

*The Analysis of the Vientiane's 450 Year Anniversary Logo: Reflections of Lao's
Culture and Society*

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Introduction

The annual Boun That Luang Festival has been held every year since Lan Xang Kingdom. However, on the full-moon night of the 11th month in 2010, the festival was more unique than the previous years because it was merged with the 450th anniversary of Vientiane as the nation's capital (1560-2010). The seven-day celebration began in November 15th until 21th, 2010 at Wat Phra That Luang. This year's event was considered a national grand event for Lao government, and it was crowded with both Lao people and foreign tourists during the week.



Figure 1 Buddhist participants during the event

Local women all wore Lao sinh (skirt) and phaa biang (shoulder cloths) to participate in this event. One of the highlights was the Wax Castle and procession to the That Luang temple. Cultural performances and trade fairs were also held here, so the area around was shut down implicitly. The entire Vientiane city was decorated with flags and banners of the celebration logo. Before reaching Wat That Luang or the center of this grand event, the visitors who traveled through this city would notice logos of Vientiane's 450th Anniversary Celebration promoting the event. Such logos were used to communicate some significant messages to the audience.



Figure 2 The logo of Vientiane's 450th Anniversary Celebration

Symbol was used to communicate some meaning in the society. It implied the meaning of a pictogram and was used to convey information, instead of using a verbal communication, to users of all ages. The users might or might not understand the language, but they would understand the meaning of the symbol if seen frequently. The Vientiane's 450th Anniversary Celebration's logo was an idol form or ideal form included the graphic representation of *Dok Champa, That Luang Stupa, and King Sayasetthathirath mounting elephant*. For the composition of the logo, besides representing the informal balance or asymmetrical balance, its size also played a role as conveying their meaning and significance. According to the logo used, it may be concluded that the graphic representation of That Luang Stupa being placed dominantly in the center was the most meaningful image. While being flanked equally on the left and right, the graphic representations of Dok Champa and King Sayasetthathirath mounting on great white elephant were being placed second priority in the logo. Moreover, the color selection made also reflects some underlying implications that need to be communicated with the audience. Each color has a psychological meaning. The colors appeared quite clearly in the logo include blue, green, and red. The color "red" refers to courage while "green" refers to freshness, and "blue" refers to the disclosure (Chalud Nimsamer, 1988, and Surapon Virulrak, 2000). At the same time, the color red placing above green background symbolizes happiness (Dreyfus, 1972). For the typography, the logo designer chose to use white Lao tag line saying "Vientiane's 450th Anniversary Celebration" on a red background.

Decoding the sign: Pha That Luang - Duang Champa - First King of Vientiane

The selection of the graphic representations that are related to Lao history, including That Luang Stupa, Dok Champa, and King Sayasetthathirath mounting the great white elephant, shows the concept of conveying some "messages" to Lao citizens and whoever sees such logo.

Thongjue Kiatthong (2000) noted that symbols were important to the society because they could create a message, admonition, persuasion, and cooperation among people in the society. Furthermore, symbol is a way of communication that implies a meaning or thinking about something that is effective in terms of thinking but not in practice (Wirun Tungcharoen, 1999). Thus, it shows that the logo of Vientiane's 450th Anniversary Celebration all implies interesting communication to the visitors about the history of Vientiane as national capital city. In my perspective, those signs, including 3 main national institutes (*Nation, Religion, and Hero of national salvation*) covertly aim to communicate and create some discourse to the new generation of Lao citizens.

"Dok Champa, the official symbol of Lao PDR": When mentioning about flowers, people would think of delicacy, sweetness, and allude to women. But Dok Champa, the national flower of Lao PDR (in Thailand, it was called Dok Lantom or, later changed, Dok Leelawadee), does not have any historical background related to any sweetness and redolence at all. According to the historical data, however, Dok Champa was used for reuniting the country. It was used to represent the land of Laos. (<http://atcloud.com/stories/42486>. reference. November 23, 2010.) If you learn about the

song's background, you will better understand the meaning between Dok Champa and Lao nationhood. The song was originally written by Utama Julamanii, former minister of Lao Ministry of Education, during his participation in the fight for Lao independence from France about 50 years ago. It was written in order to demonstrate the colony at that time, France, the solidarity among Lao people. The song writer used "Dok Champa" or Dok Lantom, the flower that Lao people in the past liked to grow, as a medium to convey their love for the nation. The style of singing used was Khap Thum Luang Prabang. Duang Champa song was expanding and building solidarity rapidly among people in the country, and eventually, Laos achieved independence from France. After the Lao People's revolution in 1975, the country leaders decided to choose Dok Champa as the national flower. The song was famous and sang by people along Mekong River throughout the country, from northern Lao region in Pongsalee down to Champsak. Duang Champa's lyrics were about the separation from the motherland, and its melodies were sad and lonely. Below are the lyrics,

*"Oh! Champa Flower, when I admire you I could envision thousands in my mind.
I could see your heart; I could enjoy your sweet fragrance.
I could see the flower garden that my father had planted long ago.
Whenever I feel melancholy, I think of thee and I no longer feel lonely or sad.
Oh! Champa Flower, you have stood by my side since I was young.
Your fragrance is significant; in my heart it stands with love and affection.
I treasure your sweet scent, for when I feel lonely, I can breathe in your sweet fragrance,
My Dear Sweet Champa.
Sniffing your delicate fragrance is like my long lost friend.
You have been a beautiful flower since the beginning of time, My Dear Champa Flower,
My Beloved Flower.
Oh! Champa Flower, the flower of our beloved country, Muang Laos, you are as beautiful
as glittering stars.
All Lao people adore you in their hearts; You are born in Lan Xaang, the Land of a
Million Elephants.
If we depart from our homeland and flee far away from her, we will always have you as
our true friend as long as we live.
Oh! Champa Flower, the exquisitely beautiful flower, and the auspicious flower of
Muang Laos." (Translated by Dr. Wajuppa Tossa and Prasong Saihong)*

Even today, if you listen to the song and analyze the lyrics and melody, you will find that, according to the time it was produced, the beautiful language and soft rhyme can very well remind you of your beloved homeland and Laos. The song did not immediately make Lao people become courage and harsh to fight for their independence from French colony, but the deep and profound melody made Lao people who were far away from become sad and lonely. The use of the language by mentioning various senses of Dok Champa, such as seeing and smelling the sweet fragrance, and by reminiscing the past history of their own country was a communication technique of appealing to the audience's emotion, called pathos. This technique is quite clever, or it can be said that this song is one of the most stirring patriotic songs in the world.

What's interesting in the logo of Vientiane 450th Anniversary Celebration is how this flower was selected as one of the components. Thus, it means that Dok Champa is well-accepted as a meaningful and valuable flower to this capital city. The use of Dok Champa in the logo is producing a discourse to confirm that this flower is important for the nation, and it is communicating the "nationhood" to Lao citizens and foreigners.

"Pha That Luang, a symbol of Buddhist religion": According to the Myth of Urangadhatu, That Luang Stupa was established at the same time when Vientiane became the capital. It was built by Praya Chanthabury Pasithisak, the ruler of Vientiane, for almost a thousand years ago, as old as Phra That Phanom Stupa in Thailand. This reflects that Buddhism has been national religion of Laos since ancient times. The importance of Buddhism was also appeared in several historical sources. But, currently, it can be said that Phra That Luang is seen by Lao government the most important temple. It is likely that this Buddhist pagoda represents a symbol of Buddhism that Lao people accept. The reason why Lao government gives such significance to Phra That Luang may possibly be because it is located in the middle of various temples and in country's center province.



Figure 3 Coat of arms of Laos



**25th SEA GAMES, LAOS
VIENTIANE 2009**

Figure 4 SEA Games 2009 logo

Even though during the period of King Setthathirath, a new royal palace, several glorious creeds of Buddhism, and the temple of Emerald Buddha were all built simultaneously with the expansion of That Luang Stupa, (Jiraporn translated from Martin Stuart-Fox, 2010) however, there is not any temple in Vientiane at present that has lasted long, complete and valuable as Phra That Luang. It is because this stupa contains holy relics, and that historically it was a part of Vientiane's establishment as a capital which also related to King Setthathirath, who established Vientiane as the capital. Therefore, That Luang Stupa then is most appropriate symbol to represent Buddhism and to confirm that Laos is a Buddhist country, Besides the empirical evidences appear to show the importance of That Luang Stupa and to communicate that this temple represents Vientiane and Laos are how the image of That Luang Stupa has been used as a part of their national symbol or logo. For example, the image of That Luang Stupa was also used in other festivals or activities, such as, the logo of SEA Games in 2009 and the design of medals used in several medals in sports and other similar areas involving competition.

The use of That Luang stupa as a part of several logos and symbols, not only it represents Buddhism in this country, but it also reflects the faith Lao people has had towards this religion for a long time, including representing one of the country's basis that should be praised and continued. While currently there are not many countries in the world that have such proud-to-be cultural capital, in addition, the use of That Luang Stupa also shows that the power of Buddhism is still exist in this country.

"King Sayasetthathirath, the hero of national salvation": Even though at present in Lao People's Democratic Republic, the form of government is under a communist regime, or what Lao people call "People's democratic regime. When people representatives nationwide participated in the Nation Congress of People's Representatives held in Vientiane in December 2nd, 1975, it was the turning point of this realm from the former system of government, constitutional monarchy, (Jiraporn translated from Martin Stuart-Fox, 2010) and Laos has been governed by Lao Revolutionary People's Party since then. The party is currently led by Choummaly Sayasone, and Mr Thongsing Thammavong acts as the prime minister. Such regime is totally different from when King Sayasetthathirath ruled the country, though the perspectives that Lao citizen's have towards this king and the monarchy of the Vientiane's establishment period, according to the current historiography written under socialist regime, do not deny the heroism of this great king, and he is still being accepted by the people as a great benefactor of the country. People's perspectives are still positive and honoring the king as they are praising him in the history of Laos, as seen below;

"The army of Lan Xang had smaller combatant. Their weapons mostly were locals since they had not yet had any trade with the western, which was Burma. But they could resist and graciously win the attack of Burma, who had more combatant and modern weapons bought from the western merchants. To win the attack of Burma this time, it gave Lao Lan Xang kingdom the great reputation and respectability from nearby kingdom kings who were thinking of expand their influence into this kingdom. Even Bayinnaung, king of the Toungoo dynasty of Burma, who had never been defeated in any war and whenever he and his army attack any kingdom or country, it would mean only victory. But when attacking Lan Xang kingdom this time, he lost and was severely hurt. People at that time would all say King Sayasetthathirath of Lan Xang kingdom was the most prestigious rival and the only one warrior who never gave up to Bayinnaung." (Kittirat Sihabun, referred Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism, 2000)

From the historiography of Laos, it shows that even though the feudal monarchy was collapsed, the virtues it had towards the nation are still written and told until present. Lao government does not deny this acceptance, but they also see the value and significance of this king who devoted their efforts to unite Laos. Hence, the importance of the King is still meaningful to this land. Various monuments were erected nationwide to glorify him. Even in the Vientiane's 450th anniversary celebration, Lao people of all ages still paid homage to the past ruler, King Sayasetthathirath. Though coming from different period of time, the discourse of honoring and reproducing the virtue makes Lao people still aware and appreciate his grace until today. In this grand celebration of Vientiane 450th anniversary as the nation's capital, the graphic representation of King Sayasetthathirath

was used in the event's logo in order to represent the monarchy. His monumental image was also appeared in 100,000 kip banknote made to commemorate the event.



Figure 5 King Sayasetthathirath Monument



Figure 6 100,000 kip banknote commemorating the event

In the logo, you will see the monument of King Sayasetthathirath mounting on great white elephant which means the glorification and greatness people praise this king. Clearly it is a testament of giving precedence, fidelity and coexistence between national history and the generosity of the new country's government. While the past history is not concealed, instead they together unify their history harmoniously as possible.

The logo of Vientiane's 450th anniversary celebration, the reproduction of a discourse for new generations

Besides the logo design is an artwork, it is also another way to create the value of beauty and reliability that enhance the society's aesthetic level (Thongjue Kitathong, 2005) in terms of the content they want to communicate to the audience. According to all three symbols representing the identity of Vientiane, appeared on the logo of the grand event, what is interesting is the selection and placement of the symbols they are used in order to present some topics to the society. Creating the logo by referring the nation, religion and hero of national salvation has reflected the respect, honoring the history, and pride of their own nation. Meanwhile, it is the attempt to reproduce the nationalist ideology and create a discourse for younger generations, who may only have a glimmer of their own national history, to give better precedence to this matter. One of the purposes Lao government wants to communicate through the logo is "the solidarity of Lao people in the age of globalization" with the ideology of mutual national history. The attempt is to instruct people with pride they have towards the country's capital, Vientiane, and the Lao nation, as well as to build faith in Buddhism and commemorate the virtue of Lao ancestors. Furthermore, the logo produced and designed by the government is also

reflecting the state's concept of recognizing people about their history. They use the logo as a medium to share some ideas or concepts in the society, which is consistent with the concept of Thonjue Kiatthong (2005) who noted that society means the aggregate of people who have power, faith, belief and ideology which give the society power and unity, and is used to express that they are from the same society by using symbols.

In the midst of the diversity of ethnicity, language and culture, however, using the logo of Vientiane's 450th anniversary as a representation of the country's grand event has made the symbols become another channel that helps the citizens to together re-recognize their national history. It is likely that the story of Vientiane in the past is being transmitted to the new Lao generation and that the story will be told eternally.

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