sixteen to seventeen and gaining an insight into their views about local heritage was valuable. The second group was to include the ‘current’ leaders of Viengxai, such as representatives from local business, mass organizations (the Lao Women’s Union, the Front for National Construction, the Youth Union), local villages, local army and police, village security, Lao People’s Revolutionary Party members, the Lao Federation of Trade Unions, District government, Transport Association and Market Traders.

Time limitations forced us to choose the guided question method of consultation. Thus, the first task was to formulate questions for each group and we worked on identifying five questions for the communities to consider. Initially, Deakin

participants wrote down what they thought they wanted to know. These were translated and then the Lao participants debated the relevance or appropriateness of them, in a similar manner to the significance debates outlined above. Again, although time-consuming, crucial gains were made. The translator gained confidence in both her English ability and her ideas, and prompted the other Lao participants to engage in the discussion. Further, the Deakin participants were involved in a direct exchange and debate about the relevance of their approach to the task. This built camaraderie – trying to explain their ideas simply often caused great amusement and thus diffused tension - and gave them the sense that the impossible task assigned to them was becoming achievable.

Both community meetings created transformative learning experiences, particularly for the Lao participants, as they were conducted in Lao. The meetings were also valuable from a process perspective. These two sessions were the first consultative meetings the KPMTCO had undertaken, and the Vice Director of the KPMTCO found the focus groups a good source of information about the local community's perceptions of the caves. For instance, the school meeting inspired discussion of developing an essay prize whereby high school students are asked to submit essays about Viengxai's history. The general consensus from the community meeting was that there was a need for greater interpretation of the caves. There was also agreement that particular methods, such as improved signage, promotional material and oral history, would enhance visitor experience and understanding.

These meetings provided the Lao participants with an opportunity to situate their work in a broader context, to learn from their immediate community as well as from the Deakin students who participated in the group. The Deakin students were able to witness how this approach to interpretation planning was useful, and to integrate it into the interpretation plan.

## **Conclusion**

In much heritage practice there is a strong tension between professional expertise, political exigencies and community participation. Getting the balance right is, as most heritage practitioners know, not always easy. Indeed it is often tempting for professionals to believe that they know best, for politicians to confuse the announcement of an already determined strategy with consultation, and for local communities to end up being ignored. The risk of such an outcome in a developing country with little experience of public consultation and little sense of independent civil society organizations representing non-government perspectives was very real in Laos. We believe, however, that the interpretation plan for the Viengxai Caves represents a case of successful community participation in heritage policy for a number of reasons.

Importantly, the auspicing agencies, particularly SNV, have a very strong commitment to participatory work, and excellent, committed staff on the ground. The common view propagated by western governments that Communist party-run states such as Laos, Cuba and Vietnam are totalitarian and devoid of any real opportunities for ordinary people to express their views is outdated, if it was ever accurate. Although Laos is by no means a democracy, there are many ways in which people are able to participate in policy development and feedback to government, in formal and informal ways. In fact, the presence of international aid agencies, some of which utilise the most advanced forms of community participation, means that Laos is often exposed to best practice in this field (Long and Sweet, 2006). More accurate than old Cold War stereotypes is the assessment that community consultation in such states can actually be quite effective so long as it does not pose a threat to the Party's dominance of political power.

Thus in Viengxai we found that our efforts to encourage public participation were facilitated and rewarded. Indeed, in comparison to public participation processes in many Australian local government jurisdictions, we felt that community involvement was serious, valued and effective.

Perhaps one of the reasons for this success was the very nature of the Field School. Because a substantial number of the Australian participants were students, and because of the remote, unusual and culturally alien (to us) nature of the site, there was a very real sense in which all participants had something to learn. Shared experiences outside working hours, and the fact that we lived in the town during the process, all added to this sense of shared learning and experiences. The Australians could bring knowledge of western interpretation practices, while the Lao participants brought a deep understanding of Viengxai as a culturally meaningful place.

What was needed to give this shared commitment and enthusiasm some structure was not anything particularly unusual. Simple educational techniques, such as Photovoice, and an ability to operate in a culturally sensitive way were essential. Critical, too, were fundamental elements of good heritage practice that should shape all our heritage work: getting the significance understood, and a commitment to real consultation with local communities.

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