

Travel, Photography, and Identity: Filipino Travelers in Laos

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The popularity of do-it-yourself and solo travel augmented by discounted airfares offered by budget airlines is evident on social media—something that my friend and I often take advantage. With similar interests in Asian society and culture, as well as travel and photography, we decided to go on our first adventure together. Korea may have been our country of specialization in graduate school, but that did not diminish our interest in Southeast Asia. Fortunately, the visa-free agreement among the member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) made it easier for Southeast Asians like us to travel within the region for up to 14 days (ASEAN n.d.). However, many Filipino tourists are still not familiar with Lao PDR—aside from some Philippine television crew shooting on location for a documentary while we were there. Probably, the lack of direct flights from Manila to Laos accounts for this.

At the time of our visit, Luang Prabang and Vang Vieng were filled with foreign tourists, especially Europeans on their extended holidays. In Luang Prabang, a UNESCO world heritage town in northern Laos, the remnants of its French colonial past is successfully merged with traditional Buddhist temples, showcasing the well-preserved fusion of Eastern and

Western culture (UNESCO World Heritage Centre n.d.). It was a very modest town that even the night market was quiet unlike those in other Southeast Asian countries. Theravada Buddhist monks can usually be seen walking around the town. Vang Vieng, another town located between Vientiane and Luang Prabang, was also interesting as it used to be popular among tourists for its nightlife. Now, government efforts transformed it into a relatively quieter town. On the way to Vang Vieng, you could see Chinese infrastructure projects being built, such as the Laos-China railway which was inaugurated in 2021 (Strangio 2021). We immediately thought that this could significantly increase Chinese visitors in Laos in the coming years.

Studying Asia enabled us to better appreciate and understand diverse cultures. While going around Laos, we noticed that Lao Buddhist expressions are distinct from other Buddhist countries. In Luang Prabang, Buddhist monks met the people every day to receive food offerings with their begging bowls (Lester 1973, 112). Their procession was solemn. Unfortunately, despite public notices, some tourists did not know how to respect the monks. Some people placed their mobile phones near the monks' faces to take photos. The amount of attention people gave to the procession was apparent. Only when the monks turned to another street did tourists stop from following and photographing them. Interestingly, we noticed that some monks would give away part of the offerings they received to the kids lined up on the street. This reminded us of what the Chilean photographer Paz Errázuriz said, that "the margin is where power looks differently. You have to show people or make people learn how to look" (BBC Reel 2019). After seeing that, my friend and I went silent.

During our last night in Luang Prabang, rather than going to a bar like other tourists, we chose to watch the Garavek, a traditional Laotian storytelling show narrated in English (Garavek n.d.). In the show, locals narrated folktales accompanied by music. It allowed us to learn and appreciate their culture more, especially the origins of the Mekong River and Mount Phusi. We also enjoyed the food at the night market even



Figure 1: Young monks in Luang Prabang carrying their begging bowls and giving donations to the children. Photo taken by the author.

though its names were difficult to understand. It was hard to communicate with the vendors in English. Surprisingly, there were also a lot of Korean restaurants around. Our Korean language skills proved to be more useful as many of the menus and signs were in Hangeul when we were in Vang Vieng. Local vendors knew how to speak Korean more than English which made communicating with them more convenient for us. While in graduate school, I used to think that as Korea majors, the foreign language we learned would only be useful when we go to Korea or speak with Koreans. Who would have thought that our Korean language skills would come in handy in Laos? I did not expect Southeast Asians communicating with each other using a Northeast Asian language.

Readings in class were only able to inform us about a part of the reality in Asia. Exploring the countries in Southeast Asia, experiencing them firsthand allowed us to better understand the region. However, the question of whether Filipinos are more “Southeast Asian” or Western became more apparent. Because of our physical features, Filipinos tend to blend in as residents or local tourists, unlike Northeast Asian and Caucasian-looking tourists. Once we start speaking, other people can easily tell that we are Filipinos. While waiting for the boat to the Pak Ou Caves in Luang Prabang, some Singaporean tourists suddenly asked if we were Filipinos. They said it was because of the language we used as well as our accents when speaking in English. On another occasion, while we were having breakfast at our guesthouse, a European-looking family approached us and also asked if we were Filipinos. They said they were Israeli-Spanish. This time, they thought we were Filipinos after hearing familiar Spanish words in our conversation.

These instances are not isolated cases. Whenever I travel with other Filipinos around Southeast Asia, locals and Southeast Asian tourists would immediately know that we are Filipinos because of our accent and the words we use. Ironically, our colonial roots that brought us the English and Spanish languages and allowed us to communicate easily with a wider audience, became markers of Filipino identity. We may not know the local languages in other Southeast Asian countries, except for some familiar words in Bahasa Indonesia, but they are able to easily identify Filipinos. This is similar to how easily we recognize Singaporeans because of their use of “Singlish” (Singaporean English), even though it also resembles the Malaysians’ accent when they speak English. This confirms that Southeast Asians blend traditions; we merge Eastern and Western influences together, connecting Southeast Asia with the rest of the world (Lockard 2009, 1-3). Are Filipinos then more Southeast Asian or are we just more Westernized than other Southeast Asians?

This trip proved to be enlightening. Our initial goal of capturing the “usual” travel photos—those that would probably gain “likes” on social media—changed. It may not be photos that would gain many “likes,” but we hoped this reality would be seen by more people. Travel should allow us to gain more knowledge in the process. More than the photos we took, the good food we ate, and the souvenirs we bought, the realizations we gained from this trip were more indispensable.

About the Author

Marian F. Gongora is a faculty member of the Department of International Studies at Far Eastern University, Manila where she teaches courses on Geography and Global Challenges and Comparative Foreign Policy of Major Powers. She obtained her master’s degree in Asian Studies (major in Northeast Asia – Korea) at the Asian Center, University of the Philippines Diliman, and her Bachelor of Arts in Asian Studies at the University of Santo Tomas, Manila. She was also an exchange student at Seoul National University. She previously worked for the Embassy of the Republic of Korea in the Philippines and has undertaken research projects at the UP Asian Center and UP Korea Research Center. Her research interests include international relations, area studies, geopolitics and human security, popular culture and public diplomacy, and women’s issues.

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