



# The development of the Lao animation industry from past to present

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## Abstract

This paper explores the development of the Lao animation industry from past to present. It specifically focuses on the real development of Lao animation that has never been previously undiscovered. Interestingly, there have been attempts to collect data regarding Lao animation by researchers and journalists in the past. However, due to constraints of language, cultural understanding, and a lack of trust by the Laotian artists, it has been difficult to obtain permission to view their artworks, observe their work environment, and interview them for the more in-depth information that has been typically kept secret from foreigners. This article, as previously mentioned, aims to study the development of Lao animation as it has been gradually developed from simple cartoons to the advanced 3D animation which represents the embracing of digital culture in Lao PDR. Furthermore, in order to consider Lao animation as an industry, systems theory was used in this study, along with other theories, in order to explain context including; globalization, modernization and diffusion theories. These theories will help explain the collected data gathered by the research tools that included; observation, in-depth interview and focus groups. Therefore, according to the systems theory, any industry can be viewed as system when considering four elements; input, process, output and outcome. The results show that the Lao animation industry started to form in the late 1990s, after the Lao government officially announced its "New Economic Mechanism" (NEM) during the second five year period of the national socio-economic development plan (1986-1990). Since then, there have been some interesting factors and elements that continuously appeared to help facilitate the development of the Lao animation industry including; input, process, output and outcome. Nonetheless, a lack of associated documentation and research papers made it impossible to focus on what should be improved. Today, the Lao animation industry is currently struggling with different issues. Consequently, in order to understand the development of the Lao animation industry and its trend towards a creative industry approach, an understanding of the digital culture and an analysis of its related factors is useful and might help provide guidance or recommendations for future development.

**Keywords:** Animation, Creative Industry, Digital Media, Laos

## 1. Introduction

From the past to the present, it is a fact that communication has played a large role in globalization. It is a major factor that drives the world, especially regarding the appearance of innovation and modern technology. It has changed the communication process by increasing speed and pushing boundaries. Information communication technology (ICT) has become a crucial management tool that cannot be overlooked by most industries including; medical, entertainment, education, tourism and business [1]. Lately, state of the art technology and communications have been diffused to Asian countries and have started to show significant impacts upon almost every industry. Digitalization is now becoming a trend that has changed the way we consume various types of information. Digital media has become a part of almost every culture and society, people have changed their consumption behavior while being willing to generate their own content and provide it to the general public. Mixing different types of media together help promote multimedia as an undeniable tool used in our daily lives. Additionally, it has great potential to be developed in the future, with the creative industry warmly embracing it, worldwide [2].

Unfortunately, the complexity of the information that has been generated by people around the world can cause confusion, and sometimes this leads to misunderstanding. Information overload is becoming one of the most concerning issues of the modern era. Therefore, in order to reduce the complexity of the information, different ways of presentation were designed to help convey the content of messages to the audience in the way that the sender perceived. Currently, infographics plays an important role in the communication process because it helps viewers to easily consume information without spending too much time on it. Nowadays, the use of infographics really depends on the type of information that the sender wants to be digested; it can be created as data centric, timeline, geographical, etc [3]. In addition, along with infographics, there is another form of communication that has become very popular since the '90s, it is called "animation" and came to be considered as an art form that changed the way people think about the communication industry. Over the last few years, the animation industry has been identified as one of the world's fastest growing industries [4].

Interestingly, since the '90s, animation has been frequently used in many countries for various purposes, such as spreading news, advertising, and entertainment. It has been gradually developed

and will eventually become a part of the media industry development, becoming undeniable in almost every country. Furthermore, Lao PDR appears to be a country that has widely adopted cartoon animation as an educational and rural development tool, but most animation was imported from outside the country. However, in 2012, the first Lao animation named “My Village” showed its potential and caught the interest of both local and foreign organizations who were interested in investing in Lao PDR. Unfortunately, the early development of Lao animation does not appear to have been recorded and there are still some unknown areas of information to be discovered. Utilizing the available information, this research paper will try to discover the development of the Lao animation industry, the current situation, and its trend towards being a creative industry. This study should help to develop knowledge regarding Lao animation, which might be useful for researchers or investors who want to start a business or make a relationship with the local artists in Lao PDR.

## 2. Aim of the research

The following are the main objectives of this study:

- a) To study the development of the Lao animation industry since The Laotian Civil War (1975)
- b) To study the current situation of the Lao animation industry and its trend towards the creative industries approach

## 3. Method

The study employed qualitative research methodology with the population and subjects from the area of Vientiane Prefecture. The research instruments included; survey form, observation form, in-depth interview form, and focus group interview. The forms were sent to a panel of experts for their comments and feedback. The panel of experts was selected by considering their expertise in the area of fine and applied arts, research measurement, and research evaluation, for validation purposes. After receiving the comments and feedback, some modifications were made to the original instruments.

Before the researcher visited the study area, the target groups were officially asked for their permission to be interviewed. However, some key informants, casual informants and general informants, related to Lao animation, were discovered through the snowball method. There were five key informants, ten casual informants and fifteen general key informants involved in the study process. Both the key and casual informants were prominent people in Lao fine and applied arts or the media industry.

The data collected was gathered and analyzed by structural and functional theory, cultural diffusion theory, globalization theory, post-modern theory, system theory, and presented by descriptive analysis.

## 4. Conceptual framework

To study the Lao animation industry’s development from past to present and towards its future, it is necessary to use the theoretical concepts involved in order to help explain the phenomenon that occurred in the Lao PDR because during the various states of development, social culture and the economy continued to change. Therefore, to be able to explain the big picture of Lao animation industry development, theoretical concepts are crucial including; globalization, culture and innovation diffusion, as well as post-modernism. However, in order to study the animation industry as a system, system theory will be used to analyze and explain the cycles of the Lao animation process that consists of four key elements (input, process, output, and outcome). These elements will reflect the details of the collected data which was gathered from the informants who have direct and indirect involvement in Lao animation [5]. According to the deliberations, it will create a

knowledge of the animation and media industry in Lao PDR, which is consistent with other industries such as film and music. Additionally, the result of the study will help guide the direction of the animation industry development so that it can effectively become part of the creative industries and other developments that might take place in the future.

## 5. Results

The results of this research are divided into two parts, firstly, they describe the development of Lao the animation industry; secondly, they indicate the current situation of the Lao animation industry and its trend towards a creative economy approach. The first part describes information obtained from literature review as well as the data gathered from the various informants who live in the study area. Consequently, a further phase of the study describes the four elements of industry; input, process, output and outcome, that reflect the current situation of the Lao animation industry, animation trends that took place over the past few years, and suggestions and ideas to push the industry to be a part of the national development plan in Lao PDR.

### 5.1. The development of the Lao animation industry

Undoubtedly, looking back into Lao PDR history, it is difficult to find evidence of the development of Lao animation, and any related industry, because most of the studies and research papers mainly focused on conflicts, politics and government, and economics. Therefore, some areas of study were left behind and never officially recorded as a part of Lao development progress, with arts study one of the areas that were missed out of Lao PDR history. Many art forms were never considered to be recorded because they were considered only small parts of the overall development. Fortunately, there are researchers and journalists who love discovering more about other areas and are still uncovering more of the history of arts and media which was also a contributing factor in shaping the economic status of Lao PDR from undeveloped into a developing country.

Interestingly, in 2012, there was a cartoon animation series called “My Village” that was originally created by a Laotian artist named Souliya Phoumivong. The series was officially screened on Lao national television (Channel 3) and Lao Star. The series was considered as a phenomenal show because it was one of the very first Lao cartoons to be formally approved by the government. Furthermore, its reputation widely spread among Asian countries and it was warmly accepted by many professionals and organizations who work in the media industry. Since then, My Village has become an animation continuously supported by the government and organizations who provided grants to produce the series (currently has 4 series). In addition, a recent UNICEF evaluation concluded that the series helps promote positive caregiving practices and has a strong potential to influence a diverse range of early learning and development outcomes for children [6]. According to the appearance of the show, Souliya turned out to be one of the most influential Laotian artists of the new era. Nevertheless, he seems to be the only artist holding the key that will allow researchers to make further investigation of Lao animation.

When considering the evidence, literature or research papers related to industry development in Lao PDR make it clear that, after the change in Lao economic and social policy occurred in 1984 (NEM: New Economic Mechanism), the Lao PDR has upgraded to become a developing country that focuses more on industrial development. Agriculture, natural resources, and tourism became the industries at the top of the list. However, the lack of national infrastructure, especially in technology and human resource development, still needs to be improved. Obviously, the animation industry seems to be an area that the Lao government should be concerned with. Interestingly, Nobuyuki Tsugata [7] a Japanese researcher traveled to Lao and studied the insight story of the situation of Lao film and animation. He discovered an interesting

appearance of cultural diffusion in film and also explained about cartoon consumption, mainly sourced from East Asia countries, especially from China, Thailand, and Japan. Nonetheless, the study did not clearly explain the appearance of Lao animation and its development, but merely stated that Laotian people preferred consuming media from other countries, because of the limitations of media consumption in Lao PDR.

According to the information above, the researcher strongly believes that there must be some hidden information which has not yet been discovered. Recently, there was some evidence that the showing of animation is nothing new to Lao culture. A cartoon series named "My Village", a "stop motion animation" or "Clay-mation" created by Souliya Phoumivong was one of the very first Lao cartoon animation series, that was approved by the government, to be officially screened on national television, and continues to be screened now (2017). For this reason, the researcher decided to study the development, as well as the current situation, of the animation industry by visiting the study area (Vientiane Capital) and by directly contacting some involved, key informants, practitioners, and related individuals. Finally, information gathered from the interviews and observation indicated that, the development of Lao animation can be divided into three eras as follows:

### 1. The first era of Lao animation (1975-1985)

Considering the political conflicts that took place during this era (The Laotian Civil War), it was understandable that there was no evidence showing the use of animation in any form of media, as the Lao government did not truly focus on industrial development at that point. However, during 1976-1985, the first socio-economic development plan was officially introduced. It was a centrally-planned system which mainly focused on various development areas including: agriculture, natural resources, local industries and services; whereas, information communication technology (ICT), particularly new media, were hardly seen in Lao PDR<sup>8</sup>. Interestingly, even though animation did not appear to be taking place in this era, there was some significant evidence showing the need to use drawing and cartoon to express movements of characters through stories. These were mostly disseminated to the public through print media including, newspaper, leaflet, posters; it was used as a propaganda tool.

According to the information above, it is very obvious that there were no signs of an attempt to push any kind of these art forms into becoming real, consumable animation, rather they expressed ideas, beliefs and gave encouragement to the public by using mostly print media. So, considering the four elements of a proper industry; input, process, output and outcome, the results can be described that, in the first era of Lao animation some evidence was part of the input, but there was no animation process and output involved. However, the awareness of the use of drawings and cartoons to improve the communication cycle, that took place between government, artists, and citizens, were a big part of an outcome which reflects the importance of using new, effective approaches of conveying messages to the audience that consequently developed into a new form of media in the next era.

### 2. The second era of Lao animation (1986-2000)

After the first national development plan was implemented during 1976-1985, Laos GDP did not reach the expected goal due to a lack of various infrastructures which meant the country was not capable of catching up with a global economy which was rapidly changing at that time [8]. After the failure of the first national development plan, Lao PDR decided to push a new strategy according to the rise of globalization by introducing the "New Economic Mechanism" (NEM), a part of the second national development plan that was launched in 1986. This mechanism mainly focused on economic improvement. The diffusion of globalization factors became a crucial part of Lao PDR, many infrastructures started to be developed in this era, especially the ICT, which helped push the industry elements in a new direction. Interest-

ly, this is the first era that appeared to have animation produced by Laotian artists.

Phipat Phamuang [9], an experienced Laotian artist as well as a founder of "D.K. Arts", a multimedia production company, strongly believed that his brother in law, Duangdy Khanthavilay was the very first person to dedicate himself to new the media direction. He further explained that; even though, Duangdy was a busy diplomat, he also had a strong background in fine arts and language skills; he loved pushing the limits and was always finding opportunities to improve his art production skills. Interestingly, the idea of creating animation first arose during a visit to Vietnam. He intentionally learned animation techniques and tried to combine his knowledge with a new approach. Subsequently, during 1995-1999, he produced various computer animations by using various techniques; including, paper, clay, and basic drawn animation. Some of his works were selected by a Japanese organization and later exhibited in Yokubo Artspace, Tokyo, Japan. Ultimately, this appears to be the first Lao animation, produced by a Laotian artist, which was ever shown internationally. Unfortunately, a year later, Duangdy passed away due to health problems. It cannot be denied that Souliya Phoumivong is one of the most successful Laotian artists within animation history, mainly because of his stop motion animation that has been officially broadcast on Lao National Television and Lao Star channel since 2012. This is considered as an interesting case study because; typically the Lao government is very strict on launching new types of media or shows to the public. However, Souliya, an art lecturer from the National Institute of Fine Arts, expressed his ideas and passion throughout the interview; he stated that making artwork for living in the past was never easy. He used to be a drawing artist and sell his artworks at the night market located near the Mekong River. Meanwhile, he began to realize the trend in new media used in society, so he started creating arts using different types of electronic devices including; digital camera, camcorder, as well as a Macintosh computer which he had received from a German lecturer. From then on, photography and videography seem to have become a part of his career. He has produced many video commercials, joined in film exhibitions and has provided feedback to students who join film competitions. In 2009, he was chosen as a representative of Laotian art by the JENESYS (Japan-East Asia Network of Exchange for Students and Youths) program, which was managed by a Japanese Foundation that works closely with the Lao government, to join an art workshop and exhibition at Yokubo Artspace, Tokyo, Japan. "It was very exciting and inspiring to see the different kinds of art from people who come from different places, it makes me want to improve myself", he added [10].

As countryside man, living in Tokyo, seeing the world in a way that he had never seen before, he could not keep his excitement inside his heart. He expressed his feelings by producing a stop motion animation called "Big World" which was later exhibited in various art galleries and at festivals in East Asia. Additionally, Souliya was one of the first Laotian artists to be interviewed by the Japan Times, one of the biggest news media in Japan. Interviewed about his work and attitudes toward modern art in Lao PDR [11]. Later, Souliya continued producing various stop motion animations while teaching at the National Institute of Fine Arts. He eventually received a grant from UNICEF, which works closely with the Lao Government for early childhood development (ECD). He was backed to produce a stop motion series named "My Village" which has been officially broadcast up to the present (2017), this makes Souliya one of the most influential artists in Lao PDR.

However, the newer generation of Laotian artists cannot be ignored, since modernization changes the way young artists present their work to the public. Recent communication technology, especially the internet, is now a part of their life, consuming and expressing ideas on the social networks and websites is now considered crucial. With modern life styles, most young artists who interested in producing digital arts, mainly focus on creating artwork

and animation using digital technology because it helps in reducing production time, budget and is much easier to publish to the public. Thus, this was the time when the Lao animation industry started adapting itself to newer approaches, shaping various industries in a new direction. To summarize, according to the hypothesis, the animation industry's elements include input, process, output, and outcome. It appears that a complete cycle of the animation industry was first displayed in this era, and was gradually improved due to cultural diffusion and globalization.

3. The third era of Lao animation (2000-present) This is the era that the Lao animation industry grew rapidly because of mass communication. Online media became a platform used by most people daily, generating, and sharing information by using their electronic mobile devices. Many production companies have pushed themselves, utilizing the benefits of modern technology. Interestingly, the animation industry has also adapted itself into a new dimension. Internet plays a major role in the service industry. For instance, a large company based in Japan named JCEAS (Japan Computer Entertainment and Animation Studio) realized the advantages of using technology in their media production, possibly helping them in lowering their budget and in building connections with other Asian countries. So they conducted market research and discovered that production possibilities were significantly increasing in Southeast Asia. Apparently, Lao PDR is an interesting investment destination that has human resources available in new media development. Nonetheless, it is merely the beginning of the industry development era, considered from the perspective of the five-year plan that will focus more on improving the infrastructure of technologies, media, industries, as well as human resource development [12]. Moreover, digital trends seem to be pushing many educational institutes in Vientiane capital to create new study programs that are suitable for market supply and demand. Interestingly, some animation projects have been recently produced by students who studied at college and university level. Considering the increasing number of multimedia related companies that were rapidly established in this period of time, it indicates that new media tends to be being accepted by the government and private sectors who realize the efficiency of using animation as a medium. JCEAS, as previously mentioned is one the most successful foreign game production companies that have had great success in investing. One of the main reasons for JCEAS's success was due to its understanding the context of Lao PDR. Thus, JCEAS itself has a complete cycle of animation industry; including, input, process, output, and outcome [13].

However, rather than looking at the foreign companies, there are also many Lao companies that are trying to set themselves up to catch the wave of modernization. Xaiyavong Mahavong is a founder of Talad Design, established in 2016; his is currently one of the youngest influencers in the Lao design industry. His famous work tells the story about "relationships among Lao teenagers" (2015) and was digitally viewed almost eighty thousand times. He confidentially expressed his vision of the Lao animation industry throughout the interview by saying that "the animation industry in Lao is considered as an infant when comparing to other Asian countries. However, I believe that it will be better in the future because the government, private companies, and organizations seem to understand the potential of using new media as a marketing tool in order to reach a specific audience. The use of infographic as well as digital animation is crucial in today's communications" [14].

Another young Laotian artist who is interested in new media is named Mangkonephet Sayasane, a co-founder of the Bizgital Company where investors can get consultation on marketing or conducting business in Lao PDR. He is also an administrator of "Lao Otaku Club", a Facebook page created in 2012 that has more than five thousand likes and officially supported by the Embassy of Japan in the Lao PDR. "I am interested in pop culture, especially anime (Japanese cartoon) from Japan. I think we have learned a lot from Japanese culture because we have had a good relationship

with Japan for a long time. Consuming media and arts from Japan helps in pushing our younger artists to apply and shape things that are available in our culture into a newer form of arts, animation is part of that," he said. Also, he strongly believes that the animation industry will be growing in the future, because of the number of animation related events and workshops, which are held by private organizations, are regularly increasing. Moreover, there are many individual groups of artists who still keep working on animation projects that will be ready to launch in the near future [15].

Nonetheless, from the past to the present, Lat Ruttanawong and Chongkham Phonekaw [16] co-founders of D.K.Arts suggested that, even though the animation industry in Lao contains complete cycles of production; including, input, process, output and outcome, still, these elements are totally new to the Lao society and currently available to only specific groups of people, mostly the younger generation who are interested in digital media and technology. So that, in order to create a stronger fundamental for industry development, some national infrastructures must be improved, development of education and human resources are needed. These are things that the government should consider if they want to compete with other countries, as well as creating a unique value for Laos's animation. Moreover, there are many startup companies that still wait for support from the government and organizations who are interested in investing in creative industries. Added Lat, "from my observation, it is quite clear that in Lao PDR., animation can be categorized into three types, considering its purpose; including, 1) advertising, 2) rural development and 3) education". These types of animation are significantly consistent with the gathered information; it helps in explaining that the four elements of an animation industry are totally apparent within this era.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

Considering some of the concrete evidence of Lao animation that appeared during the development period (1975-2017), it is indicated that the development of Lao animation gradually improved over time. It has been growing along with the flow of globalization and without any hesitation. Creativity and innovation also eventually became part of communication and the arts. However, in order to define the Lao animation industry, there are four elements that help in completing the cycle of industry; input, process, output and outcome. According to other media industry studies such as film and music in Lao PDR, the mentioned elements are important in creating an ideal environment for creative industry development [5, 17].

Based on the available information, it appears that Lao animation can be divided into three eras. The first era was when the very first Lao animation was created and successfully accepted by other countries, the second era was when the newer generation of Laotian artists tried pushing the boundaries of their creative animation work into Laotian society, and the third era was started from 2000, when modernization, globalization, and digitalization become part of the country. Since then, those changes have helped in shaping Lao animation into an industry that should not be ignored, because, at the present most information tends to be adopting animation into it, making it easier for the audience to consume.

Nonetheless, the current situation of the Lao animation industry is that it is just getting started, but is proving to have a decent future in the long run. Other multimedia related industries, such as film and music are also improving and embracing the changes of globalization. The new generation of Laotians seems to see the benefits of using technology and multimedia to spread their digital artworks to the world. It is obvious that animation is one of the art forms that has potential and can be used for many purposes. There is no denying the fact that animation has become a part of the digital media advertising trends in Lao PDR. Different types of animation have been used to spread the messages via any possible channel, and their quality has improved to reach the industry standard.

However, the people involved in the Lao animation industry strongly believe that there is still room for improvement. Accordingly, the four elements of the animation industry must be improved. They suggest that the cooperation between the local government and private sectors must be taken into consideration, in order to help in providing a budget and related events or activities that will increase the awareness of the use of animation as a communication tool. The government should focus on developing related infrastructures such as human resources, education, and technology in communication. Ultimately, creativity is the key to success, having creative spaces, people and ideas will definitely help in pushing Lao animation to be a part of the creative industries.

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