JRAI Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute

Multiple nostalgias: the fabric of heritage in Luang Prabang (Lao PDR)

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This article explores the workings of nostalgia as a major driving force in heritage-making. Based on my fieldwork in Luang Prabang, an ancient royal town of northern Laos which became a UNESCO Listed World Heritage Site in 1995, I propose that it is necessary to disentangle the multiple nostalgic attachments which lie behind the often-mentioned label 'nostalgia' from those which are not necessarily nostalgic. I explore the various engagements of diverse actors with nostalgia, and how these engagements, rooted in personal experiences, intersect with specific postures towards time, history, heritage, development, and culture. Secondly, my aim is to highlight the performative aspects of nostalgia in the fabric of heritage. I argue that, by attempting to preserve spaces, practices, and objects, UNESCO experts and national civil servants effectively transform them. Far from stopping transmission and culture mechanisms, patrimonial recognition creates aesthetic forms, historical narratives, politics of transmission, and, more generally, social configurations. I delve into the processes through which Luang Prabang has been turned into a heritage scene and a tourist attraction, and I contend that such transformation is rendered possible by the concatenation of UNESCO projects, cosmopolitan gentrification, tourism development, and state programmes.

Ethnographies of nostalgia

Nostalgia, in the sense of a 'longing for what is lacking in a changed present ... a yearning for what is now unattainable, simply because of the irreversibility of time' (Pickering & Keightley 2006: 920), is a central notion that permeates many contemporary discourses and practices (Boym 2001; Davis 1979). Postmodernist theorists have seen in it a distinctive attitude towards the past inherent in contemporary culture, 'a reaction against the irreversible' (Jankélévitch 1983: 299) to be found everywhere and one that these days is often commodified. Since the rediscovery of memory by social scientists (Berliner 2005), and in particular its emotionality (White 2006), nostalgia has attracted anthropologists' attention. For us, there is a great deal to be researched in these laments about loss and the vanishing of the 'breath of air which was among that which came before' (to use Walter Benjamin's terms [2006: 390]), which we keep hearing in the field. Terms including 'structural' (Herzfeld 1996), 'synthetic' (Strathern 1995), 'armchair' (Appadurai 1996), 'colonial' (Bissell 2005), 'imperialist' (Rosaldo 1989), 'resistant' (Stewart 1988), or 'for the future' (Piot 2010) have been appended to nostalgia to approach its complexity, at the intersection of the individual, the social, and the political. In this article, I will not use 'nostalgia' to describe a feeling *per se*, an overly

Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.) **18**, 769-786

subjectivist stance for anthropologists, whose appraisal of such a state might only be elusive. Rather, I see nostalgia as a specific posture *vis-à-vis* the past seen as irreversible, a set of publicly displayed discourses, practices, and emotions where the ancient is somehow glorified, without necessarily implying the experience of first-hand nostalgic memories.

First, nostalgia as a theory (Robertson 1992) and a practice (materialized, for instance, in museum object collections) has played an important role in the history of our discipline (as well as in the field of sociology). As much as continuity is a key idea for social scientists (Berliner 2010; Robbins 2007), anthropology has, from the beginning, held on to nostalgia for disappearing worlds and ruptured equilibriums, far away or close to home, as in the case of folklorists (Bendix 1997). In Malinowski's *Argonauts* (1922) or Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques/A world on the wane* (1961 [1955]) we find examples of anthropological discourse as forms of cultural necrology, deploying what French ethnologist Fabre (2008) termed the '*paradigme des derniers*'. And whilst anthropologists have slowly abandoned this genre of speech and writing, without definitely stepping out of the 'posture of the nostalgist' (Faubion 1993: 36),[1] nostalgic discourses and practices are foundations underlying the fields of heritage and tourism.

A lot has been written on nostalgia as a resource for preservation agents, UNESCO experts, private investors, and tourism companies (e.g. Dann 1998; Frow 1991). Numerous scholars have explored the ways in which current experiences of tourist consumption involve nostalgia (e.g. Graburn 1995; 2000; Gyimothy 2005;[2] Peleggi 2005), often addressed through the theme of authenticity and rooted in evolutionary theory. In this article, acknowledging the entanglement of tourism, consumption, and nostalgia in contemporary 'heritagescapes' (Di Giovine 2008), I extend the discussion of nostalgia. First, based on my fieldwork in Luang Prabang, an ancient royal town of northern Laos which became a UNESCO Listed World Heritage Site in 1995, I propose that it is necessary to disentangle the multiple nostalgic attachments which lie behind the oftencited label 'nostalgia' from those which are not necessarily nostalgic. Following Bissell's study in Zanzibar, which distinguishes between different forms of colonial and revolutionary nostalgia circulating among developers, preservationists, and inhabitants, I suggest that, in Luang Prabang, we examine how 'nostalgia takes on very different forms and dimensions, engaging an array of social agents, interests, forces, and locations' (Bissell 2005: 239). I concur that 'nostalgic discourses ... are anything but singular' (2005: 216) and that, as anthropologists, we try to locate 'the multiple strands of nostalgia circulating' within our field sites (2005: 235). I explore diverse categories of often disconnected actors (UNESCO experts, local elites, expatriates, Asian and Western tourists, Lao in the diaspora, Buddhist monks, and inhabitants) and their multiple engagements with nostalgia. I show how their engagements, rooted in personal experiences, imply specific present-day postures towards time (past, present, and future), history, heritage, development, and culture. These attachments may constitute a source of convergence: for instance, by bonding diverse actors in a community of loss which laments the vanishing of Luang Prabang atmosphere. At the same time, multiple nostalgic attachments give rise to misunderstandings and tensions, as many lack the same relationship to heritage. I then argue that people's investments in heritage are not only past-orientated but also point towards certain visions of the future, expressing diverse hopes and fears about the kind of world that future generations will inhabit.

Secondly, I emphasize that, far from being a feeling hidden in the confines of the self, nostalgia is 'a force that does something' (Dames 2010: 272) in contemporary Luang

Prabang. I argue that, by attempting to preserve spaces, practices, and objects, UNESCO experts and national heritage professionals effectively transform them. In a thought-provoking piece, Navaro-Yashin has shown that an appraisal of melancholia centred 'on the subject, or the interior experience of the human being, ... misses significant aspects of relations that generate melancholia' (2009: 16). I agree with Navaro-Yashin that one has to go beyond the exploration of the inner world of our interlocutors. However, in this article, I analyse the pragmatic effects of nostalgia. Following Latour (2005), I pose the question: how do nostalgic attachments 'make do' (what he terms '*faire faire*')? My aim is to delve into what I term the transformative aspects of nostalgia in the production of heritage.[3] Instead of stopping transmission and culture mechanisms, heritage recognition creates aesthetic forms, historical narratives, politics of transmission, and, more generally, new social configurations.

Of course, what is produced draws on something of the past, but also reproduces it as something new. This is clearly evident in Luang Prabang. There, state programmes, UNESCO projects, cosmopolitan gentrification, and tourism development have been fostered in parallel, but their making of heritage 'hijacks history' (Herzfeld 2011). The geographer Harvey has illustrated how cultivation of nostalgia, promoted by contemporary cultural organizations around the world, can produce 'sanitized collective memories, the nurturing of uncritical aesthetic experiences and the absorption of future possibilities into a non-conflictual arena that is eternally present' (2000: 168). Practices of preservation also recycle the past, transforming urban textures into 'nostalgic palimpsests' (Dawdy 2010), and create new landscapes, seemingly innocuous and ready to be consumed by tourists. In the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), Luang Prabang was a neglected town after the Socialist Revolution of 1975 owing to its association with the royal family. Since 1995, Luang Prabang has been turned into a UNESCO sanctuary and a tourist attraction, where French Indochina is somehow celebrated and the pains caused by the Communist experiment are silenced.

This article aims to explain how such transformation, from neglected town to UNESCO site, is perceived and rendered possible, by describing (1) whose nostalgias are being voiced and displayed; (2) the conversion of discourses about heritage and loss into nostalgic actions on the ground; (3) the diverse mediations (institutions, agents, and objects) that facilitate these processes; and (4) actors' manoeuvres and identifications (or lack thereof) in these newly constituted heritage worlds. At a time when one can observe the global institutionalization of the preservation attitude, this article aims to contribute an insightful understanding of heritage planning and the cultivation of nostalgia as forms of 'ongoing ruination' (Stoler 2008: 195), a kind of violence that renders the landscape silent, represses its traumatic past, and reduces it to a charming spectacle for tourists, idealizing Luang Prabang's history.

Luang Prabang, a UNESCO sanctuary

Famous for its thirty-four Buddhist monasteries and orange-robed monks as well as for its colonial architecture, Luang Prabang was a royal town and a transnational centre of Buddhist learning (Stuart-Fox 1997). With 50,000 inhabitants, it is located on the peninsula formed by the Mekong and Namkhan rivers in the mountainous region of northern Laos. Its history has been punctuated by the succession of kings. In the fourteenth century, King Fa Ngum established the Lane Xang Kingdom on the territory occupied by the Khmu (an ethnic group of Lao PDR) and, accepting a golden statue of Buddha, adopted Theravada Buddhism. Since the fifteenth century, Luang Prabang has

seen successive invasions by foreign powers: Vietnamese, Burmese, Siamese, Chinese Haw, French, Japanese, and finally Americans. Having signed an agreement with the reigning king in 1893, French colonizers drew the national borders of Laos and established a Protectorate which persisted until 1953 (Ivarsson 2008). In the 1950s and 1960s, the creation of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party led to the 1975 Socialist Revolution (and the dethronement of King Sisavang Vatthana), which forced many supporters of the king into exile.

Following extended negotiations involving Lao and French actors, the UNESCO assembly awarded Luang Prabang World Heritage status at the 1995 Berlin Conference. Under the UNESCO umbrella, a multiplicity of institutional agents launched and continue to participate in the preservation project. These range from the Paris and Bangkok-based experts, to architects, engineers, and cultural and tourism consultants based in Luang Prabang who are not employed by UNESCO, but funded by a host of international organizations that operate closely with it, such as Agence Française du Développement, the European Union, and the Asian Bank for Development. Also, as part of the France-UNESCO convention, continuous technical and financial support flows from France, fostering a certain style of cultural preservation *à la Française* centred on monumental material heritage, as captured by certain inhabitants when they describe Luang Prabang as 'Luang Paris'.

In architectural terms, Luang Prabang peninsula, the former centre of political life with its royal and noble residences, features many heritage listed constructions built of wood ('traditional houses') or brick ('colonial houses') as well as stone temples. The conservation of traditional and colonial houses, temples, and natural and aquatic spaces is carefully monitored by the Maison du Patrimoine (Heritage House). This national institution operates under the Ministry of Information and Culture, and employs a mixture of Lao architects and foreign experts (mostly French) who implement UNESCO-Paris preservation policies. Heritage House aims to ensure adherence to the Luang Prabang conservation plan, established in 2000 by French UNESCO architects. It monitors, for example, the over-densification of urban spaces and denounces new illegal building activities within the protected perimeter, as well as the inappropriate use of architectural forms and materials (height, painting, light, windows, and fences). Heritage House also prevents the demolition of listed houses and protects wetlands, vegetation cover, river banks, and trees. Finally, it seeks to regulate rampant economic activities by foreign investors who rent many downtown houses to transform these into guesthouses and restaurants. Above all, Heritage House strives to preserve and restore many pre-Second World War religious and ordinary listed monuments in the town. By contrast, the UNESCO office based in Bangkok has launched its own conservation projects, putting clear emphasis on intangible heritage preservation, such as sculpture classes for monks to learn how to restore their temples themselves (IMPACT 2004).

The nostalgic charm

> The charm of London does not come from its monuments, which have nothing special, nor from its mediocre perspectives, but from all the rest, the streets, the houses, the shops, the people.
>
> Perec 1995: 84

Although UNESCO-Paris and UNESCO-Bangkok experts and those based in Luang Prabang hold different perspectives on the modalities of preservation, most are,

nevertheless, animated by the same spirit. Notwithstanding the diversity of perceptions and conservation projects, their common goal is to preserve the 'outstanding value of the site', articulated around four propositions:

1 Luang Prabang is a unique and ancient site, its authenticity rooted in the pre-colonial and colonial past.
2 Luang Prabang's authenticity is mostly connected to its charm. As underlined by a UNESCO functionary I met in Paris, 'heritage in Luang Prabang, it is the life, the atmosphere, the quietness, the spirit of the place'. The spirit of Luang Prabang is often mentioned by experts, tourists, and outsiders, who deploy a specific aesthetic objectification of the site. Since the 2008 International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) conference in Québec, where participants adopted a declaration of principles and recommendations to safeguard it, '*l'esprit du lieu*' has become a crucial concept in UNESCO preservation policies, a notion defined 'as the physical and the spiritual elements that give meaning, value, emotion and mystery to place ... made up of tangible (sites, buildings, landscapes, routes, objects) as well as intangible elements (memories, narratives, written documents, festivals, commemorations, rituals, traditional knowledge, values, textures, colors, odors, etc.)' (Québec Declaration 2008).[4]
3 This charm is very fragile and in need of being urgently preserved from annihilation. Drawing upon a social-Darwinist rhetoric, encapsulated in the trope of the vanishing inherited from early anthropologists,[5] most experts use nostalgia tropes to describe how Luang Prabang is losing much of its character. In their words, preserving the town represents a romantic quest for tradition and sincerity with a certain fear of the artifices of modernity and globalizing forces. For instance, in the IMPACT brochure edited by UNESCO-Bangkok in 2004, a picture of a car parked in a temple supports the caption: 'Today temples are sometimes not treated with the respect they were given in the past', the car being the symbol of modernity in a traditional temple.
4 Luang Prabang's charm is mostly threatened by the assault of Asian and European tourism. Accordingly, what is at the heart of most experts' bitterness is the vanishing of Luang Prabang's spirit under the threat of tourism. As one of my UNESCO interlocutors in Bangkok stated with a tone of cultural necrology, 'Luang Prabang is under lots of pressure now. The whole town is being used by tourists only. Even the monks are leaving the town. We are losing the spirit of the place'.[6]

In fact, my interviews with foreign experts in Paris, Bangkok, and Luang Prabang revealed the same set of underlying ideas about Luang Prabang's spirit: a Western romanticized perception of Buddhism and colonial conceptions of other people's traditional life, conveying nostalgia for local rituals, for a feeling of quietness and isolation in the Tropics, and for local people living their traditional life in their traditional houses and temples. Such Orientalist longing for a vanishing atmosphere is reminiscent of the '*charme nostalgique*' captured by the French philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch as 'ce je-ne-sais-quoi dont on ne peut assigner la place' ('this non-localizable I-do-not-know-what') (1983: 303), which is even more precious now that it is disappearing.

This idealized Luang Prabang is, indeed, a town of bygone days. Many locals rent their houses in the centre of the town to foreign investors and happily build large

houses in the suburbs. Every day hundreds of tourists stroll around the old town. Thirty-nine hotels, more than 190 guesthouses, and a night market for tourists have opened up, whilst sixty-nine restaurants have blossomed along the Mekong and the Namkhan rivers. In contrast to this urban growth which violates many heritage regulations, foreign experts aim to 'recreate the past atmosphere of Luang Prabang' (as a French architect claimed) or to keep its 'sleepy ambiance', leading to the adoption of concrete preservation measures such as the restoration of temples and houses with ancient material and techniques, the control of the electricity level and of commercial advertisements in the town, or the transformation of old houses on stilts into cultural centres where traditional events or concerts are organized. A UNESCO-related architect recommends making a list of authorized offerings by worshippers to the temples so as to avoid the current gifts of cement, acrylic painting, industrial tiles, and other modern construction materials. Such anxieties about losing Luang Prabang's atmosphere, whether it is tangible or intangible heritage, leads to very tangible decisions, with a recent verdict by the World Heritage Committee stating that Luang Prabang should 'halt the progressive loss of its fabric and traditions in the face of development pressures' (Boccardi & Logan 2007: 26). This is a warning to Lao officials that 'if the Lao traditional heritage in particular continues its steady decline, the Town of Luang Prabang is heading towards a situation that would justify World Heritage in Danger listing' (2007: 26).

Experts in offices versus experts in the field

It is important to make a distinction between the experts I have met in Paris and Bangkok offices, and those based in Luang Prabang. The bureaucrats in Paris and Bangkok exhibit typical UNESCO institutional nostalgia, a rhetoric deployed around the foundational idea of time as irreversible and the means to resist its passage, but this nostalgia is rarely, if ever, connected to any lived, personal experience. Such 'armchair nostalgia' (Appadurai 1996: 78) fits well with the stereotypical image of the expert posture, usually described as cold and disembodied (Boyer 2005). In contrast, although they deploy the same alarmist discourse, experts living in Luang Prabang display a very different attitude and their nostalgia is clearly articulated. Dedicated to the process of preservation *in situ* and familiar with the history and culture of the region, they deploy the trope of the vanishing spirit, but combine it with their life experience in the town, a combination which makes their feeling of loss even more intense. As one of them recounted with a tone of bitterness, 'We feel nostalgic for the ancient Luang Prabang. Look, my former house is now a pizzeria'. Indeed, some experts have been based in Luang Prabang for more than ten years, and have observed the changes to the town. They are the individuals mobilized for heritage-making in the field. Most of the time, their language is the language of indignation and denunciation. A UNESCO consultant in Luang Prabang insisted that 'the town has changed a lot over the last ten years. Soon the town centre will be emptied of its inhabitants. Locals are selling their houses and going to the suburbs ... Here it is like Disneyland now. It's a disaster!' According to another expert who spoke with bitterness, it is already 'too late. Luang Prabang is a failure'. For these experts, the current metamorphosis of the town is described as 'a tragedy', 'a wreck', 'a horror', in which they conceive their preservation work as 'a never-ending struggle'. 'In Luang Prabang, it's a permanent struggle. I am like a mercenary here. I am alone against all', exclaimed one French architect.

To describe cultural loss, most foreign experts metaphorically invoke *Tak Baad*, the morning alms-giving ritual. During this ritual, inhabitants of Luang Prabang give food to monks who chant their blessings and transfer the merit of the offering to the giver. Because of the many visiting tourists, *Tak Baad* has, according to another French heritage expert, turned into a 'circus', 'a zoo where tourists feed monks like they would feed animals'. Seen as predation, the everyday experience of tourism reinforces in them the feeling of losing the spirit of the place. Locals, too, are perceived as a major threat to the good preservation of Luang Prabang's ambiance. Whilst the Luang Prabang Conservation Plan forbids pane glass and recently manufactured windows, flower pots, and fences, as well as the use of lacquer, which the experts *in situ* describe as 'kitsch', all of these are widely adored by locals. Moreover, against these UNESCO rules, some town-centre residents cram their land with as much construction as they can (e.g. when building a guesthouse), while in recent years local authorities have rented out listed state buildings to foreign investors. In the end, the residents of Luang Prabang and the Lao government are often denied any aesthetic and patrimonial competence by the UNESCO experts. Like the inhabitants of Rethemnos in Greece (Herzfeld 1991), they are referred to by heritage experts as 'useless', 'unable to preserve their own heritage'.

Needless to say, the posture held by experts *in situ* is the antithesis of the stereotypical image of bureaucratic disembodied expertise. When walking the streets of Luang Prabang, I witnessed them running around construction sites, shouting at local architects and workers, sometimes yelling at tourists who did not respect local codes of behaviour. Some can even be seen participating in local religious rituals. They do not have the 'self-restraint' (*retenue*) described by the French sociologist Nathalie Heinich (2009), who studied the researchers of the Inventaire général du patrimoine culturel in France. In Luang Prabang, experts' mobilization is nostalgia-based, active, and very much embodied, to the extent that many people from Luang Prabang pejoratively refer to them as 'more Lao than the Lao themselves. They want to teach us how to be a Lao'. Struggling with materials, inhabitants, local authorities, and tourists, UNESCO experts nevertheless constitute crucial mediators in the heritage-making process.

A transnational community of loss

Like the UNESCO experts *in situ*, expatriates in town, as well as Lao elites and intellectuals (mostly Lao from the diaspora who return to their country after decades of exile in France, Australia, Germany, or North America), share the sense of losing the Luang Prabang atmosphere, albeit with some differences. *Nostalgie revendiquée* is for these expats lamenting the disappearance of the Luang Prabang they knew when 'there was no traffic jam, but bicycles' and 'only one car for the whole town'. For their part, exiles returning to Laos (after over thirty-five years abroad) regret the vanishing of the Luang Prabang they knew before 1975. Theirs is a mixture of nostalgia for the pre-socialist era and a patrimonial discourse often reinforced by their diasporic condition.

Significantly, *Tak Baad* has also become the metaphor of cultural loss. Many expats and returnees express concern about the morning alms-giving ritual becoming a spectacle 'relying mostly on tourists and foreigners who live here, because local people have left the town centre'. For them, a tourist scene has replaced the symbiotic relationship that had existed between monks and villagers for centuries. A Lao who has lived abroad for many years said,

> When I see tourists who come here and they take photos of *Tak Baad*, I am shocked. *Tak Baad* is not a spectacle. It's meditation by begging food. We have a saying here that when you open a window, you have fresh air entering the room, but also mosquitoes and flies. Fresh air makes us alive again, but mosquitoes, one should expel them, kill them or domesticate them.

Here, 'fresh air' designates the opening up of the country to the non-socialist world in the 1990s and the 'mosquitoes' are the polluting tourists. This indignation sometimes leads to a *corps-à-corps* between expatriates and tourists. A French man living in the town since 1996 recounted that he had 'almost had a fight with a tourist yesterday, because he was taking pictures of the monks very closely'. Purportedly, he sometimes attends *Tak Baad* and takes pictures of tourists at close range 'to show them how unpleasant it is', an attitude of indignation which is not shared by most monks, who, generally, like to be photographed (Suntikul 2009).

The fear of losing the Luang Prabang spirit leads to concrete initiatives from Lao and expatriates alike. The latter have launched numerous campaigns to sensitize tourists to cultural issues concerning the alms-giving ritual and have created cultural centres to preserve 'the traditional arts and cultural heritage of Luang Prabang in their most authentic forms'. For instance, the Champa Cultural House, run by a Lao who has lived in France for twenty years, offers lessons to youngsters in traditional Lao arts (music, dance, gold thread embroidery, or ceremonial flower arrangement). Strongly opposed to the use of synthetic materials imported from China, the director, who has local priorities in mind (local transmission for young generations and not for tourists), wants to reproduce artisanship *à l'ancienne*, 'to help young people embrace what had been lost during the old regime of restrictive Communism'. Such conservation practices require working in collaboration with old artisans from the royal era, a very sensitive issue in present-day Luang Prabang.

Finally, there are a number of civil servants and local elites (not from the diaspora) who share the same patrimonial attitude *vis-à-vis* Luang Prabang's culture and fear of tourism. Indeed, certain local elites feel sadness about the rapid loss of culture. One such intellectual emphasized that 'UNESCO is good. But since UNESCO arrived, there have only been Europeans in the streets. We are worried that we are going to lose our culture now'. He expressed nostalgia for the town 'before it became picture perfect' (cited in Stewart 1988: 233). Like many educated Lao, such local elites emphasize the rise and detrimental influence of Thai culture (through television and tourism) and the colonial position of France in the UNESCOization of their town, denouncing the fact that 'too many French people work here. Only Lao should be authorized to work at the Heritage House'. A civil servant who has opened a Children's Cultural Centre where local children can learn traditional games and instruments believes that Luang Prabang represents the material legacy of the glorious past of Lao culture and constitutes a national centre for its preservation. Yet he feels that it should not display too many royalist connotations, hence his view that 'we are now revitalizing some past rituals, but not those connected to royal history. There are some things we do not want to revive'.

Discourses and practices (as held by UNESCO experts in Paris, Bangkok, and Luang Prabang, French, German, Australian and North American expatriates, Lao from the diaspora, as well as some local intellectuals and civil servants) participate in the invention of a community of loss, sealing Luang Prabang's fate as a town of cultural preservation and transmission. Such a nostalgiascape is engendered out of transnational ramifications, similar to the transnational production of historical memory of

the Vietnam War 'that involves variously situated actors and their global engagements with memory' (Schwenkel 2006: 20). It is diversely experienced, with individuals engaging with their own Luang Prabang (whether Orientalist or pre-Communist), situated between fantasy and reality, coloured by their own agendas and influences.

Nostalgic consumption for tourists

The discourse of experts resonates with the experiences of most tourists. A nostalgic site aimed at assuaging a fear of loss that many educated Westerners and Asians (experts or tourists) share today, Luang Prabang has become a key destination for tourists in Southeast Asia. According to local statistics provided by the Tourism Office, Luang Prabang attracted 260,000 tourists in 2005, a boom compared to 62,000 in 1997.[7] In line with Cohen's observation of some thirty years ago (Cohen 1979), Luang Prabang constitutes an arena for diverse tourist profiles, from French backpackers, Thai and Chinese tourists, expatriates living in Bangkok, Lao living abroad or in different provinces, British couples on honeymoon, or gay tourists, many of whom are not always driven by nostalgia (Caton & Almeida Santos 2007). Some young travellers, mostly Western backpackers, stop in Luang Prabang to 'chill out' and drink alcohol following a trip 'into the jungle'. The town has also become a sexual heterotopia for foreign men (Westerners and Asians alike) seeking to encounter Lao men (Berliner 2011). During the New Year festivals, many Lao from other provinces visit Luang Prabang to perform their religious duties in some of the most famous Buddhist temples of Lao PDR. Similarly, a large number of exiles living abroad return to the country to see their families who stayed after the Socialist Revolution. For those who have experienced the suffering of exile, Luang Prabang does not represent a painless heritagescape, but rather a trigger for pre-1975 nostalgic reminiscences and vivid memories of pain.

That said, my fieldwork demonstrates that many tourists continue to see Luang Prabang as a charming small town set amongst the mountains with its 'amusing' French influence and Buddhist mystique. Most Westerners fall for the Indochinese spirit of Luang Prabang, which plunges them into an idealized past world reminiscent of Marguerite Duras's novel *L'Amant*, with its old cars, fans, antique furniture, and bright colours.[8] They also enjoy approaching Buddhist novices and chatting with them, an experience described as 'charming', 'full of respect'. Monks can easily turn these exchanges to their advantage by obtaining tourists' addresses and, in many instances, gifts or cash. Many Western visitors emphasize the authenticity of the place, exemplified by one French woman who exclaimed, 'Here, it is the pure, real humanity'. A British visitor described the town as 'a sort of Indochinese Oxford'. Tourists, however, also lament the contemporary vanishing of such purported authenticity. Three Dutch persons standing in front of a temple regretted that locals 'don't wear traditional clothing anymore' and an American woman, upon noticing televisions in people's homes, emphasized that it made her realize how 'people lose their traditions here'. Whilst many Westerners lament the ongoing vanishing of the town's precious atmosphere (considering their visit as well timed 'before it disappears forever'), Thai tourists throng to Luang Prabang to see 'how Thailand was fifty or a hundred years ago'. As an inexpensive destination, it represents for many Thai an assortment of fun (rafting speedboats on the Mekong), nostalgic curiosity, exoticism (observing so-called 'Lao backwardness' and eating French baguettes), and religion (fervently giving alms to the monks and offerings to famous images of Buddha). Asian tourists do not experience the same yearning for the Indochinese spirit as do Westerners. Yet Luang Prabang

represents for them a picturesque old town preserved from the craze of urban modernity. Whether they fall for colonial nostalgia *per se*, exoticism, or both, Luang Prabang constitutes for most tourists a site for nostalgic imagination, where the ancient is glorified and the coevalness of time denied (Fabian 1983), despite being presented in a sanitized manner with paved roads, clean guesthouses, and tasty food. Such enchantment with the ancient is indeed continually reinforced by tourism companies, restaurants, and hotel owners (mostly foreigners, French, Thai, Vietnamese, Chinese, Singaporean, but also Lao elites), who are engaged in the 'business of nostalgia' (Peleggi 2002), offering a pre-Second World War vision as merchandise to be consumed by visitors.

Needless to say, the past delivered to visitors preserves something, but it also deletes and distorts. For instance, the painful history of the town, the forced abdication of the last king, and the historical co-operation with Americans during the Vietnam War are not explicit parts of the town's advertised heritage. As one of my elderly interlocutors commented, 'Luang Prabang was a damned town for years after the Revolution. Then UNESCO comes and wants to make a nice town here. Tourists don't know that. But we have suffered a lot here'. Walking in the streets of Luang Prabang and talking with tourists, one is reminded of this 'past without the pain'. Such an anaesthetized past was analysed by Kennedy and Williams (2001), who describe how postwar Vietnam is now becoming a harmless tourist attraction. In Luang Prabang, through a specific selection of monuments, a patchwork consisting only of precolonial and French colonial architectural traces, it is as if an 'eternal phantasmatic Indochina' (Norindr 1997) and French colonialism, defined as a quite harmonious integration of cultural traditions, are in some way celebrated. And for those who want to be critical of the international organization (as is often the case – see Collins 2008), one can identify, in UNESCO actions in Luang Prabang, legacies from the French empire. For most tourists, however, attachment to Luang Prabang's heritage and complicated history is very superficial: no mobilization, occasionally some indignation for the loss of a culture they do not belong to, and a universalistic fear of loss of cultural diversity. Before moving on to another activity, tourists experience vicarious nostalgia, *en passant*, for a Luang Prabang whitewashed into a consumer brand.

The fruits of heritage

Whilst for heritage experts, foreign tourists, expatriates, and Lao elites Luang Prabang symbolizes a spirit requiring immediate salvage from the destructive assaults of rapid modernization, most locals are ambivalent about the UNESCO-generated urgency to resist loss and destruction. Are the residents of Luang Prabang nostalgic about the past when 'there were no traffic jams and there was little tourism and no television'? How do they experience the transformation of their town into a heritage site? Do they identify with the UNESCO policies defining preservation as a collective 'moral and political obligation' (Debray 1997)? Clearly, when it comes to heritage, there are a diversity of views divided along lines of age, class, social status, and education. Much depends on the benefits gained from tourism and the heritage economy.

There are, however, some common perceptions about '*Moladok*', the local word used to designate heritage (most interlocutors do not mention 'UNESCO' as such). '*Moladok*' is not a new Lao word. People use it to refer to familial heritage, mainly conveying 'something which has to be kept and passed on between generations'. However, the term has recently acquired a new meaning, an idea suggested by some

when they confessed that, 'before, we never heard about *Moladok*'. For many, new meanings attached to *Moladok* do not seem apparent as yet, aside from its touristic and economic connotations. As in Zanzibar (Bissell 2005), heritage-making policies are indeed top-down external strategies implying, for most inhabitants, a kind of deference to institutional authority. As one interlocutor stated, 'We do *Moladok* because we respect the government'.

Yet most people from Luang Prabang emphasize how their life has positively changed over the last ten years. All are proud to see that their town is now an internationally recognized site, where tourists come from all over the world and inject substantial revenue. The increase in economic resources is often mentioned as a positive impact of UNESCOization, creating new job opportunities, albeit unequally, for many people in Luang Prabang and the surrounding countryside (guesthouse staff, rickshaw drivers, ethnic handicraft producers, etc.). Also, most highlight that renovations are rendering Luang Prabang cleaner and more aesthetically attractive and that, by helping to refurbish temples, '*Moladok* helps Buddhism'. The statement 'life has been better here since *Moladok*' is one I heard hundreds of times throughout my interviews. Given the many years of traumatic history in Laos and Luang Prabang, this makes sense.

In casual interactions, people rarely speak about heritage. When they do, it is mostly to denounce how heritage regulations are strict and recommendations difficult to follow, even 'hellish' ('*Moladok monahok*'). Indeed, Heritage House is mostly perceived as a restrictive institution which 'forbids one from doing this or that'. Clearly, the local UNESCO policies have fostered a sense amongst some inhabitants that, as one interlocutor expressed it, '*Moladok* wants to limit our property rights. These lands are ours. Before *Moladok*, we repaired houses the way we needed but now we have to ask for permission at the Heritage House'. Moreover, adherence to '*Moladok* style' is constraining for some Lao architects, who cannot create new architectural forms, but have to follow architectural typologies and use materials imposed by UNESCO-related architects. This creates a sense of architectural standardization in the town centre, denounced by some Lao elites and foreign expatriates: 'Here it's not a town for invention, but for preservation'.

The idea of intactness, cherished by foreign experts, is vigorously contested by residents of Luang Prabang. To preserve the ancient, as it was, makes little sense to most inhabitants, who have a practical conception of heritage. Holding an aesthetic competence denied to them by most foreign experts, many declare their fondness for the renovation of Lao traditional wooden houses and also applaud temple renovations. They do not, however, embrace the categorical imperative of Heritage House to use old materials, seen as less solid and the most expensive (to the extent that some people cannot afford to renovate their houses). As one informant stated, 'The problem with *Moladok* is that they want us to preserve everything "old style", whilst people here want to make modern adaptations. Heritage House is too obsessed with the ancient'.

The residents' rhetoric is rooted in a shared political narrative about accessing modernity, and, within the context of postwar Laos, this narrative is not framed nostalgically. Whilst experts cling to colonial nostalgia, many people from Luang Prabang are not lamenting the vanishing of an idealized epoch. A good example is exemplified by one interlocutor who said, 'Things have changed a lot here since 1995, and that's very good like that'. Locals are clearly not entirely enamoured with the past as saved by UNESCO. For those who gain benefits from UNESCOization, the past is the past and was not a better world than today: 'We have no regrets; before was good, now

it's even better'. Local discourses tend to emphasize an aspiration towards modernity, with an expressed desire to see 'even more tourists and planes flying to Luang Prabang'. In this context, worldwide heritage recognition is associated with rapid changes rather than with continuity. Local attitudes towards preservation are seen as a step into, rather than a retreat from, modernity. This contrasts the Luang Prabang as imagined by visiting experts and foreign travellers. Preserving traditional houses, in addition to sustaining tourism, is seen by many locals as a way to conserve relics of the past for future generations, 'to remember how we lived in the past' and 'to show to our children and grandchildren, but we don't want to live in them anymore'.

Ordinary nostalgias, hopes, and fears

The discourse of Lao state officials about Luang Prabang heritage functions similarly, and is not evidently nostalgic. As Long and Sweet (2006) have shown, the colonial past, traditional houses, and rituals which UNESCO strives to preserve are intimately connected to royal history and heritage, a currently silenced period of the town's history and a very sensitive research topic. Moreover, the museumification of Luang Prabang, which freezes the royal past and renders it harmless to the present, has also to be understood through the lens of Lao nationalism, which 'strategically uses the assistance of global organizations such as UNESCO to further its nationalist aims' (Long & Sweet 2006: 449). As Evans (1998: 122) underlines, in 1975 revolutionaries immediately transformed the king's palace into the Royal Palace Museum, with the political intention to de-politicize it and keep the past under control.

However, claiming absence of nostalgia among people from Luang Prabang would provide only a partial picture of the current situation. As discussed above, exiles returning to Laos lament the disappearance of pre-1975 Luang Prabang. There are many old people who secretly cherish memories of the *ancien régime* and regret the cultural changes, denouncing, for example, the changes in female clothing or hairstyles and the manners of young people. Some inhabitants of Luang Prabang feel sadness regarding transformations of sociability – 'People have less time for family and friends because it's all about business now' – and many stress the dire practical consequences of tourism to their lives (such as the expansion of the airport and drug smuggling for tourists). In addition, others criticize monks who spend their time pursuing tourists and using internet cafés. Many remember a better past unburdened by preservation policies, nostalgically complaining about the loss of freedom to build houses with any material.

Comparing Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot histories of their island's partition, Bryant has lucidly shown how visions of lost homelands are also 'visions of homelands yet to be realized' (Bryant 2008: 399). The women's narratives that Bryant analyses 'complicate our notions of nostalgia through a longing for a homeland that is not absent but rather apocalyptic – a homeland not of the past but of the future' (2008: 404). In Luang Prabang, too, rapid changes produce certain anxieties about the future. Nostalgia is being crafted within such horizons of expectations. Interestingly, for some, these fears take the form of postcolonial imagination. In Luang Prabang, many people gossip about the risk to the town of becoming a '*meuang Falang*' (literally a 'French town' and, by extension, a town of 'Westerners'). For example, one man suggested that 'within ten years, there will be only *Falang* in town. They buy everything here'. For some, Heritage House works hand-in-hand with foreigners 'to transform Luang Prabang into a *meuang* for *Falang* only', and *Moladok* is seen as a 'new form of colonization by the French'. Others emphasize that its precise role is to control foreign

investors in the town. Practically, such ideas are reinforced by certain Lao officers from Heritage House, who castigate locals about heritage regulations. I observed that some tend always to defer to '*Falang*' authoritative decisions, which allows them to escape being blamed by the locals and to delegate responsibility to the former French colonizers (on similar bureaucratic deference, see Herzfeld 1991). In sum, such gossip and interaction reveal the uncertainty under which many residents live and emphasize their feeling of dispossession in postcolonial contexts, rendering them 'exiles in their own homeland' (Stewart 1988: 235).

Contrary to UNESCO-related experts, expatriates, and both Lao from the diaspora and a segment of the local elite, few inhabitants vocalize regret for the demolition of old houses or their fear for the disappearance of traditional rituals. My research demonstrates that the ways in which most residents from Luang Prabang describe permanence and loss do not correspond to the sense of loss expressed by UNESCO experts, Lao elites, Western expatriates, or travellers. I was surprised that few elderly and young people actually complain about the possible vanishing of the *Tak Baad* ritual. Alarmist discourses are now increasingly circulated through campaigns launched by expatriates and Lao elites. This is of practical concern to some religious leaders whose temples are located within the tourist area. In contrast, many residents insist on cultural persistence, emphasizing that they are 'keeping on with tradition. Tradition is not changing'. For one woman, 'custom is not disappearing, even with tourism. Lao people do conserve their traditions. *Tak Baad* won't vanish. It's a Lao tradition', whilst for an elderly man, 'even if people rent out their houses and leave the town centre, I am not worried. Even with *Falang*, Lao tradition will persist. Lao tradition is always the same. And now the *Falang* help the Lao to preserve *Tak Baad*'. In my many interviews with local people, they revealed that they do not long for the return of what seems to some foreign experts and tourists as lost forever, and that they do not share the traits of the latter's cultural alarmism.

Exo/endo-nostalgias

Evans (1998) and subsequently Long and Sweet have emphasized how Luang Prabang's UNESCO recognition is rooted in nostalgic imagination, 'a quest for an Idealized, Orientalized "real Asia" ' (Long & Sweet 2006: 455). However, claiming the existence of a single nostalgic posture is problematic. As Strathern lucidly expresses it, '[W]hile we might imagine that we could share other people's nostalgia for a vanishing culture, we cannot share it for the particular persons they miss or the places they have left. Here your (their) nostalgia is most emphatically not my (our) nostalgia' (1995: 111). This article is an invitation to refine this proposition by underlining the multiple dimensions of nostalgic investments deployed by diverse groups of people in Luang Prabang. In order to clarify this complex theoretical situation, I propose distinguishing between two nostalgic postures: nostalgia for the past one has lived personally (what I term 'endo-nostalgia'), implying a sense of personal ownership of the past; and nostalgia for the past not experienced personally, a vicarious nostalgia I term 'exo-nostalgia'. The latter is common amongst Western tourists and UNESCO experts based in Paris, whose externalist discourses about cultural loss do not refer to their own historical past. At the other end of the continuum are diverse endo-nostalgic forms held by Luang Prabang inhabitants: royalist nostalgias for some, a lament about the loss of certain values for others, but never an alarmist discourse on the necessity to sanctify heritage and culture, not a wish to forgo the benefits brought about by tourism. The distinction between

endo-nostalgia and exo-nostalgia is, of course, not absolute, and there exists a grey area of ambivalence between the poles. Some experiences qualify as 'endo' and 'exo', such as the nostalgia felt by experts *in situ* which combines an exo-nostalgic discourse based on an in-depth knowledge of local history and culture (a nostalgia for a culture which is not theirs, for other people's culture and history) with a longing for the vanishing charm of a town they have long known (endo-nostalgia). The endo-nostalgia of expatriates, mainly rooted in their personal experience of the town, the emotional attachment to 'their' Luang Prabang of the past, is in some aspects very similar to the endo-nostalgia of Lao from the diaspora who are born in Luang Prabang but then forced into exile. They lament the disappearance of the town of their childhood, combined (for some) with a patrimonial discourse reinforced in diaspora. In between insider and outsider, there is also the nostalgic experience of European tourists who wish to bring their children to Luang Prabang to enjoy it as they did when brought as children by their parents.

Rooted in different notions of historiography and senses of history, such nostalgic postures expose a divergent dynamic of temporality and, in particular, specific forms of engagement with the future. Indeed, far from being synonymous with a preoccupation with the past, nostalgia reveals relationships that exist between the past, the present, and the future. Following the historian Koselleck (2004 [1979]), one might treat discourses and feelings about the passing of time as *always already* framed within the 'horizons of expectations' in the present. The nostalgias of Parisian experts and international tourists are intertwined with their desire to imagine in Luang Prabang another world, a world still able to resist cultural homogenization and to preserve ethnic diversity. Whilst their horizon is crafted in universalistic terms, it is not the same for experts and expatriates living in Luang Prabang, or for the Lao diaspora, whose royal nostalgia also conveys their dreams of political change. Whereas many people from Luang Prabang fearfully stress the current transformation of their town into a 'Luang Falang' (a Luang Prabang owned by Westerners), a world in which they feel dispossessed, some cling to the futurity of their new urban landscape. As one elderly man concluded, 'Who will remember UNESCO in 1,000 years? Laos and Buddhism will still be there, but who will remember UNESCO?' Hope is never far from nostalgia.

I have shown that Luang Prabang constitutes an arena for multiple nostalgias, variously experienced by different groups of often disconnected people who occupy diverse positions. However, while engaging with the town of their own, together they produce a heritage scene. A locus of different values, Luang Prabang is an illustration of a network of interconnections between diverse people with various interests, concatenated around heritage. UNESCO experts, foreign tourists, expatriates, and Lao elites from the diaspora share a sense of longing for the ancient (their past or otherwise) and, in some cases, glorify the Indochinese past, an image used by tourism companies and local private investors. Such an image is beneficial to the development of tourism, crucial to most inhabitants, and seems to converge with a Lao nationalist reading of history, freezing royal and Indochinese eras as 'things from the past', thus rendering them harmless to the present. In that regard, heritage in Luang Prabang constitutes a 'boundary object' (Star & Griesemer 1989), which assembles the disparate interests of disconnected individuals who are all invested in the production of a certain kind of fantasy that brings money to locals (although unequally), a sense of cultural righteousness to UNESCO, and pleasure to tourists. This convergence takes place despite apparent misunderstandings between multiple parties who do not to share a common sense

of heritage. Nor does the convergence rely on similar nostalgic postures. How, then, to explain such a concatenation around Luang Prabang's heritage?

Whether it is bureaucratic, lived, or consumerist, nostalgia motivates UNESCO experts and civil servants to protect monuments and safeguard arts. The appetite of tourists for nostalgic consumption is also highly transformative as it inspires locals to sell Indochinese nostalgia. Simultaneously, since its patrimonial recognition, the town centre is being bought by members of the 'cosmopolitan class', people with money from Singapore, Thailand, France, or Australia, who open restaurants and hotels displaying the style of the 'Indochinese spirit'. Such nostalgic gentrification, which also sells nostalgia to tourists, largely emanates from foreigners who see Luang Prabang as a charming place to live and a profitable place in which to invest. A heritagescape such as this is evidently not immune to the pressures of international capital which contribute to the conversion of the town into a 'Luang Falang', a consumer brand sold on the basis of its artificial uniqueness. But in Luang Prabang, patrimonial and consumerist nostalgias alone cannot explain the transformation of the town into what it is today. In post-Soviet Russia, Rethmann (2008) has shown that nostalgia is rendered possible by a certain kind of political de-ideologization. In Moscow, the development of capitalist consumerism has allowed the deployment of non-subversive nostalgias for empty forms and material ruins (such as the Sculpture Park, Manezh Square, and Moskva Pool) that tend to take over local forms of memory attached to them. Certainly, UNESCOization and the transnational community of loss have to be thought of concomitantly with the development of capitalist consumerism. But also, importantly, they converge with national political necessities. In Lao PDR, such necessities are anti-royalist and framed in evolutionist terms which are clearly neither de-ideologized nor nostalgic. Here, the scene of heritagization reveals its very complexity in conjunction with nationalistic projects, the ordinary hopes of inhabitants for prosperity, cultural globalization, colonial legacies, and the deployment of multiple nostalgias.

NOTES

I have benefited tremendously from the generous comments of Anne Allison, Juliet Bedford, Chiara Bortolotto Catherine Choron-Baix, Olivier Evrard, Nathalie Heinich, Holly High, Martin Holbraad, Johanna Markkula, Galina Oustinova-Stjepanovic, Pierre Petit, Charles Piot, Mike Rowlands, and Michael Stewart. Also I would like to thank Matthew Engelke and anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful remarks on an earlier version of this text.

[1] Although it does not rely on the trope of the disappearing savage, anthropology continues to be motivated by nostalgia. First, it is as if we have 'nostalgized' the heterogeneous, the local, the particular, the weak. As anthropologists, aren't we drawn sentimentally to the indigenousness of our interlocutors (whether they are close or far away), their very locality against the idea of an undifferentiated modernity? Secondly, even when they wager on rupture, scholars are 'longing for continuity in a fragmented world' (Boym 2001: xvi), a world of persistent indigenousness in disrupted times. Lastly, notwithstanding our research subjects, it is also our methods that we 'nostalgize'. Participant observation functions as an impossible quest for intimacy and sincerity. It is often voiced by anthropologists as a longing for a future understanding never to be fully realized. See High (2011) for an important discussion of the ethnographer's melancholia.

[2] Gyimothy (2005) coined the notion 'nostalgiascape' to better understand a yearning for the past expressed in tourist consumption. Looking at inns in Denmark, she emphasizes how these countryside buildings constitute nostalgiascapes which activate romantic and patriotic memories of rural Danishness.

[3] Such transformative aspect of nostalgia is elegantly captured by novelist Milan Kundera in *The unbearable lightness of being* when he writes: 'In the sunset of dissolution, everything is illuminated by the aura of nostalgia, even the guillotine' (1984: 4).

[4] The preservationist discourse of UNESCO is committed to specific modes of framing heritage – essentially focusing on the built environment, and using technical and bureaucratic means to conserve it in a

certain state. By extension, experts believe that it is possible to maintain the spirit of a place in the same way. One wonders, however, how it is possible to monitor an atmosphere.

[5] Scholars have started taking UNESCO bureaucratic discourses and practices as a field site where notions of culture, heritage, loss, and authenticity are being produced and debated (e.g. Bortolotto 2007; Brumann 2012; Meskell 2012). Anthropologists have long worked for UNESCO (e.g. Métraux or, more loosely, Lévi-Strauss) and their number has increased over the last few decades. The history of the complex relationship between UNESCO and anthropologists remains to be written.

[6] See the article by Starin (2008), an example of such an alarmist perspective.

[7] For a detailed analysis of the impact of tourism in Luang Prabang, see Gujadhur & Rogers (2008).

[8] The novel (Duras 1984) and film realized by Annaud in 1992 (which received 3 million viewers in France) have been influential in promoting certain visions of French Indochina. For instance, a French blogger visiting Luang Prabang wrote: 'Luang Prabang ... could have hosted the love between Marguerite Duras and the "man of Cholen" ... Parked in front of an old house, I even believe I recognize the gleaming car of the Chinese, as if the lovers had outdistanced my words, my desires' (*http://foodinandout.over-blog.fr/article-tamarind-l-invitation-a-plonger-luang-prabang-laos-2-66506161.html*, accessed 17 August 2012).

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Nostalgies multiples : la fabrique du patrimoine à Luang Prabang (RDP Lao)

Résumé

L'article explore le fonctionnement de la nostalgie comme force motrice majeure dans la fabrication du patrimoine. À partir de son travail de terrain à Luang Prabang, ancienne cité royale du nord du Laos inscrite au Patrimoine mondial de l'UNESCO en 1995, l'auteur suggère qu'il faut distinguer les différents attachements nostalgiques couverts par l'étiquette un peu galvaudée de « nostalgie » de ceux qui ne sont pas forcément nostalgiques. Il explore les relations de différents acteurs avec la nostalgie et la manière dont ces relations, enracinées dans leur expérience personnelle, recoupent des postures spécifiques en matière de temps, d'histoire, de patrimoine, de développement et de culture. Le deuxième but de l'article est de mettre en lumière les aspects performatifs de la nostalgie dans la fabrique du patrimoine. L'auteur affirme qu'en tentant de préserver des lieux, des pratiques et des objets, les experts de l'UNESCO et les fonctionnaires nationaux transforment en réalité ceux-ci. Loin d'interrompre les mécanismes de transmission et de culture, la reconnaissance du patrimoine crée des formes esthétiques, des récits historiques, des politiques de la transmission et, plus généralement, des configurations sociales. L'auteur s'attarde sur les processus qui ont fait de Luang Prabang un lieu de patrimoine et une attraction touristique et affirme que cette transformation est rendue possible par l'imbrication des projets de l'UNESCO, de l'apparition d'une classe aisée cosmopolite, du développement touristique et des programmes de l'État laotien.

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