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2004

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Disconnecting the Tais: Responses to Trade, Training and Tourism

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Setting the Scene

This paper is based on field work in Nghe An Province, Vietnam, and Vientiane, Luang Prabang, and Luang Namtha Province in Laos. It compares and contrasts the responses of Tai speaking groups living in those areas to outside influences and their increasing awareness of the commercial value of their handwoven fabrics.

Although there are few written records, it is clear that there have been Tai speakers living in peninsular Southeast Asia for thousands of years. It is widely accepted that the original home of Tai speakers was in what is now called southern China. Political instability in this area from the 10th to the 13th Centuries led to large numbers of Tai moving south into areas that are now part of Burma, Laos, Vietnam and Thailand. Tai speakers form one of the largest language groups in Southeast Asia. Tai speakers are 85% of the 68 million population of Thailand; in Laos they are 65% of the 5 million inhabitants and in Burma they are 9% of the 43 million population. In Vietnam there are 3 million Tai speakers or 2.2% of the population. Additionally, there are a number of Tai dialect speakers in southern China and northeast India.

The Tai are linked not only by a common language but certain core beliefs and customs that pre-date the introduction of outside influence. While most Lao and Lue are Buddhist, most Tai Dam, Tai Daeng and Tai Khao in Laos and Vietnam are animists. All of these groups share a spiritual belief in *phi* or spirits and *khwan*, spiritual essence or soul force. Most Tai practice wet rice agriculture and live in houses built on piles off of the ground. Within their communities there is a tradition of gender specific tasks such as men working with wood and plaiting baskets and women working with cloth and weaving textiles.

The cloths the women weave also reflect a common culture. In their book *Textiles and the Tai Experience in Southeast Asia*, Mattiebelle Gittinger and H. Leedom Lefferts, Jr. speak of core textiles that were un-tailored, flat and of a narrow weft. These include costume elements such as women's skirts, household items such as blankets and ritual items such as banners. Over time, adaptations inspired by influences from other cultures have modified these core textiles and have added new costume elements such as the shoulder cloths worn by both Lao men and women for special ceremonial occasions and the long ceremonial coats worn by the Tai Dam men and women, reflecting Indian and Chinese influences respectively.

The different styles of decorating cloths used by Tai speakers also reflect the gradual absorption of techniques from other cultures, such as the use of weft ikat, tapestry weave and embroidery. Additionally, women weavers borrowed motifs, designs and pattern layouts from other groups, assigning different meanings, reflecting their own life experiences. These types of modifications have been going on for centuries as cloths and other goods were traded or given as gifts from one group to another. Just as customs and

ceremonies gradually change so do hand woven textiles for each one is, in essence, a work of art, an expression of the weaver. However, the past few years have seen an enormous increase in the speed with which outside influences have invaded the design repertoire of Tai women weavers. This change has been influenced by a number of factors.

War raged in the Indochinese countries of Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia during the mid 20th century. After the end of hostilities, unfortunately, these countries fell into a period of economic instability. Fortunately, the United Nations (UN) and several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) took an active role in assisting and advising on how best to energize their populations to return to economic solvency. One of the areas designated for 'income generation' was crafts, and most especially hand woven cloth. While there had never been a cessation of weaving, and, in fact, the economically hard times had seen a revival as most people were no longer able to afford commercially produced cloths or imported yarns and dyes, it was felt that women's skills could be used to help their families and villages improve their lot in life by weaving cloths that would be sold to others.

While there had been some internal migration and low level border trade during the war years, the re-establishment of peace also meant that people felt more free to move about their countries and to trade across borders. This resulted in groups that had previously been isolated from the mainstream coming into contact with outside influences.

Another factor in accelerating the pace of change in the way that women wove their cloths was, ironically, the awakening of the outside world to the beauty of Tai textiles. In the book *Traditional T'ai Arts in Contemporary Perspective*, Michael C. Howard discusses the role played by Queen Sirikit of Thailand in promoting traditional clothing and textiles not only for her own people's use but for the fashion world in general. This effort started in earnest in the 1970s. Additionally, tourism into Thailand greatly accelerated in the 1980s, increasing the demand for hand woven Thai textiles. The demand was often so great that textiles began being commissioned from Tai weavers living in Laos. In the late 1980s tourism from Thailand expanded into Laos, increasing the awareness of the beauty of Lao-Tai textiles. These distinctive hand woven textiles became a commodity widely recognized internationally.

About this same time, books and magazine articles were published describing the various heirloom textiles from Laos that were appearing for sale in Laos and neighboring countries. Textile collectors were soon seeking out these previously little known beautifully woven and dyed cloths. In 1994 the first bridge linking Laos and Thailand was opened. This precipitated a flood of traders from Thailand who actively sought out Lao-Tai heirloom cloths which they knew had a ready market in Bangkok and Chaing Mai.

As the pool of heirloom cloths from northern Laos diminished, traders were soon crossing into the Tai speaking areas of Vietnam in search of traditional textiles. In Vietnam, the Tai represent only 2.2% of the population and thus their culture is not a major part of the national identity. Knowing that textiles from Laos were more marketable than Tai textiles from Vietnam, the Tai textiles from Vietnam were sold as

‘northern Lao’ textiles. Suddenly the cloths and the motifs they contained were tossed into a new world, creating no end of confusion for textile scholars.

The loss of these cloths diminishes a village’s heritage by reducing the number of textiles a woman can draw upon as a design source when weaving new cloths. Both in Laos and Vietnam, during the time these heirloom cloths were being sold, few Tai villages were actively re-creating the older style cloths using indigenous yarns and dyes. Fortunately, both the Lao and Vietnamese governments, working with outside assistance, have taken steps to revive sericulture, natural dyes and traditional weaving techniques. The challenge is how to continue the production of well woven commercial as well as traditional textiles and to enhance the status of the makers of these cloths.

Nghe An Province, Vietnam

Although a formal Handicraft Master Plan of Vietnam was not developed until recently, a number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been working with the Vietnamese in preserving indigenous crafts for least the past 10 years. One outstanding non-profit organization is Craft Link founded in 1995. Craft Link started by going into the Vietnamese hinterland and evaluating the existing crafts and crafts at risk of extinction and then determining how best to configure these crafts to appeal to a distant, commercial market. This paper will look at Craft Link’s efforts in Nghe An Province and the impact this organization as well as other external factors have had on the textiles produced there. There are 300,000 Tai speakers living in Nghe An Province. Most of the Tai living in Nghe An belong to two major groups: The White Tai, here called Tai Muang, and the Black Tai, here called Tai Thanh. There are a number of sub-groups that fall under the umbrella of these two main groups.

The hinterland of this province is not open to foreign visitors without government permission. While this has not stopped traders going to and from Laos, it has limited the ability of some local textile producers to sell directly to their intended customers.

Highway 7 runs from the port city of Vinh into the Lao province of Xieng Khouang, home of the famous Plain of Jars. These ancient stone jars are testimony to the trade in the region that was taking place nearly 2500 years ago. Over the centuries, the informal trade going on along this route has impacted the lives of those living in surrounding areas. Traders from Laos bring goods to sell or barter to villages in Vietnam. Sometimes they bring handwoven cloths from Laos. In this way women in Nghe An are exposed to different types of cloths, such as shoulder cloths which are not part of their costume, and to new types of motifs or pattern elements which they incorporate into their repertoire. Influence from other minorities living in Vietnam is also reflected in Tai textiles in the province. It is felt that cloths from groups such as the Muong inspired Tai women to use embroidery to decorate their skirt hem pieces, rather than the hand woven bands most Tai use for the hem piece.

In Con Cuong district a number of Tai villages were encouraged to expand into commercial weaving for a non-Tai market. One notable effort was in the Luc Da commune, Yen Thanh village. Prior to beginning the project, non-governmental organizations studied the traditional textiles produced in the village to determine what could be adapted to the commercial market. The NGOs focused originally on the narrow width head cloth worn by these White Tai women. The cloth was adapted to become a

more marketable neck scarf - something these women do not wear - by changing the color palette and design structure. The women were not only encouraged to use non-traditional colors but also to incorporate techniques into these scarves, such as ikat that is normally used only in ceremonial skirts. They were also encouraged to weave in silk rather than cotton. While the scarves are woven using natural dyes in soft colors, the poor quality silk used, purchased from markets in Hanoi, is a problem. However, the women are starting to raise silkworms.

Today there are a number of villages near Highway 7 where the women are weaving and embroidering to sell not only to their local market but to handicraft fairs in Hanoi and nearby towns as well as to Craft Link, and through it to the Museum of Ethnology's gift shop in Hanoi. Rather than travel to Hanoi themselves, often the weavers rely on the local bus driver to deliver their goods and collect the money.

There are some traders from Hanoi who have started working with Tai weavers such as the women in Phong village, Tuong Duong dist. Here the traders provide yarn and give sample patterns. Unfortunately the quality of the silk, spun not reeled, is very poor and much time is lost as the women work to wind the yarn from skein to bobbin. This village is lucky in that they have a lively matriarch who has kept a significant number of heirloom textiles to use as she teaches her granddaughter to weave.

The other road, Number 48, which leads from Vinh to the Northwest via Que Chau and Que Phong, is not paved all the way to the Lao border. While this has not stopped Lao traders from crossing, it has limited the options of some women weaving there.

Que Chau district was the site of a major joint project between Craft Link and the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology in 1997. The aim of the project was to develop new crafts based on traditional skills and to document old textiles. Intensive interviews were recorded on video, showing traditional textiles as well as weaving and dyeing techniques. The intent was to deepen the Craft Link project people's understanding of the Tai culture prior to designing new products and to impress upon the people associated with the museum that the culture they were recording is evolving not static. After the initial documentation for the project was completed there was a major exhibition at the museum in Hanoi. Two weavers from Quy Chau demonstrated their skills at the museum during the exhibition. This was an excellent way for them to interact with people outside their remote village and get feedback on their products. In 2001, during a UNESCO regional textile workshop held at the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, weavers from Quy Chau were introduced to a range of innovative techniques by textile producers from Laos and Thailand. They were also shown examples of the types of cloths woven for sale by Tai speakers in these countries.

The primary village chosen for the project is the White Tai village of Hoa Tien, Chau Tien commune. In addition to weaving with ikat and supplementary weft, the women in this region have an unusual style of weaving, a type of composite twill, they call *ma'an*. Traditionally this time consuming type of weave is used for ceremonial cloths such as the long banners, called *ma'an bang*, used in conjunction for funerals or to make rectangular cloths that can be hung on walls for ceremonial use or as a wrap for a baby being carried on its mother's back. For the foreign market this style of weaving has been incorporated into neck scarves and other small cloths.

The isolation of Quy Chau and Que Phong, further north, has been exploited by traders both local and from across the border in Laos. Not only are the traders buying up heirloom cloths (including a majority of the cloths so carefully documented in Chau Tien by Craft Link in 1997) and thus robbing the villagers of a source of inspiration for future textiles, they are paying women in isolated hamlets the equivalent of only one dollar a meter for cloths woven using the laborious *ma'an* technique. According to one source it would take three days to weave one meter using the *ma'an* technique.

The Craft Link project is exemplary. Not only does it work with other organizations to analyze traditional crafts and seek ways to adapt them to foreign tastes but, by establishing its own commercial shop for products as well as organizing craft fairs, it provides a regular outlet for the handiwork of people from rural areas. By working with the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, it has elevated the status of the crafts produced by educating consumers about the ancient culture of people who are the creators. While some associated with the Craft Link projects express frustration at not being able to do more to fully tap the skills of the Tai weavers in Nghe An due to budgetary considerations, they have given these women from an isolated province an opportunity to speak to the world of their abilities and have encouraged younger women to continue preserving family traditions.

Luang Namtha Province, Laos

The Lao province of Luang Namtha, near the borders with China and Burma, is about 750 km. northwest of Vientiane and has been open to unrestricted tourism since 1995. Although the Lao Tourism board estimates that there were nearly 30,000 visitors to the province in 2003, many of these are traders that come across the border from China selling inexpensive household items, including pre-dyed cotton yarns to villages in the province. The majority of Tai speakers in this province are Lue, Tai Dam or Black Tai, and Tai Daeng or Red Tai.

In this remote, rural province many women weave primarily for their own families, making household items such as blankets and clothing and ceremonial cloths such as banners using both cotton and silk, both of which are produced locally.

In the late 1980s a French project, *Ecole sans Frontieres* (Schools without Borders), became involved in encouraging the Tai women in the province to weave cloths as a source of income for their families. They worked with trainers from Vientiane to educate the women to weave new products that would appeal to a foreign consumer. The local Lao Women's Union representatives agreed to assist in getting the cloths to an outside market. Simple neck scarves incorporating ikat and supplementary weft techniques using the local silk and natural dyes were chosen as the model product. Traditionally, the Tai Daeng and Tai Dam weave a skirt, called *sin mi*, which used both the techniques of supplementary weft and ikat in creating the cloth. Originally this skirt was reserved for only important ceremonies such as the funeral of the family patriarch or matriarch. Traditionally, in Laos, ikat is not used for fabrics worn above the waist.

The European Union funded re-construction of the central market in Muang Sing, a major village 7 miles from the border with China, in the early 1990s. However, recently, there has been little government support in helping village women in the area either to develop new products or to ease their access to the consumer. The Lao Women's Union

no longer maintains a network to help remote villagers sell their cloths.

Today, a number of women in the region are weaving either to sell directly in the Muang Sing market or to middlemen who buy their cloths to sell in Vientiane or Luang Prabang. In some villages, such as Ban Nam Ngam, the Tai Daeng families are actively weaving both beautiful cloths for their personal use and simple scarves they make on commission. Commonly, the dealer will supply the weavers with the yarn and tell them what they should weave.

Near to Muang Sing there are some Tai Dam villages where the women are making decidedly un-traditional textiles using a mix of their home spun cotton and pre-dyed commercial yarns. In Ban Nong Buah, wall hangings and table runners are made in colors and patterns that the villagers had been successful in selling before. These pastel colored cloths are patterned with motifs traditionally associated with cloths woven for rites of passage, such as a stylized human figure standing on the back of a mythological figure. Market-savvy Tai Dam women go from village to village collecting the cloths on a consignment basis. They will either sell them in the local market or to people who will transport them to Vientiane or Luang Prabang. Poorly woven pieces or unsold pieces are returned to the weavers, thus there is an informal form of quality control and market feedback.

Luang Namtha Province is a source of high quality silk. In the past a number of non-governmental organizations such as the Mennonite Central Community have worked to develop sericulture in the region. Near to Luang Namtha town there are a number of villages, such as Ban Tong Oum, which not only specialize in sericulture but where some village women have started weaving commercially as well, usually on consignment for buyers who come from Vientiane to purchase both the silk yarn and the cloths. Due to the success of commercial weaving shops in Vientiane, recently there has been a shortage of high quality Lao silk and efforts are underway to greatly expand sericulture throughout the country.

Vientiane

In the capital city, Vientiane, there are a number of commercial weaving galleries that have been successful in maintaining the high standards for which Lao weaving has long been famous. While some have used their skills and creativity to take Lao weaving into the contemporary art world, others are working to continue traditional styles of weaving and traditional natural dyes to produce replicas of the beautiful older cloths. The owners of these galleries work closely with the people weaving for them to inspire them to maintain and honor the well earned reputation that Lao textiles has achieved.

Additionally, the gallery owners are in constant contact with their customers and thus receive immediate feedback on what is being produced. Most of these gallery owners have also been involved in international textile exhibitions and thus have had a wide exposure to the world market. These gallery owners work hard to maintain the link between the producer and the consumer. They promote the image of Lao textiles by educating their customers about what they have for sale in their shops. Most have tags attached to their products describing the process, yarns and dyes that went into making it. Some also sell books and other publications that describe the different Lao textiles and how they are made.

Some of the more notable galleries in Vientiane are Kanchana, Lao Textiles, Nikone Handcraft, Phaeng Mai Gallery and Taykeo Textile Gallery. The Sisane family that owns Kanchana has recently opened a textile museum with the goal of educating school children and others about traditional textiles in Laos. Lao Textiles, owned by Carol Cassidy, has been in business since 1990. At first Cassidy and her team of weavers produced exact replicas of the complicated weaves of the heirloom cloths she had studied. Later they moved to designing broader interpretations of traditional works. While the major target of Lao Textiles is the export market, it has had a major impact on what is currently available for sale in local markets. Cassidy has been recognized for leading the way to new, high quality silk textiles. So successful are her methods that she advises local groups in Laos as well as weavers in Cambodia, Vietnam and Assam in northern India. Nanong Rassanikone is the managing director of Nikone Handcraft. In addition to running the gallery, which focuses on home furnishings and other lifestyle products, Rassanikone has been involved in numerous training projects to help rural women create commercially viable products. The Phaeng Mai Gallery is owned by the Nanthavongdouangsy family. This Tai Daeng family not only runs a successful business whose main focus is high quality naturally dyed textiles, they work to educate visitors as well as Lao weavers by being involved in the production of pamphlets and books describing costumes, styles of weaving, natural dyes and dyeing written in both English and Lao. Two of the family members have helped various NGOs in both Laos and Vietnam train rural women to weave commercially. One of the ways to maintain traditional weaving in Laos is through the careful replication of older textiles. Taykeo Sayavongkhamdy offers replicas of intricately woven cloths in her Textiles Gallery as a way of preserving Lao heritage without removing the original inspiration. In addition to the commercial galleries, there are a number of weaving workshops that target the Lao diaspora who send orders for clothing needed for traditional Lao weddings as well as decorative items for their homes.

Luang Prabang

The former royal town of Luang Prabang was declared a World Heritage Site in 1995. One of the consequences of this designation was an increase in interest in visiting this small but charming place. In January 1990 there were an estimated two to three thousand visitors to Luang Prabang. In the year 2002 there were more than 100,000 foreign visitors. In addition to having an impact on the infrastructure of this once remote town, the number of tourists has greatly enhanced the opportunities for the local people to improve their lives by working in tourist-related industries. Where once there were a few dusty shops selling locally produced items, there are now a number of smart shops offering a wide variety of merchandise. Unfortunately, not all that is on offer in the shops today actually comes from Luang Prabang or even Laos. However, there are places where the focus is on locally produced goods, most importantly, hand woven textiles. OckPopTok is a cooperative managed by a young Tai Daeng woman, Veomanee Duangdala, who is the daughter of a master weaver and who began weaving herself when she was very young. This shop reflects her skill and understanding of the weaving process and the innovative ideas of a British woman, Joanne Smith, who works for the cooperative as a designer.

Conclusion

This paper really should have been titled 'connecting the Tai' because it became clear when I started comparing the experience of the Tai women weaving in remote provinces, that there were more commonalities than dissimilarities. Tai village women in both Laos and Vietnam received training and product development advice from Lao living in Vientiane as well as foreigners living in Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. The core product, a narrow neck scarf in subtle colors featuring ikat as well as supplementary weft, is similar in both countries. While it seems that the Vietnamese Tai are very enterprising and are quite keen to take advantage of this new source of income, they suffer from poor quality yarn. The Tai in Luang Namtha have their indigenous high quality silk and good weaving skills but do not have easy access to a large market and no longer receive input from outside sources on product development.

The introduction of commercial weaving is a mixed blessing. While there were always villages where women were dedicated to continuing traditional styles of weaving, many of the younger generation were not, and skills were not being handed down. While the contemporary commercial cloths being produced do not always conform to village tradition, at least the young are not losing their ability to weave and hopefully will be inspired to weave not only cloths for sale but for ceremonial use within the village as well.

Cloths created for commercial purposes are almost never as complex or of as high a quality as those made for family, ritual, or religious use. In the past, however, a woman would never allow an inferior quality cloth to leave the loom as it reflected badly on her skill. Loosely woven and poorly dyed cloths made to sell are a reflection of the lack of a link between the producer and the consumer. The continuation of quality can only come about through an educated consumer and a motivated weaver who understands the purpose of the cloth she is producing.

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