

# Wat Phou, Vat Phou, Vat Phu, Wat Phu?

## World heritage can also contain a linguistic heritage

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- October, 2015 -

Wat Phou, Vat Phou, Vat Phu, Wat Phu: how should the name of this famous site near Champasak be spelt in English or in French? Just as the name of the province can take one 's' or two, there are no less than eight different ways to write these three words.

Champasak with two 's' is the French spelling, originating with the ancient name of Bassac. In English it is spelt with one 's'. So far so good, although things get complicated further on.

Using Latin letters, the temple name shows up for the first time in travel writing by a 22 year old explorer, Louis De Carné, who joined the Mekong Exploration Commission, initiated by the governor of Cochinchina. In the notes which he published in 1869, he calls the temple Vat Phou. Vat for temple and Phou for mountain.

The official text, published in 1873 by Francis Garnier, the ship's lieutenant who was also a member of the same mission as Louis De Carné uses the spelling Wat Phou. Here we have two Frenchmen, writing in French, who created the very first

spellings of the this name using a style that many today would qualify as influenced by the English language.

Six years later, in 1879, Dr. Jules Harmand, another erudite Frenchman, used the spelling Wât-Phou, adding a circumflex. There is no doubt that the addition of this little hat, of Greek-Latin origin, was not even slightly influenced by Perfidious Albion.

In 1901, Etienne Aymonier published his explorer's notes with the same spelling, Vat Phou, as originally used by Louis De Carné. On the map he drew of the Bassac region, the place name Vat Phou is clearly marked. This spelling also corresponds to the choice made by Louis Finot, the first director of the French School of Asian Studies (École française d'Extrême-Orient) when it published its second bulletin (the BEFEO) in 1902.

If the above mentioned examples show that the first word can carry certain nuances, the word Phou on the other hand was always spelt the same way until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The spelling Vat Phu came into use with the arrival of Etienne Lunet de Lajonquière in the EFEO when his inventory was published in 1907.

The transliteration of the 'ou' sound using only a 'u' exists in Vietnamese. This new choice was also in line with phonetic practices which were just then beginning to be taught.

The most thorough scientific study of the temple by Henri Parmentier officialises the new spelling 'Vat Phu', as can be seen in editions of the BEFEO published in 1912 and 1913. Later on, however, with an eye to phonetic practice, Parmentier used the spelling 'Wât Ph'u'. The present day phonetic spelling would be [wâtp<sup>h</sup>ú:].

George Cœdes, in his study of the Vat Luong Kau stele, published in the 48<sup>th</sup> edition of the BEFEO in 1956, uses the spelling 'Vat P'hu'. He thus gives an answer since the "Phu" spelling linked, with no apostrophe, is unsatisfactory since the 'ph' can be pronounced as an 'f', as in Diên Biên Phu, the phonetic spelling of which is [diə'n biən fū].

The solution proposed by George Cœdes is the one closest to its phonetic spelling. The "P'hu" allows one to pronounce the 'p' and the expiring 'h' whilst avoiding any confusion with the 'f' sound. Did this solution seem too sophisticated? The fact is that it was not taken up by other writers.

Some authors prefer staying loyal to the texts written by the first explorers. Henri Marchal, another great architect and Ancient Cambodian specialist, used the old ‘Vat Phou’ spelling. The historian Pierre Lintingre also used this form in an article he published in 1974 in the French revue *Histoire d’Outre-Mer*.

Other articles, since the one penned by Marcel Dericourt in 1962, in the 50<sup>th</sup> edition of the BEFEO, Jacques Dumarcay in the 79<sup>th</sup> edition of the BEFEO in 1992, followed by the recent articles written by Christine Hawixbrock or Michel Lorillard use the ‘Vat Phu’ spelling in line with Parmentier’s first texts.

In the Lao language, the vowel representing the “ou” sound can be either long or short. Phu (ໂ ອຸ ອຸ ມ່), meaning ‘mountain’ takes the long pronunciation, with an emphasis on the vowel ອຸ ມ່. The same vowel with a short pronunciation is written as ອຸ ມ່, and means geyser or water jet. In this way, the Nam Phou - the fountain in the centre of Vientiane - is pronounced with the short ‘ou’ in order to express that it is gushing from the earth.

Things become complicated when it comes time to translate these subtleties into Latin script. The Romanization of the Lao language during the French time, and as it is still taught to school children in Laos, uses ‘u’ to express the long sound and ‘ou’ for the short sound. In this context, it is only normal to write Vat Phu when talking about the mountain temple and Nam Phou for the fountain.

This explanation only makes sense in the perspective of maintaining Laos’ French heritage. The new American Romanization, which has come to the fore today, proposed the use of ‘ū’ for the long sound and ‘u’ for the short sound. In this way, the long and short sounds are inversed. Traditional phonetic instruction was upset by the Anglo-Saxon influence and the development of tourism. The Lao themselves abandoned the traditional “ou” when they chose to write the name Luang Prabang.

The preference of French researchers for the ‘u’ is not the fruit of English influence, even though at first blush the use of ‘u’ does look more English than the French ‘ou’. Strangely enough, most English language publications use the ‘Vat Phou’ spelling. English speakers have a weakness for the traditional spelling, possibly in order to add a cultural and historical touch to this mythical place.

Or, would this be because “Phu” is too easily confused with the [fũ] sound in Vietnamese? Another possibility is that they have adopted this form because it is always on the maps of Laos and milestones. Thus the general staff map of the US army from 1954 kept the “Phou” spelling to designate mountains.

It has been said that after the 1975 Revolution, the Lao authorities suppressed certain letters from the alphabet because they sounded too French. The name of Saravanne Province thus officially became ‘Salavan’, as can be seen on the 1983 military map. The ‘ou’ was, however, not affected by this change. Streams are still called ‘houay’ and mountains are still called ‘phou’. The Lao PDR Geographic Service still uses the ‘Vat Phou’ spelling.

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Turning our attention now to the consonant choices between V or W, Vat or Wat, both sounds do exist in French as well as English. In Lao the initial of Vat is written  $\text{ᨾ}^{\text{v}}$  and corresponds to the short V sound, although the pronunciation used is often between a V and a W. With very few exceptions, French publications prefer using a V. It is surprising that most English language literature also uses a V, although in cases such as Angkor Wat, the W is mostly used. In Laos, as in Cambodia, a Wat should sound more English than a Vat. How can one explain this Lao exception?

In truth, the complete translation of Vat Phu in English should be written as ‘Phu Wat’, like Angkor Wat, but nobody writes these two words in that order.

By putting the word ‘Wat’ first, the expression ‘Wat Phu’ borrows more from Thai culture than from the English language. Official documents written by the Lao authorities, in English, usually use the V for ‘Vat’, possibly in order to put the accent on their specific linguistic tradition and their differences with the Thai language.

The article by Michel Lorillard, written in English and published in *Before Siam in Thailand* uses the spelling ‘Wat Phu’. The researcher is continuing along the lines of Claude Jacques who had already used this spelling in his presentation at the Fiftieth International Thai Studies Conference in London in 1993. Was this due to an attachment to phonetics or rather a willingness to use an English form adapted

for the Thai reader? It should be noted that there is another site in Thailand called the ‘Wat Phu Tok’, which can lead to some confusion. Placing ‘Wat’ at the beginning may well suit the English-Thai mix, but it may not be well received in Laos.

Sokrithy Im and Surat Lertlum are Cambodian and Thai researchers respectively who have many good reasons for using the spelling ‘Wat’. When they write an article together in English on the sensitive subject of cross-border roads in the Khmer Empire, however, they decide to use the spelling ‘Vat Phu’ to designate on a map the end of the historical road leading from Angkor to Southern Laos. Have they made this choice in order to be in line with archaeological research carried out by the EFEO, or are they trying to not ruffle the feathers of their Lao colleagues by avoiding the use of the patriotically equivocal ‘Wat’?

The tourism industry seems to pay less attention to these cultural niceties and uses every possible spelling under the sun. The English edition of the Lonely Planet guide has opted for ‘Wat Phu Champasak’. The French edition of the same guide used ‘Vat Phu’, although it chooses to use the English spelling of Champasak with only one ‘s’. The term ‘Wat Phou’ is also used by tour operators as well as some English language guide books and maps. Perhaps this curious assemblage is the result of innovative marketing? The ‘Wat’ term is easily recognised by English-speaking and Thai clients, while ‘Phou’ is more unusual than ‘Phu’ which is also found in Thailand and Vietnam.

Another, and more trivial, explanation is that commercial firms vie for different names and try to acquire copyrights or Internet domain names. The plethora of spelling makes it easier to broaden the market. Some firms have given this reason when explaining their choice.

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Because Laos is an independent country, the authorities are free to decide not to use the ‘Vat Phu’ spelling chosen by French researchers or any other. In the final analysis, the original ‘Vat Phou’ used by map makers seems to satisfy the authorities responsible for culture. This 150 year old term is more rooted and permanent than its competitors. It is a pity, however, that in order to use it, the fact that it was created by a young French aristocrat during the reign of Napoleon III

has to be forgotten. Once the French Empire had disappeared, the Lao were able to claim ‘Vat Phou’ as their own.

A book dedicated to the restoration and preservation of Lao national heritage was published in 1999, under the direction of Francois Bizot, and edited in close cooperation with the Lao Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism. It is the only French-Lao bilingual edition published in Laos dedicated to this sensitive topic. This book refers back to talks given during an EFEO conference in 1996, in which all the articles surprisingly used the ‘Vat Phou’ spelling. This can only be a political choice. The EFEO knows full well that its researchers are increasingly using ‘Vat Phu’. It is also interesting to note that the article by Pierre Pichard uses ‘Vat Phou’ while the drawing he made for the article uses ‘Vat Phu’. The editor almost certainly imposed one spelling in the text, but could not modify the one other in the drawing.

The dossier used to request UNESCO Heritage status, drawn up by the Government in English, used this spelling which has been used ever since by UNESCO to designate the site in its classification acceptance and in later communiqués. Since then it has been taken up by all international experts writing in English, be they English, Australian, Chinese or Japanese.

The official UNESCO documents as translated into French maintain the ‘Vat Phou’ spelling. Is this a symbol of English language domination within UNESCO? The irony of history is that ‘Vat Phou’ is an old spelling which French researchers tried to file away and has come back in international documents, written in French, under the influence of the English language. A real Chinese puzzle!

The term ‘Vat Phu’, which was the result of scientific changes, may just end up as another French cultural exception. In the meantime, the original spelling, invented by a young French man, has come onto centre stage.

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France has lent its help to the Vat Phou Champasak World Heritage Site Management Office (WHSO) since 2007, using successive solidarity funds set up to protect and develop Lao heritage. Constant attention has been given to spelling. French texts and scientific data bases produced by WHSO in the framework of aid

given by the French Embassy use the 'Vat Phu' spelling so as to be in line with work carried out by EFEO researchers. English language productions use 'Vat Phou' because Anglo-Saxons have largely adopted this spelling which is used in official exchanges between the Lao authorities and UNESCO.

In the framework of this cooperation, each language has its own distinct flavour. It is, however, wonderful to note that thanks to one of history's little quirks, the English form – which is used today in political and institutional communication – is none other than an ancient French spelling.