



Cultural intercourse of the Lao Vieng ethnic groups that reflects on the architectural style and the use of space in the Korat house

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Article Info

Article history:

Received 19 October 2017

Revised 4 January 2018

Accepted 7 March 2018

Available online 27 March 2018

Keywords:

cultural intercourse,
Korat house,
Lao Vieng,
the use of space,
vernacular architecture

Abstract

Lao Vieng ethnic groups were taken as prisoners of war to Nakhon Ratchasima in 1778, resulting in a continuous cultural intercourse with the Thai Korat people, especially in the construction of Korat house styles. Recent research has investigated residential housing and the use of space by the two groups of Lao Vieng—Laos Vieng Taku and Laos Vieng Japoh—who settled either close to or away from the center of administration. This article focuses on the comparison of the cultural intercourse of these two groups against the main cultural group which is reflected in the development of housing and the use of interior space. A study of architectural history is applied along with anthropology and sociology. The methodology includes housing surveys, case studies, and interviews with residents. Comparative analysis between the two groups aimed at studying the phenomena of cultural intercourse, including its contributing factors. The study findings show that in a historical context, both groups have maintained to some extent, aspects according to traditional Lao culture. However, the housing patterns of the Lao Vieng Japoh reflect more the adoption of the Korat house than the other, as the location of their community is closer to the administrative center and trade routes, and is surrounded by different cultural groups, especially the Thai Korat group, resulting in social interactions, cultural intercourse, and blending in with the mainstream culture at a greater level.

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Introduction

The numbers of Korat houses is decreasing day by day due to continuous demolition and abandonment. Therefore, it is necessary to quickly study, explore, and collect information on the Korat house from various aspects to create a database that will help academics, architects, and the general public to understand and realize the value, as well as the importance of the Korat house, leading to preservation and further conservation before the

information is gone from memory. Based on information about the earlier studies of the Korat house by academics, Tansuwanrat (2002) studied the Korat house, focusing on the physical aspects and identities of the Korat House that had been most cited. Veerapradit (1999) studied the relationship of the Korat house with ways of life based on the humanities field. In general, these scholarly works did not study the integration of the humanities, social sciences, and architecture, especially the study of ethnicity that affects the characteristics of the house. This study focuses on the view of the Korat House using the cultural diversity of ethnic groups that affects the architectural style and cultural patterns of the cultural use of interior space. This is an integrated study that will broaden and clarify the existing knowledge base.

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Peer review under responsibility of Kasetsart University.

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Pak Thong Chai district, Nakhon Ratchasima province (Korat) is a prominent district for cultural intercourse between the Thai Korat group—the former residents and major cultural group with the Lao Vieng group—an ethnic group of the Kingdom of Lan Xang, who resided along the Mekong River on the Vientiane plain and were taken as prisoners of war to the Japoh outpost (Pak Thong Chai District today) in 1778. After the war, the Lao Vieng dispersed into two groups—in Baan Japoh and Taku districts (Figure 1)—and have been adapting to their area contexts ever since, as can be seen from house construction that follows the Korat house pattern, according to the main cultural groups. Modification of the house style of the Lao Vieng to the Korat pattern shows adaptation to the main culture. It shows social status to comply with the values of the Thai Korat for acceptance and to negotiate an identity that shows social rights and equality with interaction. *“When the main culture interacts with the existing culture nearby both cultures can learn and understand one another. In the early stages, culture may be temporarily or culturally borrowed and then subsequently adopted as their own culture, while the less energetic groups are often blended into the more powerful ones.”* (Pongsapit, 2006, p.15). According to this, *“people with different cultural background borrowed or exchanged ‘rules of thumb’ about house building. This was an indigenous development which occurred according to social interaction between the pioneers, and the merits and pitfalls of their building practices and lifestyles.”* (Lawrence, 1990, p. 253).

With preliminary observations on the differences in the architectural style and the use of interior space of the two Lao Vieng groups of Laos, such as size, roof truss, the

positions for doors and windows in the bedroom, the question arise of whether the differences in an area context and location near or far from the center of administration can affect the different levels of cultural intercourse of the Lao Vieng Japoh and the Lao Vieng Taku with the main culture. This introduces the purpose of this study—to compare the cultural intercourse of the two Lao Vieng groups with the main cultural group as it is reflected in the construction of housing and the use of space, including contributing factors. Discussion based on the conceptual framework of cultural intercourse theory is applied, in accordance with the historical time of the case-study area, and considering every single variable that affects the architectural patterns and the use of interior space. The results will be important information to help identify ethnic characteristics and to perceive the existence of ethnic groups before they are forgotten and disappear, making it impossible for future research.

Literature Review

Comparison Between the Korat House and Lao Vieng House

Patterns of Korat and Lao Vieng houses are similar in some respects—a single storey, wooden house with a raised platform and a high gable roof. The house structure is a prefabricated system. In general, both groups have a similar layout with awareness of the sun's path. Obvious differences between the two groups of houses are. 1) **Structure of the main house with bedrooms:** The Korat house is unique in that the king post is vertically jointed on

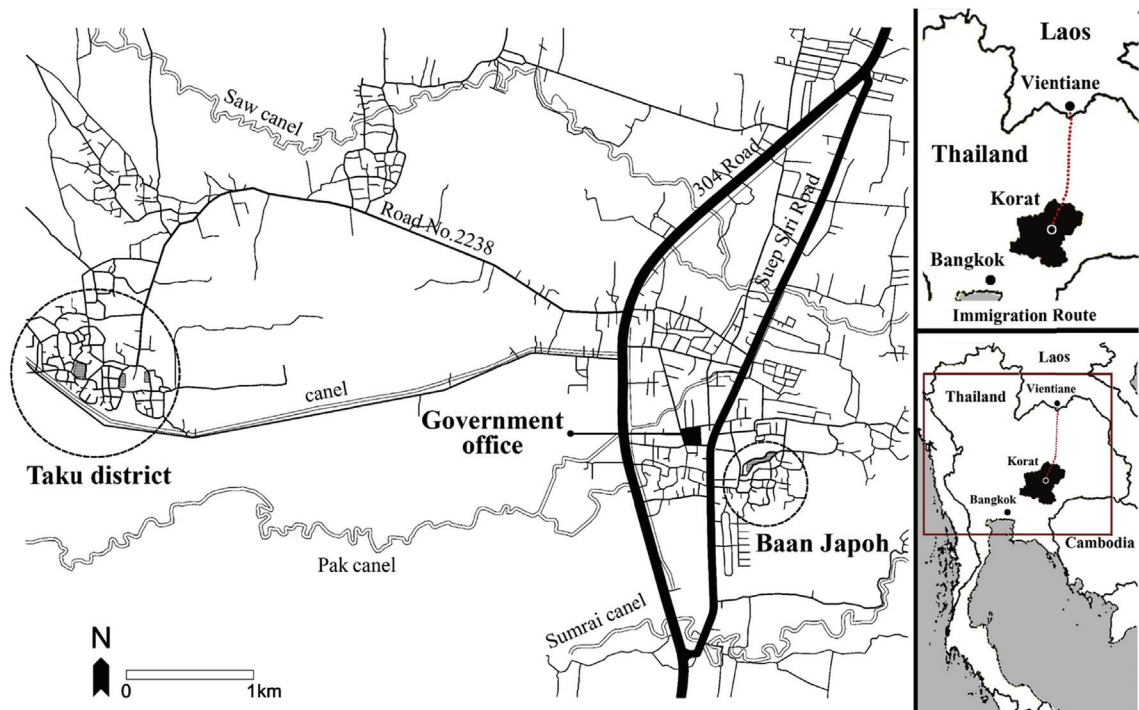


Figure 1 Immigration route and location of both communities

a tie beam inserted through rafters to support the ridgepole of the roof truss, thus supporting the housing structure with the roof. In contrast, the Lao Vieng house is not structured this way, with only poles from the floor up, to support the center of the tie beam due to the long width-side of the house, to facilitate the use of space as practiced by Lao cultural groups. Poles of the Korat house are mounted with a tenon only, but the Lao Vieng house uses two types of pole mounting—mortise and tenon—with different types of wood joints. **2) Size of the bedroom area:** The Lao Vieng house has a wider range of widths of the house (the average width of the Korat house is 3.60 m, but that of the Lao Vieng averages 5.00 m). This results in more interior space which can be separated into independent walkway and sleeping areas. This is different from the Korat house with its narrower range of building widths and no clear separation of these two areas. **3) Position of doors:** In the Korat house, there is only one bedroom door in the middle room; this results in short internal routes split left and right into both sleeping areas. The Lao Vieng house has two bedroom doors; the first of which is open only during ceremonies for monks or senior citizens, while the third room near the kitchen is for regular access.

Table 1

Differences in the characteristics of Korat and Lao Vieng houses

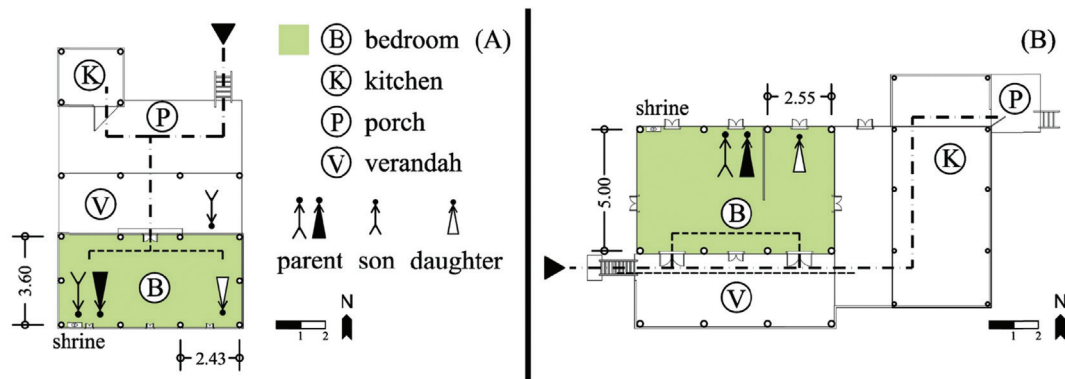
	Korat House	Lao Vieng House
Main house structure	*King post on tie beam (1)	**Strut (2)
Pole top structure	*Tenon (3)	**Tenon (4)/Mortise (5)
Main house size	*Width, 3.60 m	**Width, 5.00 m
	*Length, 2.43 m/a span	**Length, 2.55 m/a span
Door position	*Middle	**First and third room
Window position (Width side)	*No window on the width side	**2 on width sides, Middle room panel (porch side)
Wall panel installation	*Modular wall system (6)	**Framing
Wall panel material	*Typha/Wood	**Bamboo/Wood
Sacred area location	***Not definite	**First room
Daughter's bedroom	***First room	**Third room

Source: *Tansuwanrat (2002), **Clement-Charpentier & Clement (2003), ***fieldwork

4) Position of windows: Even though both groups may position the bedroom windows to be on the bed-head side, three windows, with one for each room, the Lao Vieng house has more positions assigned for window framing, on matching positions on both sides of the house, and the middle panel of the room next to the verandah, (open only during ceremonies), while the Korat house does not fix the window on that side of the panel; rather, it has windows only on the bed-head side panel. **5) Wall materials and installation:** A Korat traditional house wall is modular and the size of one panel is equal to the span between two poles. They originally used Typha for wall material, while the wall panel of the Lao Vieng house is attached to the longitudinal frame along each side of the house and bamboo is widely used for this. Later on, when modern construction materials and tools become more available, both groups made the same wall panel from wood, but still with differences regarding the installation system mentioned above. **6) Use of space:** Both groups differ in terms of the use of indoor space. For instance, the Thai Korat are not strict about the definite position for a sacred shrine. Generally they set the shrine on the house owner's bed-head side in a prominent position that may be moved to another one according to age range. It is customary for a daughter to sleep inside the house which is most often the first room on the east side. The Lao Vientiane have a fixed sacred position for this; they have the shrine on the bed-head side of the first room and designate it as a restricted area for outsiders because it is only the family's territory. In addition, it is customary for a daughter to always sleep in the third room. This very space will then be a sleeping area for the daughter and son-in-law after marriage too (Table 1, Figure 2 and Figure 3).

Methods

This was survey research with data collection consisting of surveys of 20 case-study houses (12 houses of the Lao Vieng Taku, 8 houses of the Lao Vieng Japoh), from 60 to 120 years old that were specifically selected, and interviews of residents regarding the use of interior space. Data analysis was conducted using morphological and comparative analysis to identify the similarities and differences between

**Figure 2** Comparison of the use of space in Korat house (A) and Lao Vieng house (B)

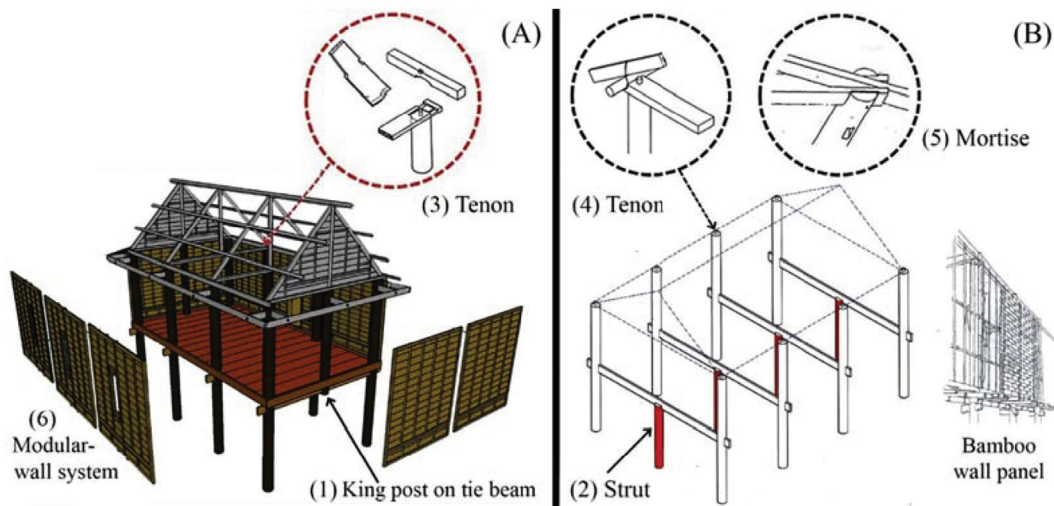
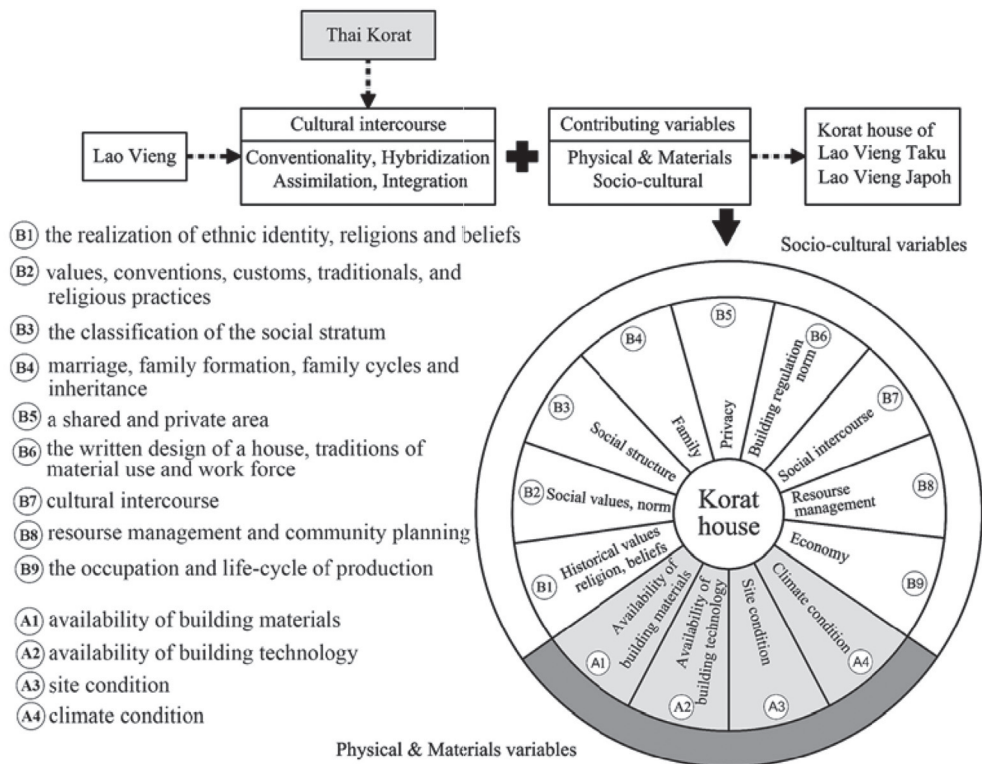


Figure 3 Comparison of structure and wall panel of Korat house (A) and Lao Vieng house (B)

the two Lao Vieng groups. Then, differences were compared in the traditional use of space with these Lao Vieng and Korat house patterns to study the phenomenon of cultural intercourse. Discussions under the conceptual framework of cultural intercourse theory, along with the historical events of the case-study area are implied to find

out whether and how the two groups of Lao Vieng adapted in similar or different manners. The identification of contributing factors is discussed with interpretation of the conceptual framework of variables that affect the vernacular house of the ethnic groups in the case-study area (Figure 4). This framework was created by comparative



Note: contributing variables diagram consists of Physical & Materials variables and Socio-cultural variables. All variables are interrelated and have an effect on the Korat houses in the case-study area.

Figure 4 Conceptual framework and affecting variables in the case-study area

study of variables affecting the architectural style and the use of space of a vernacular house of 3 researchers such as [Rapoport \(1969\)](#) (who saw that the socio-cultural forces primary, and the others modifying), [Lawrence \(1990\)](#) (who created the conceptual model of vernacular house) and [Oliver \(1997\)](#) (who studied variables that affect the vernacular house comprehensive). Then these variables were considered in the context of the case-study area. Finally, all data were concluded by interpretation.

Results

The housing features of the two groups are similar in appearance being a single-storey wooden house with raised floor, space beneath the raised floor, and a high gabled roof. The house structure is prefabricated, with a position longitudinal with the sun's path. This kind of 100-year-old house is fitted with modular walls and similarly has the pole mounted with a tenon joint. The differences between the two groups of houses and a comparison of the Lao Vieng and Korat house patterns are as follows.

- 1) Structure of the sleeping areas of the Lao Vieng Taku has two forms for posts (king post and king post on tie beam), while the structure of the sleeping area of the Lao Vieng Japoh group has only one form (king post on tie beam).
- 2) The house of the Lao Vieng Taku has a very wide range in wide (average 4.00–5.00 m), which is wider than the average width of the Korat house (average 3.60 m). This results in the walkway and sleeping area being clearly separated, while in the Lao Vieng Japoh house with the narrower range for the width (average 3.13 m), there is no clear separation between the living and sleeping areas.
- 3) Every Lao Vieng Taku house has one entrance to the sleeping area at the first room, making the third room more private. The research found this kind of door positioning in only one house of the Lao Vieng Japoh, the age of which was more than 100 years, while most of the houses had a single bedroom door in the middle room, resulting in shorter internal routing.
- 4) The two groups both set the position of windows on the three bed-head sides (1 point each). However, the house of the Lao Vieng Taku has the window framed at one or two places on the width in the same facing position, while the Lao Vieng Japoh does not commonly frame the window on the width-side of the house.

Although both groups have assimilated the Korat house style to their own in the above-mentioned manner, they still retain the tradition of using the interior space in accordance with traditional Lao culture for the use of space in daily life and rituals in the life-long tradition, which involves the positioning of the sacred area by setting up a

shrine in the first room on the east side, setting the daughter's bedroom in the third room on the west and which will later be the sleeping area of the daughter and son-in-law after the wedding ([Table 2](#), [Figure 5](#) and [Figure 6](#)).

Discussion and Interpretation

Comparison Between Lao Vieng Taku House and Lao Vieng Japoh House

Comparing the 100-year-old houses of both groups, the research found that the houses of the Lao Vieng Taku, which are far from the administrative center of the larger population, are in the more conventional Lao Vieng style. Moreover, they still maintain the area, space, and zoning of the interior by separating the sleeping area and the walkway clearly from each other to enhance the utility and activities according to Lao culture. According to [Rapoport \(1969\)](#), p. 52 “So many immigrants bring their architecture with them and persist in its use.” Additionally, there is some assimilation and hybridization of the Korat house style into some of the structures, such as the king post, position of the door in the first room, and the routing inside the house. At the same time, they accept the layout and the assembly process of wall panels with a modular system in the Korat style, but still with the patterns and the selection of materials they are connected with their heritage, such as with the use of bamboo for the paneling assembly. This corresponds to [Rapoport \(1969\)](#), p. 109 who reported “certain materials may be related to those used in a previous habitat prior to immigration.” While there is no Lao Vieng style found in the Lao Vieng Japoh house, most of the patterns have adopted the Korat house style; with only a combination of patterns by positioning the door entrance for the first room and the routing. This is similar to the Lao Vieng Taku house.

Comparing the houses less than 100 years old, it is clear that the Lao Vieng Taku house has been changing from the former style, by adjusting the wide-side of the house to be narrower—from 5.00 m to 4.00 m, so that the structure is changed from a strut king post to a king post on the tie beam, with changes in the layout and wall panel installation to be more like the Korat house pattern but still maintaining the clear zoning inside the house, as well as the positioning of the door entrance to the first room, and the routing remains the same. However, the house of the Lao Vieng Taku still has a wider range for the wide-side than the standard Korat house. This indicates the maintenance of the size of utility space and the space inside the house to facilitate the use and activities according to Lao cultural traditions. The architectural style of the Lao Vieng Japoh has completely changed to follow the Korat pattern, especially the change in the location of the entrance door from the first to the middle room, as well as changes in the internal routing.

However, even though the two groups live together in cultural and social groups under the Thai national government, each group defines itself in its own way and firmly maintains certain Lao cultural traditions. This is due to their cultural roots, historical beliefs, and traditions that are preserved by inheritance from generation to

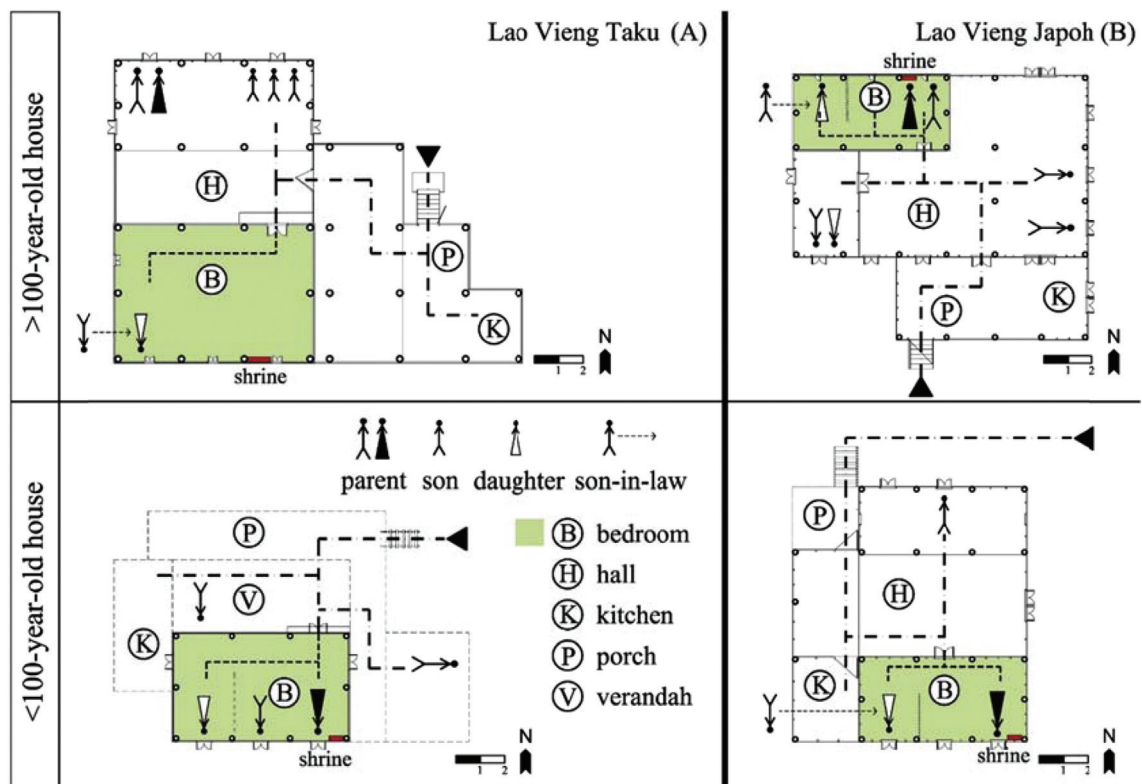
Table 2

Comparison of the characteristics of Korat house and the use of space, Laos Vieng, Laos Vieng Taku, and Laos Vieng Japoh

	Korat House	Laos Vieng House	Laos Vieng Taku House	Laos Vieng Japoh House
Main house structure	King post on tie beam	Strut	Strut-King post/King post on tie beam	King post on tie beam
Pole top structure	Tenon	Tenon/mortise	Tenon	Tenon
Main house size		Strut	Strut-King post	
- Width side		5.00 m	5.00 m	
- Length side		2.55 m/a span	2.55 m/a span	
	King post on Tie beam		King post on tie beam	King post on Tie beam
- Width side	3.60 m		4.00 m	3.13 m
- Length side	2.43 m/a span		2.56 m/a span	2.36 m/a span
Door position	Middle	First and third room	First room (east side)	Middle room
Window position (Width side)	No window on width side	2 on width sides	1 on width side or 2 on sides	No window on width side
		room panel (porchside)		
Wall panel installation	Modular wall system	Framing	Modular wall system	Modular wall system
Wall panel material	Typha/Wood	Bamboo/Wood	Typha/Wood/Bamboo	Typha/Wood/Bamboo
Sacred area location	Not definite	First room	First room	First room
Daughter's bedroom	First room	Third room	Third room	Third room

generation. However, with the changing social contexts, as a result, the two groups of Lao Vieng have different levels of adaptation, reflected in their different housing styles. The Lao Vieng Taku group has made a gradual adaptation; the more-than-100-year-old house demonstrates the pattern solution by combining the traditional Lao style with the Korat style, maintaining the same space but changing with new looks to blend in with the house style of the main culture, resulting in the introduction of Hybrid Architecture. Although the later houses are rather built in the Korat

style, still the space inside has the same traditional pattern to meet the use of space according to the Lao culture. This corresponds with Lawrence's idea that "the construction of architectural hybrids became more common, as links between the settlers and their Motherlands were weakened." (Lawrence, 1990, p. 254). In contrast, the Lao Vieng Japoh have shown faster adaptation to the Thai Korat culture, due to their more extensive cultural intercourse. The houses of the Lao Vieng Japoh show greater reception to the Korat house style.

**Figure 5** Comparison of interior utility space between Lao Vieng Taku (A) and Japoh (B)

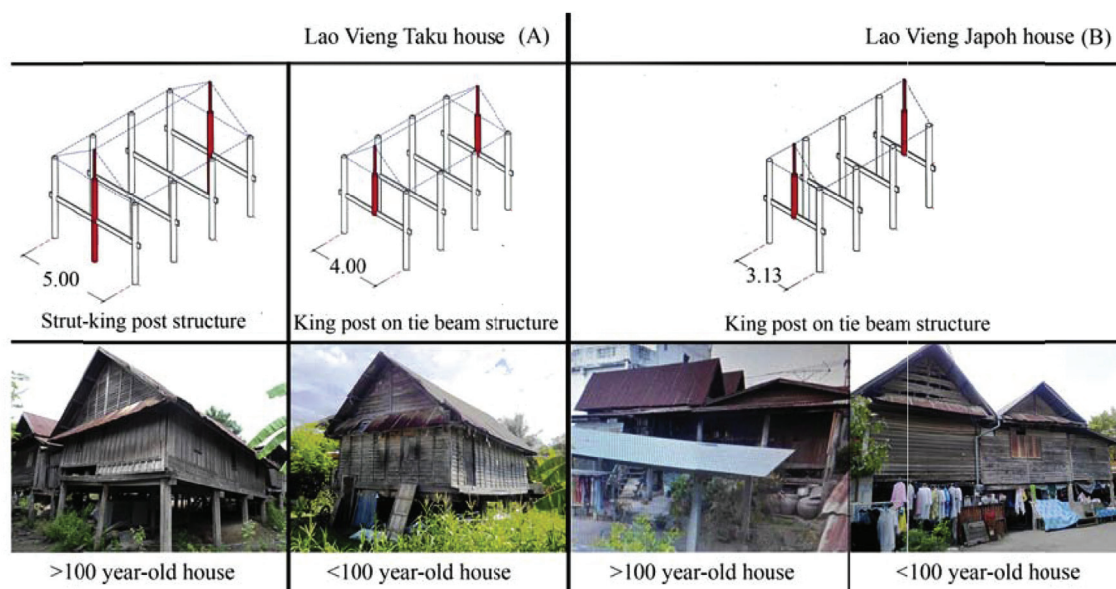


Figure 6 Comparison of structure and house between Lao Vieng Taku (A) and Japoh (B)

Cultural Intercourse Analysis and Identification the Contributing Variables

When analyzing the factors that affect this phenomenon, compared with historical events, when the relationship between Thailand and neighboring countries was clearly understood in “they” and “us” terms, and as evidenced by the long struggle for the occupation of manpower and resources, it was clear that the houses aged more than 100 years of the Lao Vieng Japoh are more similar to the Korat style. This is due to the level of differences in social interaction under political power and the socio-cultural contexts as main factors for the two groups to interact differently with the main cultural group. As was evident, the Japoh community's location is closer to the administrative center that has contact with the city of Nakhon Ratchasima, This has led to a close relationship with the military and politicians, as well as an opportunity to have contact with the Thai Korat people of the ruling class, such as the nobles and civil servants along with locations residing near trade routes, which are considered the connection point of various social and cultural groups. Moreover, being considered small groups of Lao cultural society surrounded by other groups and especially the Thai Korat, caused a cultural interaction with the main culture, by assimilating one's culture in harmony; so as not to be considered as outsiders. The development of residential houses represents social status and equality, so that houses were built to look similar to the Korat house style. In contrast, the Lao Vieng Taku, as a large group Lao cultural society residing far from the city center, were less affected and often conducted their daily lives only in their social groups. Furthermore, because of the difficulties on traveling any distance, there was a lesser degree of cultural intercourse with the main culture. Thus, they still express

and retain the traditional Lao Vieng style for house building.

For a comparison of the less-than-100-year-old houses built during the post-World War I period, Thailand was at the time affected by the expansion of political power from the West. This resulted in a reduction in “they” and “us” attitudes between the neighboring countries and the state policy was more focused on creating nationalism to build political stability. Consequently, the houses of both groups changed in architectural style to become more like the Korat pattern. The Lao Vieng Japoh adjusted the door entrance to the bedroom from the first to the middle room, while the Lao Vieng Taku reduced the size of the bedroom area and reduced the range in the width of the house, cut off the strut and left only the king post, affecting the space and the interior zoning in the house. These modifications are assumed to have occurred as both groups moved more toward the Korat house pattern, because they had a sense that they were Thai due to being more integrated into Thai society, according to the national unification of the state in each particular era. The inclusion of all races to become the Thai people occurred from 1899 onwards, according to Thai national policy to force Siam to express Thai culture officially to prevent the invasion of colonialism from the Western nations. Together with the Declaration of the Surname Act in 1913, minorities began to feel that they were part of Thai society. Finally, in 1932, the year of democratic transition, they obtained the right to Thai citizenship, educational opportunities, occupation, and benefits including the declaration of nationalism in 1939, which required all the ethnic groups to be Thai by encouraging them to express themselves in Thai culture. It can be said that the process of assimilating the people to be Thai people in each era promoted and raised the awareness for the Lao people of both groups to be more aware of being

Thai. During this period (about four generations after immigration and first settlement), they changed their way of life in line with the social contexts and the values of the majority of people in that period as well, including the architectural changes to the housing style as mentioned above (Figure 7).

In addition, there were advances in materials and construction technology that came with the country's development, especially after World War II, such as zinc, nails, and construction tools, most of which were transported by train from Bangkok to Nakhon Ratchasima when the service opened in 1900. From this time onward, the two groups of Lao Vieng applied these changes to their house construction. Different architectural elements and structures differ according to the way of each construction worker in each community, such as the forms of pole tops, wall panels, and roof elements that became less complicated. In addition, the Thai government's population expansion policy (1942–1962) encouraged Thai people to

have as many children as possible in order to increase the labor force and pioneer agricultural areas that still relied on the original production system. This policy was widely adopted throughout the country, including by these two groups of Lao Vieng. As a result, each family had a larger number of members and was integrated into a larger family, so they adapted new residential housing models, such as two-gabled and three-gable houses, or attaching annexes to the main house in various ways in order to have enough space for added members. With the introduction of new construction materials and construction technology, the two groups of Lao Vieng gradually adjusted to these changes at almost the same time. However, the Lao Vieng Taku still retained more of the conventional Lao Vieng pattern than the Lao Vieng Japoh, such as the positioning of the doors and windows, area, space, and zoning. The researcher indicates this was specifically due to social interaction, especially the variation in location and socio-cultural context (Figure 8).

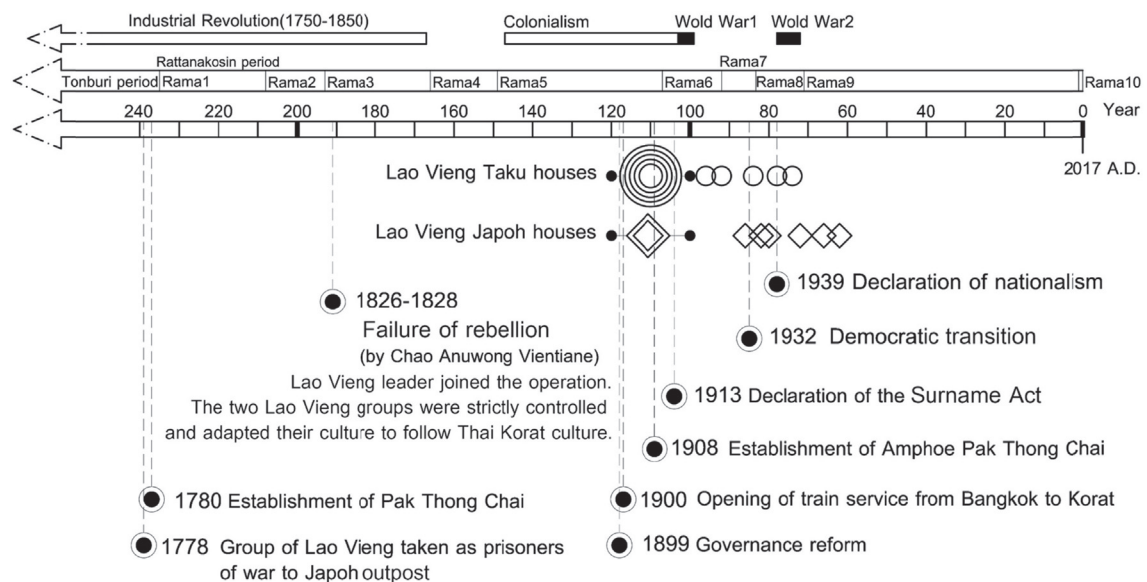


Figure 7 Historical moments that occurred in the case-study area under the research context

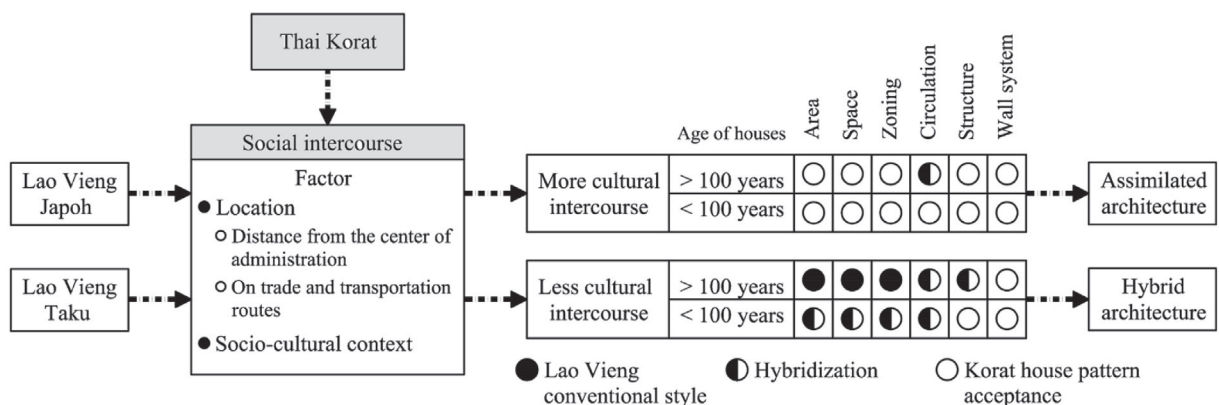


Figure 8 Factors affecting differences between the two groups' houses due to cultural intercourse

Conclusion

The same ethnic groups that immigrated to the same area of governance could have cultural intercourse with the administrative center and the former large population at different levels. This was due to location variables, and the different micro-external environments, while the macro-external environments was similar. As a result, these groups have adapted to different levels in the recent historical period that is reflected in the housing style. In the pre-nationalist or post-nationalist period when the central government was added to the definition of a socio-economic center, there was a greater chance for the group residing closer to the center of governance to be assimilated culturally into the main culture, with less attachment to the original ethnic group as appears in the Lao Vieng Taku and Lao Vieng Japoh communities. This study indicates a common phenomenon that applies to human beings as they normally have to adapt to the new context when they migrate to settle down in order to be accepted by the inhabitants and to feel as belonging through physical and cultural adaption. In overview, the results of this study provide historical data that can be used to conserve and develop the Korat House in the case study area.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgments

Thanks are recorded to The Center for Research on Plurality in the Mekong Region (CERP), Khon Kaen University for financial support in publishing this article.

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