

Report on Today's Traditional Textile Scene in Laos and Chiang Mai

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Abstract

The present research was conducted by Otsuma Grant-in Aid for Individual Exploratory Research. The theme is today's traditional textiles in Laos and Thailand. The author researched the circumstances surrounding traditional textile weaving and their sales at galleries and stores in Vientiane, Luang Prabang and Chiang Mai in 2019. The result is that the support for traditional weaving techniques is active and there are many stores which benefit from this trend. Some galleries raise their weavers to become experts, and some stores sell traditional textiles through fair trade. This trend supports the traditional skills and saves people from poverty. But as traditional textiles become commodities, the meaning of traditional textiles in the community is also changing. In other words, they make products that are easy to sell and weave trendy textiles for sale. Serious consideration needs to be made to the problem of resolving poverty but also to that of keeping the traditional system.

1. Previous researches

There are many books and researches about the textiles of Southeast Asia. Many of them are about specific areas and specific textiles. For example, a book was published in 1990, written by Robin Maxwell, that introduced Southeast Asian textiles, especially Indonesian ikat and batik, and considered influences between India and Asian countries concerning techniques and designs.^[1] Other previous researches related to this are of study concerning regional contributions and fair trade. However, many of such researches are about foodstuffs like cacao, tea or coffee, and these attempts show that many local contributions have promoted their village independence.^[2] In addition, reports concerning fair trade business about traditional textiles are almost all reports of what have been practiced in the villages.^[3] There is not a study which considers issues related with traditional textiles and textiles made for sale. It is good to eliminate poverty to have active fair trade and regional contributions but it is also important to think about the meaning of traditional textiles within their regions. This paper shows one suggestion.

2. Traditional Textiles in Laos

Shin is the traditional costume of Lao women. It is a rectangular cloth which is wrapped around the waist and the length is from the waist to the ankle (tube skirt) (Fig.1). The materials used are silk or cotton mostly; in recent years they have been made from synthetic fiber like polyester as well.

Weaving techniques are continuous supplementary weft, discontinuous supplementary weft, weft ikat and warp ikat, traditionally. The weaving technique is extremely complicated and delicate, and the texture is fine.

Many motifs are original designs showing animals, plants, trees, flowers or mountains and rivers from the scenery around the people. The textile motifs are the symbol of their textile culture. The most popular motif is river dragon, which means the dragon representing water like rivers or rain. Rain brings harvest and enriches the people's daily life. Other popular motifs are mythical birds and elephants. Mythical birds are a symbol of males and related with Buddhism, too, while the elephant is a symbol of strength and political power. Kings fought battles on elephants' backs and nobles

travelled by elephants with canopies.^[4]

These traditional textiles have different characteristics in different regions. These differences are found in materials, color, weaving techniques and textile patterns. Each region's people knew their textile style and they could identify each other. These differences showed the people's circumstances and depended on where they live, such as in the mountains or fields near rivers.



Fig.1 A young woman wearing traditional costume *shin*
SUDO Ryoko, 2018

3. Traditional Textiles in Thailand

There are many traditional textiles according to each tribe in Thailand. One famous textile is *mudmee*; this is ikat, tie dye textiles, in Thailand (Fig.2). These textiles are traditionally used as a wrapped skirt for women, and are made in northeast Thailand. In the northern part of Thailand there are many tribes and they also have their own traditional costumes. They harvest materials such as cotton, hemp or silk and dye them using natural dye stuffs and spin the yarn. They weave the cloth themselves and make their costumes. They have been doing this for a long time. Many of these tribe textiles are made from cotton and dyed indigo. Some of them use applique and some use embroideries while others are fine pleated.

Each tribe is proud of its costumes and they reflect its culture.



Fig.2 A woman wearing *mudmee*
SUDO Ryoko, 2018

4. Today's Traditional Textile Scene in Laos

There are several studios that are advancing the traditional weaving techniques in Laos. The author researched studios in Vientiane and Luang Prabang in February 2019.

4.1. Phaeng Mai Gallery in Vientiane

The owner of Phaeng Mai Gallery is Kongthong Nanthavongdouangsy who is a good weaver. She also teaches weaving not only to Lao but also foreign people. She won a UNESCO prize for outstanding contribution to creativity in traditional textiles in Laos in 1992 and she became an Asian Living Human Treasure in 2014.

Her gallery sells a variety of traditional style of *shins*, scarves, and other clothes. In addition, modern design *shins* and other items are sold. Many senior officials are her customers and she has their trust.

Ten craftsmen work at her studio; they are all female and they are from 14 years old to late forties (Fig.3).

Traditionally in Laos, women weave their textiles for clothes and men make tools for weaving and dyeing. Ms. Kongthong has one more studio where 26 female craftsmen work.^[5] Most craftsmen quit their work when they get married. There are more than 1000 families weaving textiles in their own places in the suburbs of Vientiane but recently many young generations work at factories like titanium factories, and they have lost traditional skills because it is easier to earn money in factories.^[6]

According to Ms. Kongthong, textiles woven in Laos are sewn in Thailand and then they are exported to Japan, in some cases. In other cases, the textiles are woven in Laos for a particular purpose, sent to Italy to be finished and then exported to Japan.

Textiles are still woven by hand in Laos, and their technique is still continuing to the next generation. However, the situation surrounding weaving is beginning to change. The way of distribution shows that they do not weave the textiles for themselves any longer and traditional textiles are becoming merchandise.



Fig.3 A weaver in Phaeng Mai Gallery
SUDO Ryoko, 2018

4.2. Houey Hong Vocational Training Center for Women in Vientiane

Houey Hong Vocational Training Center for Women was established by JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency) in 1999; the purpose is to train traditional Lao weave to women. JICA helped the start up for 3 years and then the staff took over the operation. The author researched this center in February 2019. A Japanese staff named Ms. Soma has worked as a coordinator for 5 years and she explained about this center.

There are 14 weavers working; they work from 9 am to 11:30 am and resume from 2 pm to 4:30 pm. They are all professional weavers. Male staff work as dye specialists; they use indigo and other natural dye stuffs (Fig.4). The center buys silk and cotton from northern villages, dye these materials and weave them into ikat and damask weave products. Their techniques are traditional hand weave using a complicated thread heddle. For one damask weave product, it takes 1 month to set up the loom and 1 month to weave. About 10 simple woven products can be made per month. The

products they weave are sold at the shop in this center only (Fig.5).

Eighteen females receive training every year for 1 week and they come from all over Laos. They start weaving from childhood and they come here to improve their skills. They return home to contribute their skills to their community. This center has produced about 860 weavers in 20 years.

This center has a training course for inexperienced people and they accept foreign people as well.

Their products have been ordered by people in Japan and Europe. The prices are over 100 dollars per item and are profitable. Recently they design textiles for Japan, Europe and USA depending on their preference. They have financial benefits but from the view of traditional textile design there are issues to be considered.



Fig.4 Indigo dye in the training center
SUDO Ryoko, 2018



Fig.5 Traditional textile of the training center (ikat and discontinuous supplementary weft)
SUDO Ryoko, 2018

4.3. Oct Pop Tok in Luang Prabang

The name Oct Pop Tok means “east meets west” in Lao. They have three different types of stores in the center of Luang Prabang and a studio near the city

center where they hold several workshops like dye, weaving, batik and bamboo weaving classes. The stores are sophisticated and there are many fine goods; elegant textiles and artistic daily goods are sold. people can also have good experience through the workshops dyeing textiles and weaving textiles in a beautiful scenery and good natural environment at this studio.

Oct Pop Tok was founded in 2000 by an English woman and a Laotian woman. At the beginning of their business they sold traditional Lao textiles, and before long they became famous and business went well. They also encourage ethnic groups in Laos and they assist in the design and marketing for traditional ethnic textiles.

There are also several weavers in this studio. They demonstrate how to weave and they weave textile goods for sale in their stores. One of them said they work happily and if they work for a long term the company takes them on a trip to a foreign country as a bonus.

4.4. Fair Trade Stores in Lao

There many fair trade stores in Vientiane and Luang Prabang. Some stores' owners are European or American and other stores are run by Lao people.^[7]

There are stores that sell traditional Lao textiles that are woven at their own studio like Phaeng Mai Gallery and some stores that collect traditional textiles from elsewhere in Laos to sell. In both cases they protect their own traditional skills and support the people from poor countryside villages. It is true that the traditional textiles are sold as commodities. This trend possibly changes the textile tradition and may change the system of ethnic group identity regarding their traditional clothes.

5. Today's Traditional Textile Scene in Chiang Mai, Thailand

There are many successful fair trade stores and galleries in central Chiang Mai. In the market and night market, many shops sell tribal textiles and antique traditional textiles.

5.1. Sop Moei Arts in Chiang Mai

Sop Moei Arts is a non-profit organization which

has been working with the Pwo Karen in the Sop Moei district. The people faced poverty and lack of education. Kent and Britt-Marie Gregory have lived in this area from 1977 and Mr. and Mrs. Gregory supported Karen tribe's daily life with development assistance from the Swedish government.

They tried to find a way of using traditional handmade skills in Pwo Karen. There is a high regard for their products in design and quality and the organization has been supported by a good English designer. There are locations to sell in Chiang Mai and Bangkok.

There are fine baskets for wine bottles using traditional skills and these are very suitable for modern life style (Fig.6). Other products, for example bags and shawls, are really elegant and graceful, too.



Fig.6 Basket for wine bottle
SUDO Ryoko, 2018

5.2. Nussara in Chiang Mai

Nussara Tiengkate is a textile historian and weaver. She learned local northern Thai textile techniques for two decades and started her store in Chiang Mai. There are many hand woven traditional textiles to sell and several workshops to learn traditional skills. The goods are sophisticated and modern. Nussara also teaches local weavers to produce well designed and popular products.

5.3. Jon Sri Studio

Jon Sri Studio is located in Baan Maesen village, 2 hours by car from central Chiang Mai. A middle aged couple runs this studio and 4 weavers from the neighborhood work there. They weave traditional textiles by backstrap weaving and they dye them indigo (Fig.7). Some of the cotton is planted and

harvested by themselves but they buy many quantities of materials from other areas as well. A Japanese dealer and dealers from other countries have ordered materials from this store.



Fig.7 Back strap weave in Jon Sri Studio
SUDO Ryoko, 2018

6. Conclusion

The situation of traditional textiles in Vientiane, Luang Prabang and Chiang Mai has been observed. The traditional textile market is active and traditional skills are inherited generation to generation. Many fair trade stores are helping local tribes from poverty and in their education. But some examples show that the traditional techniques and meaning of patterns are changing. Meo and Yao ethnic groups are making embroidery and batik products more commercialized for easy sale (Fig.8). They are making familiar design purses, bags or more sophisticated shawls for tourists and foreign people. Since it is woven or dyed as a product, it is likely to fall under commercial activity, and it is assumed that there is a danger that the inheritance of traditional textile techniques and textile pattern meanings will be jeopardized. There is a need to create an opportunity to confirm the meaning of traditional textiles that are originally passed down in the tribes. Furthermore, making the textiles to sell means buying their fabrics and clothes for daily use from stores and other places. It means the people do not weave the textiles for themselves any longer.

This research investigated what kind of ethnic textiles are deployed in urban areas. In further research, study needs to be made in places where textiles are made to examine the changes between the traditional textiles and modern products.



Fig.8 Embroidery bag sold in Chiang Mai
(Yoa embroidery)
SUDO Ryoko, 2018

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[6]According to Ms. Kongthong.

[7]Carol Cassidy and Saoban crafts organized by the Participatory Development and Training Center.

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Abstract (Japanese)

本研究は大妻女子大学戦略的個人研究費の助成を受けて実施した、ラオス、タイでの伝統的な染織品の実情を調査した結果について考察するものである。筆者はラオスのヴィエンチャン、ルアンパバーン、タイのチェンマイ3つの都市部で伝統的な技法で織物を織っている工房、それを販売しているギャラリーなどを訪ねて調査を行った。ラオスでは、現在でも若い女性が自ら糸を染め、伝統的な機で手織りをしている状況が分かり、技術の継承を積極的に行っている工房があることを確認できた。また、これらを販売するためのギャラリーも多くあり、外国人観光客などに人気のあることも確認できた。チェンマイでも昔ながらの技法で手織りの布を織っている工房もあり、中心部の市場には周辺民族の伝統衣装を扱っている店も多くみられた。また、山岳民族などの生活を支援するフェアトレードの店も多くあり、そのような店には洗練された商品が多く展開していた。おおむね伝統的な染織が彼らの生活を支えていることも理解できたが、一方で、自家用に作ってきた染織品が販売され収益になるということは、自分たちの作った染織品が商品になるということであり、商品として売れるものを作る必要が生じる。このような現象が各少数民族の伝統技術や伝統的な文様に影響を与えるのではないかと推察され、今回の調査から危機感を抱いた。

染織が流行とともに変化していくことは当たり前のことではあるが、その流れが急激であったり、外から強引にもたらされるものであれば、自分たちが培ってきた衣服文化を崩壊させることにもつながる。伝統的な技術や文様がいまだ残されている現在、昔ながらの染織とこれからのテキスタイル両方を見据えて、さらなる調査分析をする必要性を感じた。これについては今後の研究課題としたい。

キーワード：伝統染織，ラオス，タイ，フェアトレード

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