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(NOT) ON YOUR BIKE: HOW URBAN LAOS DOESN'T MOVE

ABSTRACT

Laos is a country of seven million people in Southeast Asia, with its largest urban centre having a population of just under one million people. At a time of rising inflation and growing awareness of climate change, this article investigates how urban residents travel, why people do and do not cycle in urban Laos, and how cycling is promoted and crucially, by whom. Drawing on interviews, survey data, and other participant observation, this paper notes that the number of bikes in Laos is increasing, and cycling for fitness is becoming more widespread, which can be linked to aspiration and conspicuous consumption, but that promotion of cycling is driven largely by outsiders as part of broader attempts to develop Laos according to their own agendas. This is demonstrated by a European Union campaign which encouraged people to commute by bike, which was largely unsuccessful in Laos.

Keywords: *cycling, Laos, mobilities, development, infrastructure, commuting*

INTRODUCTION

On 16 June 2022, the European Union in Laos began a campaign promoting healthy, active travel which promises benefits to both people and the environment. The #BikeLikeABoss campaign encouraged participants to share photos of themselves cycling to work and to encourage friends and co-workers to do the same.[1] People participating in the campaign were urged to commute by bike, and in their work clothing with the EU Ambassador to Laos reminding participants of the importance of wearing a safety helmet whilst cycling via a post on Facebook. The campaign was promoted by influencers, members of foreign embassies, and international organisations. It was also covered in the Lao press in both Lao and English, promoting the additional benefit that not needing petrol would also mitigate against the ongoing crisis of fuel shortages, high prices, and rising inflation that have marked life in Laos throughout 2022 and beyond, with inflation hitting 40% in February 2023.[2]

I arrived in Laos in July 2022 for fieldwork after an absence of more than three years largely brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. During the time I was stuck in Europe, I had shifted from a person who commutes to work slowly on a bike to become a keen cyclist. Hoping to combine work with leisure, as well as needing a means of transport that did not rely on petrol, I decided to take a bike with me to think through what it means to

Figure 1. Caption: Poster for the #BikeLikeABoss campaign

different people to travel well in contemporary Laos. Arriving in the cultural centre of Luang Prabang, my fieldwork site for another project, I noticed more bikes being ridden around the historic city centre by people in fitness gear than I had ever seen before. With such a rise in bike use, I wondered whether transport habits in Laos were changing and, if so, what drove these changes. How do bikes feature in the imagination of urban movement and for what purpose? In other words, how can we explain the rise in bike use? I also wondered how many urban residents had any interest or even any knowledge of #BikeLikeABoss or any similar ideas about sustainable or green travel and if, in the urban Lao imagination, this has anything to do with how people move.

Scholars have long recognised that particular forms of mobility are interconnected with notions of modernity. As Harvey (2018) notes, the promise of mobility is potent, not only in terms of the physical object on or through which one moves, but because of the potential that it represents (see also Anand, Gupta and

Appel 2018; Hirsh and Mostowlansky 2022). In Laos specifically, High (2013, 2014) has noted a potent connection between consumption practices and notions of being a modern citizen.

But, whose version of modernity, and what does that look like in terms of mobility? This article considers why some forms of mobility in urban Laos are attractive and utilised over and above others, and what influences these. My central argument here is that campaigns to change how urban transport is done are largely driven by outsiders promoting their own visions of what movement in Laos should look like, and that this almost, if unconscious, imperialist logic has a mixed reception amongst the local population. I begin with providing the context to mobility in urban Laos and then present contextual data on how people actually move. I argue here that cycling in urban Laos is a desirable and desired mode of movement, but not in all situations. To do this for fitness or leisure is fine and connects with internationalist agendas promoting sustainability and awareness of climate change, but to do it out of economic necessity remains stigmatised, which links to social class and internationalist notions of class. Such an understanding demonstrates a link between cycling for fitness to notions of entrepreneurism or a neoliberal logic of bodily discipline and improvement, again a connection between movement and modernity, and the role of outsiders in promoting their specific agendas.

This article is based on fieldwork conducted in Northern Laos in 2019 and more recently for two months in July and August 2022. Both of these periods of fieldwork focused on larger projects, but throughout both of them and my earlier PhD fieldwork in 2015–2016, I had owned and utilised a bike to get around. In 2022, I decided to focus on this specifically and combined interviews with around ten individuals (both cyclists and non-cyclists) aged between 18 and 40, survey responses from five participants who identified as cyclists (some of whom were also interviewed), four surveys of traffic movements in Luang Prabang and Vientiane, and participant observation with local cyclists based in Luang Prabang.[3]

LAOS: FOR THE MOTORBIKE, NOT THE CAR

Laos, defined by the United Nations as a least developed country in 1971, is a largely rural society with much of its population dependent upon subsistence rice farming. Its population of almost seven million people live primarily along the river valleys, which cut through otherwise mountainous terrain. Laos was a colony of France, a colonisation that lasted just over five decades until 1953, leaving behind minimal infrastructure and very few roads outside major cities and roads connecting those same cities.

Unsurprisingly, the main cities are also located in the lowland valley areas. Vientiane, the nation's capital, is home to just under one million people and constitutes by far the largest urban area. From Vientiane, crossing into Thailand is straightforward by private motor vehicle or bus; until the opening of the high-speed Laos–China Railway in December 2021, Vientiane was also the only place in Laos with a train station, from which approximately 5 km of railway connected Laos to Nong Khai in Northeast Thailand operated by the State Railway of Thailand. Vientiane has a public bus network, and elsewhere the public transport connections are made by private shared minibuses or trucks with benches in the back known as *songthaew*. Even in Vientiane, associates commented that they do not use the buses because of the unreliability of the service, or the lack of comfort, ease of mobility of people and stuff, and personal safety.

This is not to say that public transport has never been a feature of public policy. Further north, the cultural centre of Luang Prabang has had seemingly endless debates about how to transport large numbers of visitors around and in and out of its historic centre. Luang Prabang is a city of approximately 50 000 people and is the premier tourist destination of the country with just over 860 000 visitors in 2019 before borders largely closed due to COVID-19 (Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism 2019). Luang Prabang was recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1995, and concerns were increasingly raised about large petrol-powered vehicles within the heritage space. One solution was an E-tuk-tuk scheme, a feature of urban life during an earlier period of my research. These were intended to travel frequently along regular routes, for which customers could buy a ticket. But, when I returned to Luang Prabang in 2022, the scheme had been abandoned. I did, however, notice signs for a bus to the train station. When I asked about this, I was told that it was unreliable and better to go by motorbike to avoid any risk of missing the train. When I called the contact telephone number, I was told that the bus was not running that day. It was entirely possible to buy a ticket for a shuttle minibus service going from train to town, but the other way around was seemingly impossible. This led a Lao interlocutor to comment that Luang Prabang, and Laos generally, is a place for motorbikes because they are quick, convenient, and relatively cheap. This is important because a private car is financially out of reach for much of the population, which survives on just a few dollars a day (Alston 2019). But, even if buying a vehicle is not possible for many, amongst my interlocutors many identified doing so as a future aspiration.

How people, and goods, get around cities is, therefore, an important and growing question, especially in the absence of a public bus network outside Vientiane. Motorcycles and motorcycle taxis are commonplace in Lao cities, as are shared or private tuk-tuk or *songthaew*. There is now an app to hire taxis on demand, which also features moto-taxis in some cities, although coverage is limited to the larger urban areas.[4] App-based services are not only limited to moving people. A food delivery service, Food Panda, is popular throughout Lao cities and promises quick delivery from a variety of urban eateries.[5] In the two months during which I lived in Luang Prabang in 2022, I used Food Panda frequently. Every single time, my food was delivered via a motorcycle courier, and I would see riders often hanging around the city centre waiting for orders. There is no concept here of cycling as work or as an integral tool for work, as seen elsewhere (Murthy and Sur 2022).

COUNTING VEHICLES IN LAO CITIES

Returning to Laos after several years away, I was keen to test and retest my assumptions on how urban Laos is moving, especially at a time of climate change, post-pandemic recovery, and especially for journeys in an urban environment.[6] I had long been the target of teasing by bemused Lao friends about why I preferred to cycle around Luang Prabang city, when even as a PhD student, surely, I could have afforded a motorbike. To me, the logical way to proceed was to count traffic, quite literally. Accordingly, I chose a main road leading to a major intersection in the centre of Luang Prabang and counted vehicles heading towards and away from the junction. I repeated this twice at the same time of day on two weekday mornings, noting that the second time, weather conditions were very wet. I also did this once in the afternoon. Finally, I also repeated this observation in central Vientiane on one occasion, a Saturday morning.[7]

	Luang Prabang 21 July 2022, 7:15–7:45	Luang Prabang 05 August 2022, 7:15–7:45	Luang Prabang 10 August 2022, 14:30–15:00	Vientiane 20 August 22, 10:30–11:00
Motorbikes	**394**	**209**	**302**	**316**
Cars and trucks	**47**	**55**	**91**	**428**
Tuk-tuks	38	31	28	15
Minivans	35	20	15	15
Bikes	11	4	7	0

Table 1. Results of traffic survey in Luang Prabang and Vientiane in July and August 2022

Even with this very limited amount of data, it is clear that a large number of urban movements still rely on motorcycle in Luang Prabang. Some motorcycles were likely E-scooters, but I am confident that these are relatively small in number. I photographed the motorbikes in a parking lot (see Figure 2) and very few appear to be electrically powered.[8] For motorbikes, this is particularly interesting at a time when the purchase of a basic motorbike has almost trebled in price in the last two years. Interestingly, my numbers from Vientiane show much higher use of car traffic, which may indicate that Vientiane is a more car-friendly city centre or more materially affluent or both, and a far more comprehensive study on movements and

Figure 2. Caption: Parking at the Luang Prabang Night Market in August 2022 (photo by the author)

motivations for modes of transport is long overdue. What is clear is that, when we combine motorcycle and car use, we can see that petrol-powered transport remains the norm. Given that these observations took place in the heart of two urban centres, I suggest that this also demonstrates that one's own, primarily petrol-powered transport, remains prominent and the success of campaigns for more active transport or public transport schemes remains limited.

(NOT) MOVING BY BIKE

Of course, the bike is not new to Laos. Talking to older people who recall the period before the birth of the contemporary Lao state in 1975, I heard about basic bikes being used for the everyday transport of people and goods, including the transport of essential supplies during the Lao Civil War (1959–1975). One interlocutor, now in her late seventies, told me that one of the most spectacular road accidents she had ever seen occurred in the centre of Vientiane and involved a large number of bicycles and an even larger number of people. Here, the road functioned as a place of encounter where people who would not normally encounter each other do so. Then as now, this is not a place of equal encounter where, as Yazıcı (2013) notes, hierarchies of traffic are prevalent, and smaller road users are vulnerable to larger vehicles or those not obeying the traffic laws, identified as a common problem in Laos amongst all road users. Nevertheless, for shorter journeys, especially those made by young people, the bike is a visible feature of urban and rural Laos. In a more recent publication, Sengvandy (2019), writing about his childhood in a remote mountainous area in the 1990s, recalls that access to a bicycle for the first time in his life was a seismic moment in his childhood, and transformed mobility for him and his family, allowing them to go places more quickly than had ever been possible on foot. After teaching himself to ride a bike along the streets of his village, he continued to cycle during essential trips for many years.

This picture of cycling as a necessity especially for younger people is still replicated in many areas of Laos. Outside various youth projects in Luang Prabang when classes or activities were taking place, I would often see lines of parked single-speed bikes. But, this did not explain who I could see cycling around the centre of Luang Prabang, usually in the early morning and evening. To learn more, I took to the road and cycled after the bikes I would see passing by, typically ridden by people in Lycra under the age of about forty. These cyclists were welcoming to me, another Lycra-clad cyclist, and told me that, for them, this was mostly about physical exercise. They suggested that a reason for the upsurge in people cycling for fitness related to people seeking new forms of exercise, especially after heavy restrictions on the freedom of movement during COVID-19.

When I talked about cycling more generally in Laos with Lao friends, my interlocutors told me repeatedly and firmly that in general, going places by bike is done for fitness, or for short journeys such as to the markets by older people or, most likely, children cycling to school. They were keen to stress that in the case of going to school, to do this as a teenager, especially on a basic bike, is an expression of poverty and should be avoided if at all possible. Otherwise, 'people will think you are poor'. To go to school by bike or on the back of a friend's bike because no other option is available is not a good look for many Lao. Along a similar vein, many Lao friends found it difficult to believe that I own neither a motorbike nor a car and prefer to go by bike whenever possible.

I began a conversation with one young interlocutor by asking, 'What do *you* think is the best way to travel in Laos?' He responded with no hesitation that, in his opinion, by plane, train, and car, and in that order. When I asked why, he told me that these methods are convenient, fast, and, in the case of the train, something new for him. He then asked me what I was doing later that day, and when I said that I planned to visit a village around 10 km away by bike, he wasted no time in questioning why I considered this a good way to travel: 'But *why*? It is so *slow*.' When I asked what he thought about groups of visitors to Luang Prabang hiring bikes and cycling around the city, he said that these people are different; they are just visiting and are not local. Bike hire for tourists is common within the historic centre, even though a lack of bikes with gears makes it difficult to travel very far or fast. For many visitors, moving slowly and appreciating traditional culture are major parts of the appeal of a visit to Luang Prabang generally, even if this is not always shared, or understood, by residents (Berliner 2012; Wilcox 2020).

Travelling slowly was something positive in the opinions of the members of a local cycling club. Its founder had returned to Luang Prabang from studying overseas, during which time he had experienced cycling for leisure and was keen to share this with friends upon his return. I had met this young person on a previous visit to Laos and had started following him on a fitness app. I noticed that he and others (all male and under the age of thirty) would cycle after work and at weekends over distances of mostly under 50 km. Once in Laos, I joined them for an evening ride, taking along the bike I had brought with me, which led to a long discussion about wish lists for future bikes and who looks cool on what sort of pedal-powered machine. As we left Luang Prabang behind us, I asked them about their experiences of cycling in Laos. All were clear that, when they cycle, they are often assumed to be foreign. 'People shout "hello" at us when we are cycling.

Figure 3. Caption: Author on an evening ride with local cyclists. Photograph by Her Vang and reproduced with permission.

They speak to us in English. They are surprised when they realise that we are also Lao, just like them.' This was my experience too, although, because I am so obviously foreign, it was not a big surprise to me when people greeted me with 'hello' or '*falang*', the Lao term for white foreigner. One local cyclist shared with me that cycling had allowed him to see places in new ways because, when one travels slowly, one has more time to appreciate the scenery in a way that is not possible when travelling at speed.[9]

This interlocutor talked at length about cycling and being a cyclist as part of his identity. He bemoaned that, one evening, he had not had enough time to change into what he termed his 'cycling uniform' before joining us on a group ride. Cycling as a marker of difference and a reflection of consumption choices is something I came across elsewhere as well. When I cycled 8 km out of the city to a Lao dentist, the receptionist offered to take care of my bike inside the surgery while I was having my teeth checked, explaining that he is also a cyclist and, therefore, understood the importance of bike security, but also enjoyed looking at a bike he had not seen before. At the end of the appointment, he asked if he could take a photo of my bike to show other cyclists with whom he had started to cycle during the evenings after the lockdown ended. 'They will be so jealous. They will think that it is my bike and ask me where I got it'.

Figure 4. Caption: The author's bike in Laos (photo by the author).

When I asked cyclists about from where they got their bikes, they explained that the cyclist who had returned from abroad had brought several with him via Thailand, while others were bought or received from foreigners who had left or borrowed and then shared between them. When I offered to leave behind some cycling accessories and a kit I had brought with me including a pair of functional basic sports pedals, these were very gratefully received. I was told they would be distributed amongst people keen to start cycling or bikes in need of spare parts, of which there are many and most spare parts need to be procured from Thailand, or less frequently, Vietnam. I also learned a considerable amount from them about appropriate cycling equipment for Laos. Because evenings are short there, riding after work means cycling in the dark, which they said also works well because the temperatures are cooler. However, this means that a good pair of lights is essential, and recommended I buy a flashing rear light for maximum visibility.[10]

Among all of the Lao cyclists I met, I asked about why they cycled and why they thought other people do not. None were aware of the #BikeLikeABoss campaign, but all described themselves as enjoying cycling. They were keen to encourage others to do so as practices that care for the environment and health. One explained, 'Last year I went cycling across the Lao northern provinces for my last teenage years and one reason for it was also to inspire the young people to be interested in cycling.' In the cycling club, several told me that they are concerned about climate change and regarded cycling as a way to do something good for the planet. It is worth pointing out that all the cyclists I travelled with are male and although they did sometimes talk about women that they knew who are interested in cycling, this is unusual. They mentioned the difficulties of encouraging more women and girls to cycle partly due to questions of safety, but also due to aesthetics, since many women reject ideas of being outside in the sun for long periods if it is not necessary. One cyclist, who described himself as a close friend of the Lao student who had returned from overseas with a bike, was rather surprised when I suggested that another reason for a lack of women's cycling might be access to some women-specific kits, given that it is cut rather differently to reflect differences in the female physique. They also talked of the difficulties around the shortage of quality bikes in Laos, which makes travelling by bike difficult in mountainous terrain, even for short distances.

We see here an enthusiasm for cycling, but not for making daily journeys to school or work, in which case a stigma that one is doing it because one is poor remains prevalent. When I asked why more people did not cycle, most cyclists told me that there is not yet a big enough culture of cycling in Laos and situated this as a more significant barrier to cycling than issues such as safer roads. When friends and associates saw me cycling, some were interested. But, in general, my interlocutors agreed that it is hard to cycle in Laos for functional rather than for fitness purposes, even if it is indeed a good way to save money. The climate is hot and contrary to the exhortations of the #BikeLikeABoss campaign, cycling in one's work clothing is a sure-fire way to arrive at work feeling rather sweaty and uncomfortable. One reaction to the EU campaign encouraging people to cycle to work was, 'Laos is too hot to do that. Imagine if you are a teacher or [have] other careers mingling with people. It is not fun. You will smell bad.' Another individual also dismissed the idea as not useful for Laos, and an idea conceived 'in an air-conditioned room'.

DRIVING (SPECIFIC) CHANGE FROM THE OUTSIDE

What do EU bureaucrats campaigning for cycle commuting and a Lao returnee encouraging his friends to take up cycling have in common? Other than enthusiasm for moving by pedal-powered transport, they are both forces seeking to change Laos based on ideas conceived somewhere else and then exported to Laos, often without much reference to Lao people, their agency, and their aspirations. One could well argue that, of course, green transport is not a bad idea *per se*, but the logic of outsiders promoting assertive agendas in the apparent best interests of someone else is a stark one. When we consider the ideas of others against the backdrop of Laos as a least-developed country and a long-standing recipient of overseas development aid, this is unsurprising. Phraxayavong (2009) noted that aid can constitute a proxy battleground, in which different actors attempt to realise often competing agendas. Regarding mobility specifically, Wollin (2023) notes that to think of how other people move and should move is an act of trying to order other people's mobilities in ways that the recipients of these messages may not share. As with the EU campaign for cycling in Laos, there is often a large gap between strategies for mobility planned in one place and what happens when they are transferred to another. Clearly, the campaign is not for everyone. Only those with a bike, a camera, and a reasonable level of digital literacy would be able to take part anyway. Furthermore, this is before we consider that, by encouraging people to document their cycle commute to work and in their work clothes, this means people have an actual job away from their home, but at a commutable distance and a need for specific work clothing.

Encouraging people to think or act 'like a boss' is worth pausing over and connects with notions of living well in the neoliberal world. It speaks directly to ideas of personal aspiration, and the notion that everyone should aspire to be more than what one is currently—in other words, to become something else. Of course, many people dream of becoming the CEO of a company or a boss, which is a perfectly acceptable position to which to aspire. Moreover, the figure of the boss is a special one, somewhat above or unique from others over whom that boss figure may have direction. In other words, to be a boss is a sort of space-making through a process of being and becoming *someone*. The class notions of the EU campaign come sharply into view here and could hardly be clearer.

Bosses also have purchasing power to have stuff, to use resources, and to be seen to be embodying this lifestyle of choice and possibilities. But, if cycling is not a choice, then it is unsurprising that cycling is rather unattractive to many people, especially if it is a marker of poverty or a low social status. During my PhD research in 2016, I went with some Lao colleagues to dinner after a work event. Everyone else moved off towards the dinner venue at speed down the road on their motorbikes whilst I was left cycling along with a female Lao colleague who told me that she felt sad that she had been left behind and that nobody wanted to go at the speed at which she was able to move. 'I have no money for a motorbike, so I have to cycle. Why are **you** cycling? I mean, it is nice that you ride with me, but still.' We arrived at the dinner around half an hour later than everyone else and this particular colleague walked in behind me and stayed with me all evening.

This notion of consumer goods as a representation of material affluence, or a lack

of it, mirrors work by High (2014). High's interlocutors in Southern Laos recognised that to be poor is to be cast aside or overlooked not only because of a lack of material possessions but also what one could achieve through a particular standing that accompanied understandings of what it is to be *someone* or to have a certain status in society. To have an expensive bike is the sort of thing a boss might have or an image a boss might covey. Even if the boss analogy falls short, these are the actions of someone who has choices. Several times, Lao friends asked to try out the bike that I had brought with me. I was told that my bike was somehow different from what is commonly available in Laos, which made cycling it for everyday use acceptable, particularly since it was pedalled by someone so obviously foreign.

The connection between the EU campaign and aspiration is not only about the tangible. A good person and good leader also takes care of themselves and values personal and bodily integrity (Lomborg and Frandsen 2016; West 2015). In a recent study, Beck and Nyíri (2022) note that, in the late socialist context, having opportunities to choose to do nothing or have free time are the essential markers of being middle class. More free time, in which one can go by bike wherever one wants, is exactly what my cyclist enthusiast interlocutors desire. One of the Lao cyclists often grumbled to me that he would love to ride his bike more, but just did not have time. For the cyclists who rode with me in Laos, they can choose to travel by bike any distance they want and, in so doing, they actively choose slower forms of travel as a way in which to spend their leisure time. Going back to the boss figure continues to provide a handy analogy, because bosses may well have exactly that sort of free time and the opportunities to use it for whatever life pursuits they choose.

There is a strong internationalist dimension in promoting specific visions of what it means to live and move well, which can hardly be overstated. This is the message that the EU campaign encouraging people to cycle is hoping to convey: that, in commuting by bike, one is a responsible citizen who cares for one's environment and, through regular physical exercise, also oneself. This is someone who has leisure time, pays attention to health and safety issues, and also takes personal responsibility for their own self and the wider environment, setting a good example in the process. The role of outsiders in promoting specific agendas in Laos can hardly be overstated. It is worth returning to how the EU ambassador used the campaign to remind people to cycle whilst wearing a helmet, a legal requirement for motorbike travel which many Lao still flout with regularity, regarding it as not a very serious matter. By contrast, the prevailing narrative from the outside is that awareness of these things and the associated action has become the hallmark of what it is to be a modern, or civilised, person. There is almost a neo-colonial logic here, in demonstrating that Lao people not only need to do more cycling, but also must do it *like this*.

I see a strong connection here between an apparently cringe-worthy slogan and common images of what it is to be part of modernity or of other people's specific aspirations for modernity, as well as the long journey to get there involving bikes and cycling helmets. My suggestion is that having the option to go by bike if one wishes to do so is also representative of having the means and the ability to make consumption and mobility choices, which are not necessarily available universally or are perceived not to be. While aspiration may be universal or near universal (Jackson 2011), the focus of those aspirations varies and remains diverse, even

Figure 5. Caption: EU in Laos Facebook post celebrating the ambassador's participation in the campaign.

when we only consider mobility. Amongst my interlocutors who still made urban journeys via motorbike, I asked them why this is, especially at a time when fuel is so expensive? Would you go less often with a motorbike or find another way to move about? One shared that he might make fewer journeys or try to go with a friend so that they could share the costs. 'I would not go by bike. To go to the city is too far and too hot.' Another said, 'Sometimes we just cannot go somewhere, or we just wait for a few days.' These voices are not convinced that cycling is synonymous with their versions of aspiration and desirable future-building.

VISIONS OF A BETTER CLIMATE

The cyclists who pedalled with me did not need the EU campaign and had found the inspiration to cycle from someone they knew well. Where they converged (albeit unknowingly) with the EU campaign was in their acceptance that this is a good idea, for themselves and the wider environment. They recognised that they had choices, and this is what they chose to do. One cyclist I met in Vientiane told me that he considered cycling to be better for himself, for the city, and for the environment. He was concerned about toxic air from the growing

number of vehicles, as well as space for bicycles to use the roads.

Elsewhere, some of the other cyclists identified that they were concerned about climate change. This reflects a wider growing awareness in Laos and comes at an interesting and important time when the Lao government is increasingly aware of the growing problems caused by climate change (Government of Laos 2021; Government of Laos 2019). The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) noted over a decade ago that, while Laos is not a major contributor to climate change, it is likely to be disproportionately affected by its consequences (Government of Laos 2009; Government of Laos 2021). In policy, Lao authorities have had a Climate Change Decree since 2019 (Government of Laos 2019), and recently confirmed a target for Laos to achieve net zero emissions by 2050 and are mainstreaming questions of climate change into all areas of life (Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment and Department of Climate Change 2020). This is particularly important, as Laos is becoming ever more vulnerable to extreme weather events, particularly droughts and flooding (Maniphousay 2022).

Taking responsibility for oneself, one's choices, and one's actions has become a common sentiment of our times. We are all, in different ways, encouraged to think about our consumption choices with regard to the planet and in terms of sustainability. Of course, these small actions will not address the damage made by major polluters in any meaningful way. But, this logic is apparent when we look at how movement is presented in Laos by outsiders if it is thought of as part of a larger picture: that is, as a personal commitment to do *something* to offset rising fuel prices, to take care of the planet and oneself, and to internalise the need to take small actions as a moral obligation, even if in light of how little Laos contributes to climate change being told to bike like a boss seems even more cringeworthy. Taking responsibility without much explanation as to what that means is a feature of the official Lao government policy on climate change, which now makes caring for the environment and mitigating the effects of climate change a task for the entire population.

The expanding policy landscape on climate change to which I referred above represents the acceptance of a problem that has come sharply into view albeit driven by outsiders and a top-down approach to dealing with it. Moreover, awareness of something is not always matched by action. Laos has a new high-speed train line linking Laos and China, but this is marketed more as a way to travel from one place to another quickly and as a way to complement air travel on the same routes, rather than primarily in environmental protection terms. Similarly, in July 2023, the food delivery business Food Panda, referred to above, ordered thirty E-scooters for deliveries in the capital and plans to expand this to one hundred before the end of 2023. In discussing this development, the managing director noted the importance of contributing to the success of meeting UNDP goals for the reduction of carbon emissions (Visapra 2023b). Thirty or even one hundred E-scooters is not a very large number, but demonstrates at least a token commitment by company bosses to small actions in the direction of addressing climate change. Again, a boss takes such matters seriously.

While the policy landscape of Laos shows an increasing awareness of climate change, this is not always mirrored in other areas of transport policy. The high-speed Laos–China Railway is marketed as a way to travel quickly to places where previous options to travel fast were limited to air travel alone. A new airport in Laos is set to open for passenger transport

in the coming months, close to an area of Laos that has a high amount of Chinese investment, something frequently criticised online mostly by foreigners, sceptical of the benefits of this sort of development and the associated environmental costs (Barney and Souksakoun 2022; Harlan 2021; Rowedder 2019; Visapra 2022).

I am not suggesting here that local people are not concerned about the environmental impacts. Instead, I am arguing that the promotion of certain forms of travel in terms of their environmental impact is absent from official statements and policies in Laos. Where links are made between transport and environmental issues, these come from outsiders and, here again, we see the role of outsiders in both creating messages of travel as a sustainable choice, but also as the audience of these messages. On the ground, climate change has appeared on the agenda, but exactly what people are supposed to be doing in relation to it remains unclear. Concrete promotion of actions, at least around transport and agendas of sustainability, does not come from the Lao authorities.

CONCLUSIONS

At the time of writing in mid-2023, seemingly nobody is making statements that they #BikeLikeABoss in Laos, with references to the campaign online all but a brief memory to those interested in such things. The lack of positive reception to the EU campaign and the number of cyclists remaining minuscule for anything other than fitness or commuting out of economic necessity might indicate how far certain outsiders consider Laos and its population to be. Perhaps a new campaign is forthcoming. By any reckoning, even in the days of 40% inflation, a meaningful alternative to moving around urban Laos by motorbike for everyday purposes has yet to be found. For leisure and exercise, the interlocutors who contributed to this article continue cycling, planning excursions to new places, and reporting that interest in what they do and where they go is increasing and from a wider variety of people. Several have added other fitness practices such as gym sessions to their exercise routines, and post about their fitness successes on social media. As I noted here, this is indicative of the conspicuous consumption of fitness activities as part of their leisure time. In other words, these interlocutors are finding their own ways to pursue their aspirations.

I have argued here that interest in cycling is increasing in Laos. The number of bikes on the roads in urban areas is increasing, but this interest remains largely driven by outsiders at least initially, and there is some way to go towards expanding the culture of cycling in Laos. Importantly, interest in cycling relates to cycling for fitness, not everyday commuting. I argued here that this is related to what leisure time people have and what choices they have in spending that time. Most everyday journeys continue by motorbike or by car, although further research is needed on these patterns, especially around how this varies in different cities. I have also demonstrated here that, whilst official concerns are becoming more prevalent in relation to climate change, these are not linked to modes of mobility amongst the everyday population. There is no revolution in bikes, specifically as a future green transport for a wide variety of journeys.

I left Laos after two months of research and cycling at the end of August 2022 having learned a considerable amount about how Lao people do and do not move. Throughout that period, I found people bemused at although helpful towards a large, white, middle-aged foreigner taking to Lao roads on a sporty bike.

Having found the logistics of taking a bike in and out of Laos by air on the national airline relatively straightforward, I suggested to the airline via Facebook that they do a feature in their magazine about Laos as a cycling destination for tourists. The airline magazine is owned and operated by elite Lao, who showcase aspects of Laos to an audience of largely middle-class Lao and foreigners. I realise that my action plays entirely into the arguments I have advanced here, namely of foreigners promoting their agendas for improvements to Laos, whether or not it is really of interest to Lao people. But I hoped that it might bring in much-needed revenue at a time when many Lao people would appreciate some additional income. My suggested intervention went acknowledged, but entirely unanswered.

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NOTES

1 See Chinda Boutdavong (2022) for an example of the campaign and details of coverage.
2 Inflation rose steadily throughout 2022, but this represents a new high (Visapra 2023a).
3 I have extended the notion of the walking interview here (Evans and Jones 2011), utilising what I term the cycling interview. I agree with Evans and Jones that what people say may be influenced by where they say it, noting that some of my participants were exceptionally enthusiastic about cycling while we were cycling, but as keen cyclists generally, they were similarly optimistic off the bike.
4 The Loca Lao app is available in Lao and English (https://loca.la).
5 Food Panda Laos is available in Lao, English and Mandarin (https://www.foodpanda.la/en/).
6 Frustrated residents of Vientiane took to social media again in August 2022 to complain about fuel shortages and high prices. See, for example, Phonevilay (2022).
7 In Luang Prabang, I positioned myself outside Joma Bakery in Baan Houaxieng, watching traffic heading in both directions around the busy intersection. In Vientiane, I sat in Patuxay Park facing the Ministry of Agriculture watching traffic coming along Lane Xang Avenue from the direction of the Presidential Palace. In all situations, I did not count people walking, simply because it was too difficult to keep track of slow-moving people and faster-moving vehicles at the same time and my focus was on wheeled transport. Further research is needed to ascertain the number of people walking and their motivations. Additionally, further research can and should focus on how many motorbikes have passengers.
8 At the time of writing, a second forum on electrical mobility had concluded in Vientiane. Whether this will produce meaningful changes is a vital area of research in the coming years. See Advertorial Desk (2023).
9 This group has ambitious plans for multiday tours across Laos and even beyond. Despite their enthusiasm and aptitude for bikes, none of them used a bike to travel to work or a place of study.
10 This is advice that I still need to follow through on before any further research, as such a light system is illegal where I live. The advice about lights made me smile, as some years earlier, I had had to source a set from Vietnam in view of these being unobtainable in Laos.

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