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From the Village House to the Urban Markets: The Evolution of Silk Production in Laos

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This paper examines the development of silk textile production in Laos (Lao People's Democratic Republic). Silk textiles have important socio-cultural roles in Lao society, as markers of identity and wealth in contemporary Lao society as they had in the past. The various Tai ethnic groups, including the Lao, who have been the political majority of Laos since the 14th century CE, are the producers of silk textiles in Laos. Women are historically the producers of textiles for domestic consumption and exchange at the village level and beyond. Silk textiles signify special occasions such as weddings, religious events, and funerals and also represent wealth. The production of silk continues in contemporary Laos, but has evolved to become a commercial enterprise. Village women still weave silk textiles for domestic use but also for sale at the local market. Women living in urban areas have returned to weaving to produce textiles for the markets too. High-ranking government officials and foreigners who come to Laos either as tourists or diplomats have become the new patrons of elaborate silk textiles since the abolition of the monarchy. As long as the demand for Lao silk exists, the production of silk will continue even as Laos slowly modernizes.

Background

Laos is a developing country in mainland Southeast Asia sharing borders with Vietnam, China, Burma, Thailand, and Cambodia. In this country with a landmass half the size of France, the terrain is mountainous and intersected by numerous waterways. The rugged terrain has hindered but not excluded trade and communication, but these hindrances have assisted in changes to occur slowly.

Laos has a population of approximately 5.5 million people. The political majority, the Lao and other Tai ethnic groups, constitute two-thirds of the population. The Lao ethnic group is a member of the Tai-Kadai ethnolinguistic family. Tai groups inhabit parts of eastern India, southern China, Burma, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia. Other members of this group include the Thai of Thailand, the Shan or Tai Yai of Burma, and other groups such as the Black Tai, Phuan, and Tai Lue. Other Tai groups living in Laos include the Black Tai, Red Tai, White Tai, Phu Tai, Phuan, and Tai Lue. The Lao and other Tai groups living in Laos are primarily agriculturalists, practicing wet rice cultivation, and living in the lowlands or river valleys with good access the water.¹ To supplement their diet, they also grow other crops such as fruits and vegetables in separate garden plots next to the house. Lao women also cultivate cotton in plots outside the village.

The homes of the Lao and other Tai groups share similar architecture. The houses are elevated from the ground traditionally on wood pillars, which are now sometimes replaced with concrete. The loom and other household and farming tools are in this area underneath the house. Weaving for non-commercial production and other activities related to the weaving process may take place when the daily chores are completed in the late afternoon or evening. There appears to be more time for these activities during the

¹ Lao will refer to both Lao and other Tai ethnic groups in general.

dry season after then harvest, usually from January to April (See Chazee, 1999:27-49 for more information on general Tai characteristics).



The loom is kept underneath the house, which is elevated by wood or concrete pillars.
Ban Na Thong, Vientiane Province, Laos. Photo by Linda McIntosh

Textile Production in Laos

Lao women also practice sericulture. As with cotton production and other steps in producing textiles, women raise silkworms, meticulously feeding and cleaning the worms and then reeling the silk off of the cocoons. The silkworms may be kept in baskets and stored underneath the house near the loom or in the kitchen (see Photo 2). Mulberry leaves are fed to the worms several times a day and are chopped finely during the first days of the silkworms' existence (see Photo 3).

Women are also the primary producers of textiles in Laos. Lao girls begin to learn how to weave at the age of 5 or 6 years old. Their teachers are their mothers and other female relatives such as grandmothers and aunts. Girls begin to weave their own clothing, cloth for use by their family, and for the future. A young girl must begin to prepare textiles for her future marriage, including clothing, bedding, blankets, and gifts for her future in-laws and other family members. If the village is Buddhist, young girls and woman also provide textiles for religious purposes such as offerings of robes and bedding to the monks and ceremonial textiles to place in the temples. A Lao girl's weaving skill traditionally is a measure of her ability to be a good wife and member of society. Once a young woman could weave an extremely difficult technique, she is ready for marriage (Gittinger and Lefferts, 1992). Silk textiles are reserved for special occasions such as weddings, religious festivals, and traditionally as tribute paid to the royalty, and generally as a display of status and wealth. Silk and other textiles have been

traded with other ethnic groups living in Laos and in regional trade. Chinese silk thread and cloth continues to be imported into Laos.



Photo 2. Raising silkworms, Ban Na Thong, Vientiane Province

A major component of traditional dress of Lao women is the untailored tubeskirt or *sin*. The *sin* may be long enough to cover and wrap around the breasts while ending at the ankles. The motifs and the colors of the *sin* serve as ethnic identity markers. Other identity markers of dress include the head cloth and shoulder cloth. Some Tai groups wear a blouse similar to the Chinese and worn over the *sin* wrapped around the chest. The Lao royalty incorporated Chinese aspects of dress into their own clothing repertoire since Chinese silk and clothing was a valuable commodity.

However, major changes to traditional dress came in the late 19th century when Laos became a French colony. Lao women, living in urban areas, began to wear a blouse with their *sin*, which were beginning at the waist and tailored into a slim lower garment. Many urban abandoned the use of a head cloth. Lao men assimilated Western dress and now only wear traditional dress at their wedding (which is a combination of a

Western upper garment or jacket and a Lao lower garment or *chongkaben*).

Textile Production in Laos During the Twentieth Century

French presence in Laos also caused changes in local silk production. Demand for silk grew in urban areas as a modern bureaucracy was forming due to the colonial administration. Urban centers' populations expanded, but less urban women wove; thus, trade in silk and other textiles grew. Importation of Chinese silk increased and commercial production of silk textiles began to meet this growing demand. The textiles used in dress began to mimic the dress of the royalty. Lao royalty favored silk textiles with gold and silver thread, and these types of textiles were beginning to be worn by the

local population. Even today, a Lao bride and groom are royalty on their wedding day and dress accordingly.



Photo 3. View of inside the basket of young silkworms eating chopped mulberry leaves.
Photo by Linda McIntosh.

Despite the increase in demand for Lao textiles grew, recent publications stated that traditional textile production was dying. Duangduane Bounyavong (1996) conducted a survey on the number of stores selling hand-woven textiles in Laos from the 1960s until 1996. She found in the 1960s-1970s there were approximately twenty stores in the Morning Market, the major market of Vientiane, the capital of Laos, selling

hand-woven textiles (1996:632). Even after the revolution, the number of stores selling hand-woven textiles including silk grew. From 1975 until 1985, there were forty stores in the morning market, and in the next ten years the number grew to over 100 stores selling textiles (Duangduane, 1996:632).

After the communist revolution in December 1975, textile production persisted. The new government encouraged Lao women to wear traditional dress, and considered local textile production to work towards their goal of self-sufficiency (Ireson-Doolittle, Moreno-Black, Minivanh, 2001). Western dress was viewed as decadent. Lao men continued to wear Western dress, but were prohibited from wearing long hair or facial hair. Citizens who did not conform were sent to reeducation camps.

The communist regime promoted cotton production during its first ten years of rule. Since silk was a symbol of wealth and status, the regime promoted the use of cotton to diminish the difference among the classes in Lao society (Duangduane, 1996). Also, international trade had collapsed and foreign materials, including silk thread, were extremely difficult to obtain. With the implementation of the New Economic Mechanism in 1986, Laos has had an open market policy. Citizens were free to open private businesses. Textile production, including silk, flourished. From 1985 until 1995, there were over 100 stores in the Morning Market selling hand-woven textiles (Duangduane, 1996:632).

Patrons of Laos Silk

A demand for Lao silk textiles persists. Within Laos, women continue to wear traditional clothing. Lao women wear silk for special occasions such as religious

festivals and formal events. Wearing silk has returned as a conspicuous display of wealth now that private ownership is allowed in Laos. Commercial production of silk has increased to meet the demands of the country's citizens. Another important patron of Laos silk is the Lao expatriate. The communist revolution caused a mass exodus of the Lao elite. In their new homes abroad, Lao women still require silk textiles to uphold their cultural traditions. The demand from Lao expatriate women has created a new market for Lao textiles.

Foreigners also consume Lao textiles. Foreigners living in Laos before and after the revolution purchase silk to dress themselves and their homes, but also as works of art. One company opened by a foreigner focuses on the expatriate and international market to sell their modern Lao textiles (Beyond Tradition, 1995). Foreign tourists also create a growing demand for silk textiles and other handicrafts.

Private businesses have opened to meet the demand for silk and other textiles. Development projects also assist in the commercial production of silk as an alternative occupation for women. The Lao Women's Union supports the woman of Laos in training projects, including the "Art of Silk" project aimed at preserving Lao textiles and assisting with the design and marketing of the textiles. As the commercial sphere of textile production increases, there have been changes in the production itself. Weaving is a full-time occupation for many women, but many women are able to weave part-time at home. Weaving is no longer delegated to leisure time, but is seen as an important income producing occupation. Lao men are becoming more involved in the process. Husbands and other family members assist in the dyeing of thread and the preparation of the loom for weaving. Some men are weaving too, but the numbers are small.

With the growing demand for silk textiles, local sericulture production has not been able to meet the demand. Silk is imported from China, as it was earlier in the twentieth century for commercial production. Since 1986, silk is also imported from other countries such as Italy and Thailand. Steps have been taken to increase local sericulture production. The Lao Sericulture Company was founded in the mid 1990s. International aid organizations are investing in the development of sericulture in rural areas to replace the growing of opium. The "Lao Economic Acceleration Program for the Silk Sector" (LEAPSS) is one of these projects to improve the quality of sericulture in Laos. USAID is in charge of training programs, development of the silk industry, distribution of supplies, and the dissemination of information about the project (USAID-LAOS, 2002).

Conclusion

The production of silk in Laos has evolved over the years to become more commercial. Lao silk continues to play an important role in Lao culture. Lao women both within and outside of the country still wear silk textiles to important functions such as weddings, religious events, and as a display of wealth and status. Other consumers of Lao silk include foreigners living in the country as diplomats and experts working for international aid organizations and who visit the country as tourists.

The production process is evolving to meet the demand for silk. Imported silk is used along with Lao silk to meet demands but efforts are being made to increase the production of Lao silk. Men who traditionally were not involved in the textile production

process are beginning to assist in some stages of production as the sale of textiles creates income for the family. Lao women are beginning to weave a full or part-time occupation, and women are the owners of numerous small textile businesses.

The types of silk textiles are also evolving to meet market trends. The market has enabled textiles that were once and still continue to serve as ethnic identity markers to be consumed by people of different ethnicities. A Red Tai woman is able to purchase a Phuan textile, for example. Lao women are able to wear silk textiles resembling the textiles used by the Lao royalty without criticism from the new communist regime. Color trends also influence Lao silk fashions as well. The use of chemical dyes and improvements in natural dyes has altered the color combinations of traditional textiles, but the motifs are still recognizable.

Silk production in Laos increases and decreases according to its demand in Laos and in the international market, and will continue to evolve to meet the demands of the future.

Linda McIntosh received her Master's degree in Southeast Asian Studies from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and is presently working on her PhD studies at Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC, Canada. Her field research will be on the Phu Tai textiles of central Laos. While at Madison, she researched the textiles of Tai ethnic groups living in Thailand and Laos. Continuing her research in the field, she has lived in Thailand for several years, making frequent trips to Laos, Burma, Cambodia, and Thailand. As a Lao-American, Linda grew up around weaving as her mother (a Red Tai) continued to weave, as she did her native country, in the United States. Forthcoming publications on the subject of textiles include "Textiles and Dress of Cambodia," "Textiles and Dress of Thailand," and "Lao Ikat Dyeing," in the next edition of the *Encyclopedia of Asia* (Scribner's). She is a regular guest lecturer in a course on Southeast Asian textiles at the University of Washington-Seattle.

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