

# Why Do They Weave? : The Role of Marriage Rites in the Textile Production of Lao-Tai Women in Houa Phanh Province

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## Abstract

Xam Neua and Xam Tai Districts in Houa Phanh Province, Laos, are nationally and internationally famous for hand-woven textile production. The purpose of this paper is to reveal the cultural reasons that women in these areas weave so much and so often. The villagers' lives are based on the division of work between men and women, and weaving is categorized as one aspect of women's work. Because all Lao-Tai women in these districts must master the skill of weaving, the majority of women engage in textile production. This ability of all women to weave is a salient feature of textile production in Xam Neua and Xam Tai Districts and indicates that weaving textiles is embedded in the cultural context of village life. Today, this cultural context is changing rapidly, but women continue to weave textiles for their own use as well as for sale.

I have conducted research in Houa Phanh Province since 2010 and have stayed there for a total of eleven months. Based on this research, I identify the reasons that Lao-Tai women in the districts continue to weave, focusing especially on marriage customs and textiles as gifts that are exchanged.

## Introduction

Xam Neua and Xam Tai Districts in Houa Phanh Province (Fig. 1), located in the northeastern part of Laos and bordering Vietnam, are famous both nationally and internationally for textile production. These areas are among the biggest producers of hand-woven textiles in Laos. I first went to Laos in 2007 to do research for a master's degree. I visited weaving workshops, shops and some villages in the capital of Vientiane and interviewed owners, weavers and merchants. I found that many weavers, both in workshops and villages, came from northeastern Laos, and that much of the cloth and woven articles sold in the shops were also brought from northeastern Laos. I most frequently heard Xam Neua and Xam Tai referred to as the origin of both textiles and weavers. A Lao merchant explained, "Weaving is something running in the blood of Xam Neua women." In this paper, I intend to show what makes the province such a big producer of textiles and weavers.

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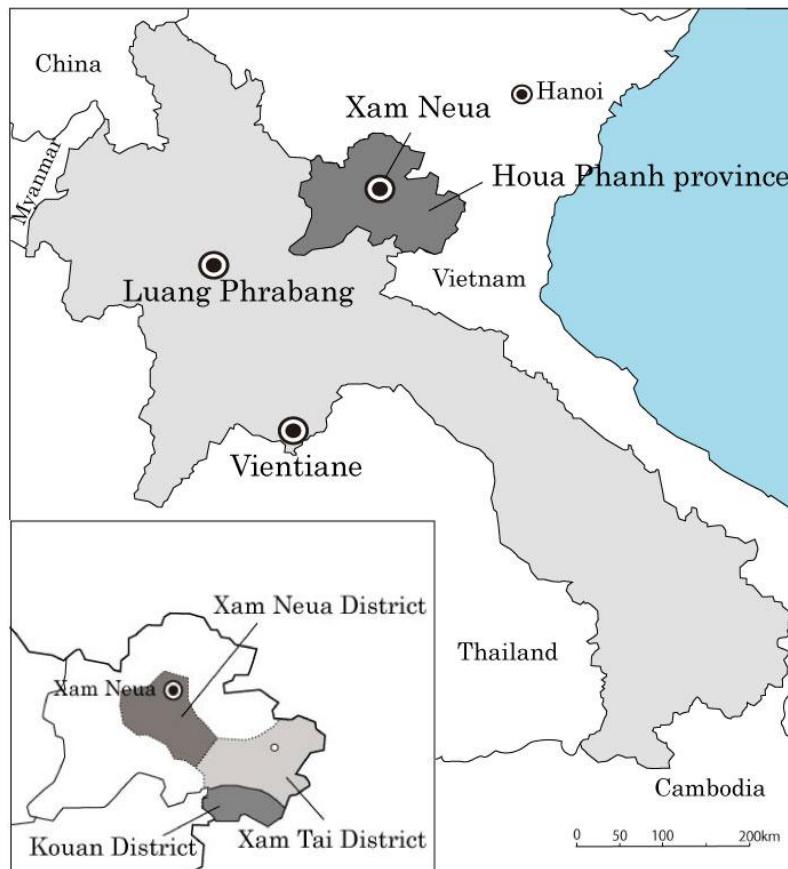
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Previous work on textiles and weaving by Tai-Kadai ethnic groups reveals that woven textiles play significant roles in various rituals, such as weddings, funerals and healing rituals (Gittinger and Lefferts 1992; Connors 1996; Cheesman 2004a; Gittinger 2004; Bunyaratavej 2004; Kanlaya 2001; McIntosh 2006). Some textiles are woven and used for specific rites (Cheesman 2004a, 2007; Gittinger 2004; McIntosh 2006). These studies show that textiles, which were indispensable for social life, were produced by women as part of a sexual division of labor (Gittinger and Lefferts 1992; Connors 1996; Cheesman 2004a; McIntosh 2007). The villages where I conducted my research in Xam Neua and Xam Tai Districts<sup>2</sup> have ceased to use hand-woven textiles for rituals, as is true in many villages, and as several studies have noted (Gittinger 2004; McIntosh 2007). However, all women in these districts possess weaving skills and engage in some part of textile production. For example, young girls who have not mastered weaving techniques help their mothers; elderly women who have poor eyesight wind yarn for their daughters or granddaughters.

It is a distinctive feature of the region that all women are engaged in textile production and have weaving skills. Women continue to weave textiles, not only for sale, but also for personal use. Interestingly, these women do not have to produce textiles for personal use, because they can buy whatever they want in the market today. Still, they continue to weave textiles for their own use, as well as for sale, because weaving is configured as a part of their culture.

## Research Methods

I used the following three anthropological methods for my research: (1) participant observation, (2) villager interviews, and (3) documentation of textiles.<sup>3</sup> I have conducted my research in Xam Neua and Xam Tai Districts in Houa Phanh



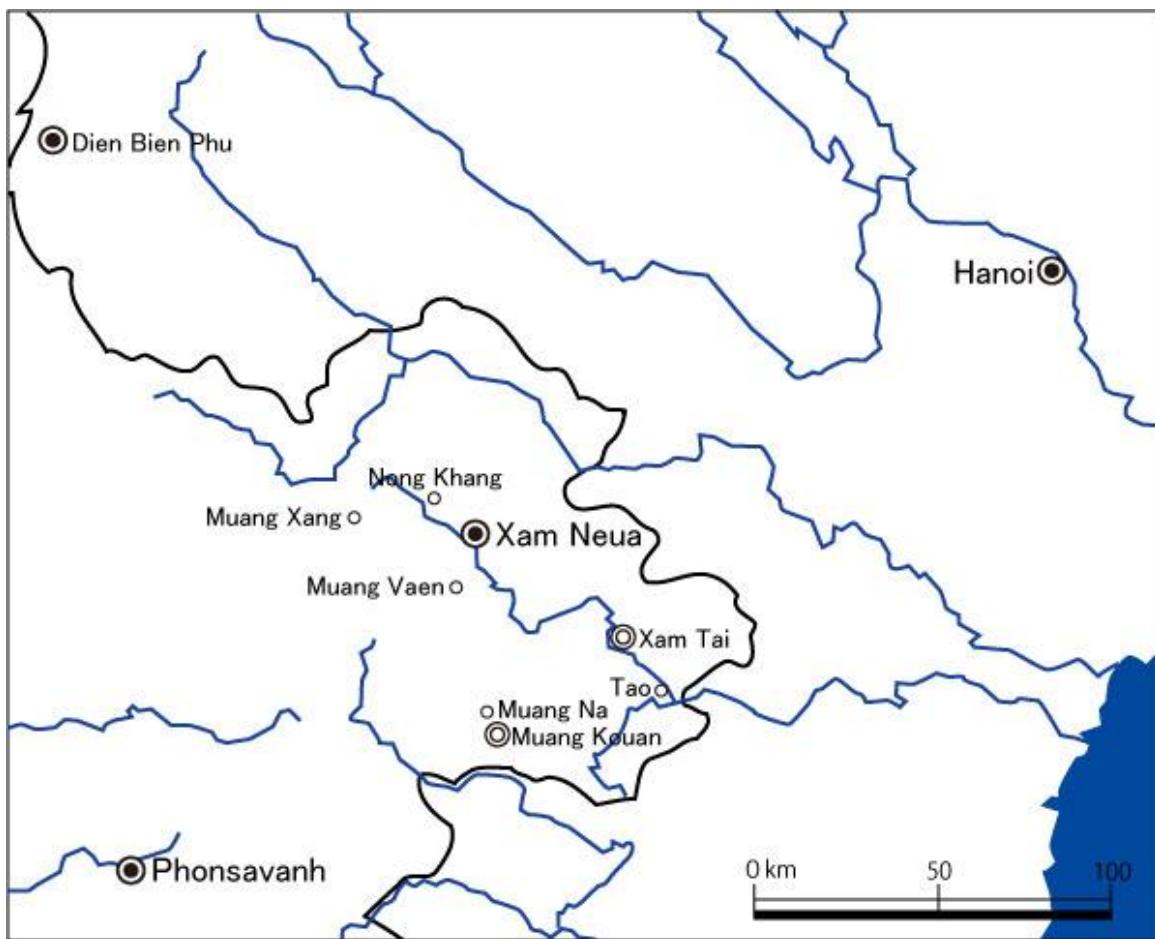
**Figure 1:** Xam Neua and Xam Tai Districts in Houa Phanh Province

<sup>2</sup> Please see ‘Research Methods’ section.

<sup>3</sup> I took photos of the textiles and interviewed villagers about names of the producers, the purposes and the year of production, the materials used, and so on.

Province, Laos, since 2010 and have stayed there for a total of eleven months while affiliated with the National University of Laos. The argument of this paper is based this research.

I studied Lao-Tai villages in three areas of Xam Neua and two areas of Xam Tai Districts: Muang Vaen, Muang Xang and Nong Khang in Xam Neua District, and Muang Kouan/ Muang Na and Tao Village in Xam Tai District. Among them, I focused primarily on the Muang Vaen area in Xam Neua District and the Muang Kouan and Muang Na areas in Kouan District (Fig. 2). The oral traditions of both the Muang Vaen and the Muang Kouan/Muang Na areas state that they have been Buddhist since their ancestors settled there and that they were once tributary *muang* of the Lan Xang Kingdom. Documents presently in the Thai National Library in Bangkok were originally sent from the authorities of the Lan Xang kingdom to the chief officials in Houa Phanh province.<sup>4</sup> The date on the oldest document is 1600.<sup>5</sup> This shows that the Lao-Tai polities of Houa Phanh became tributaries to the Lan Xang Kingdom at least by the end of the 16th century. The record of these documents



**Figure 2:** Location of the research areas and villages

<sup>4</sup> These documents are included in the Bai Choum collection in The Thai National Library in Bangkok. Fifty are written in old Lao writing, or ‘*nangseu lao bouhan* (ໜັງສີລາວບູການ).’ Twenty-one are documents prepared under the authority of the Lan Xang Kingdom and sent to the chief officials in what is now Houa Phanh Province (Phaibounwangcharoen 2000). Michael Vickery (2003: 20–23) cites a grant of authority from the King of Vientiane to the chief official of “Xamneua.”

<sup>5</sup> Although the documents do not prove when the people became Buddhists, there are no other reliable historical records to disprove the oral history of the villagers stating that they have been Buddhists through the ages.

coincides somewhat with the oral history of the villagers.

The Muang Vaen area is located along the Xam and the Vaen rivers; the latter is a tributary to the Xam. The Vaen River area is located about 35 km from Xam Neua town, and the Xam River area is located about 10 km farther east of the Vaen River area. It was the Lao Phout, Buddhist Lao, who historically settled in the Muang Vaen district; all Lao-Tai villages in the area are Lao Phout. Every Lao village has a ‘vat (ວັດ),’ a Buddhist temple. Oral tradition says that about 500 years ago, these people came from ‘Ka ya pha khan (ກ້າຍພາຂັນ),’ said to be located in present-day Vietnam (Silithong et al. 2011: 11–14). One of the documents in the Thai National Library was sent to the chief official of Muang Vaen in 1806. Thus, the district of Muang Vaen was in existence at least by then.<sup>6</sup>

Muong Kouan and Muang Na, located in the southern part of Xam Tai, used to belong to Xam Tai District. In 2012, the southern part of Xam Tai became a new district and the Muang Kouan village became the district capital. Muang Kouan is located about 36 km from Xam Tai town, and Muang Na is about 7 km farther Xam Tai. Villagers in these two areas have close relationships; they have formed an intermarriage sphere and frequently visit each other. Oral tradition says that the Lao Phout of Xam Tai came from Luang Phrabang and Vientiane by around the 14th century (Silithong et al. 2011: 5557). At that time, Xam Tai had 10 *muang*, which included both Muang Kouan and Muang Na.<sup>7</sup> Today, villages in the Muang Kouan and Muang Na areas do not belong to Xam Tai District, but they were part of the *muang* of Xam Tai<sup>8</sup> in the past. People in the newly constituted Kouan District and in Xam Tai District visit each other frequently and know one another well.<sup>9</sup> While these two areas—the Muang Vaen area and the Muang Kouan/ Muang Na area—do differ in some ways, the differences are minor when it comes to textiles and their production.

All villages that I studied, except Muang Kouan village and Tao village, are populated by Lao Phout inhabitants. These two villages, however, are populated both by Lao Phout, who were the first settlers according to their oral history, and Tai Daeng, who have not converted to Buddhism. The Tai Daeng in these two villages hold shamanic beliefs called ‘*nap theu phi* (ນັບຖືຜິ).’ In Muang Kouan, villagers stated that the Lao Phout who came from Vientiane were the first settlers and that the Tai Daeng came from Vietnam after the 1880s when the French incorporated the region into their colony, French Indochina.<sup>10</sup> In Muang Kouan village, customs of the Lao Phout and the Tai Daeng are similar and intermarriage is common. It is difficult

<sup>6</sup> I conducted research in six villages in the Muang Vaen area and spent most of the time in Muang Vaen village, which contained 85 houses and 566 people in 2013.

<sup>7</sup> I conducted research in four villages in the Muang Kouan and Muang Na area. Muang Kouan village is the district capital. It has schools, a hospital and a market, and had more than 350 houses in 2010. The villagers stated that Muang Kouan village had about 30 houses in the 1970s and about 80 houses by the end of the 1980s. At that time, only Lao-Tai people lived there. After the beginning of the 21st century, Hmong and Khmu also resettled in Muang Kouan, often from villages in the surrounding mountains. The village became the district capital in 2012, and the number of houses increased to more than 700 in 2013. The original settlers lived next to the paddy fields, and the newcomers built houses on the outskirts of the old village. I spent most of my time in the old village of Muang Kouan and conducted research there with the earlier settlers.

<sup>8</sup> Two of the documents in the National Library in Bangkok were sent to Muang Xam Tai in 1738 and 1806.

<sup>9</sup> Thus, I refer to Xam Tai District as also including the Muang Kouan and Muang Na areas in this paper.

<sup>10</sup> Muang Kouan village has a Buddhist temple and an old stupa. Unfortunately, the date of the stupa is unknown.

to distinguish the ethnicity of one group from the other on the basis of textiles, or on their component designs, motifs or weaving techniques.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, I refer to the people and textiles as Lao-Tai<sup>12</sup> in this paper.

### Contemporary Textile Production in Xam Neua and Xam Tai

In this section, I outline and describe features of present-day textile production. This will permit the reader to see what has changed and what has not.

**Setting up the loom:**<sup>13</sup> ‘*Ki* (ກີ້າ),’ or looms, are rather simple and are constructed by putting pieces of lumber together. Women or men bring the pieces and put looms together when weavers need them and take them apart and put them away when they are not using them.<sup>14</sup> Weavers have several ‘*feum* (ຝູມ),’ or reeds.<sup>15</sup> Each reed is used for a specific kind of cloth. First, women choose a reed and prepare yarn and then ‘*khon houk* (ຄົນຫຼຸກ),’ or wind yarn that will be the warp onto a warping frame according to the number of sections between the teeth in the reed. The warp yarn is then removed from the frame and one side of the loop is cut. After that, they bring a set of heddles<sup>16</sup> and a reed through which warp threads have already been threaded, left over from a cloth previously woven on this set of heddles and reed. Weavers ‘*seup houk* (ສືບຫຼຸກ),’ or thread and sley, in order to tie the new warp threads to ones that have previously been threaded through the heddles and reed set-up. All threads of the new warp are tied to the previously threaded warps. Next, the new threads are pulled through the heddles and reed to sley new yarns. Weavers then bring the whole set-up of warp, heddles and reed to the loom, lay bars onto the top of the loom frame, suspend the heddles and reed with string and put the warp on the loom. Weavers tie one end of the warp yarn to the breast beam and the other end around the top bar of the *ki* frame located over the weaver’s head, so that she can adjust the tension from her seat. After setting the warp, weavers prepare to set in the heddle system, either a supplementary weft<sup>17</sup> or a supplementary warp, if they want to weave patterns on the textiles.<sup>18</sup> Thus, when weavers start to ‘*tam houk* (ຕໍ່າຫຼຸກ),’ or weave, they already know what they will produce. That is why the villagers usually call a cloth by a specific name (for example, ‘*sin* [ສິນ],’ the traditional tube skirt; ‘*pha*

<sup>11</sup> Cheesman points out the similarity of designs and motifs in a study of Xam Neua style healing cloths, which have shamanic origin but have been adapted to Buddhist aesthetics (Cheesman 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Lao-Tai is a translation of ‘*lao-tai* (ລາວ-ໄຕ)’ in the Lao language. The name is from the ethno-linguistic classification of ethnic groups by the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC) (Messerli et al. 2008). I use this name because the villagers identify themselves primarily as Lao-Tai who are Tai-Kadai-speaking people in Laos.

<sup>13</sup> For a more detailed explanation of weaving techniques, please see Kanlaya (2001), Cheesman (2004a), and Nanthavingdouangsy (2006).

<sup>14</sup> The looms and weaving tools are usually made by male relatives.

<sup>15</sup> Weavers obtain reeds in various ways. Some reeds are made by fathers or husbands; others are bought from other villagers or in the market.

<sup>16</sup> Heddles are called ‘*khao* (ຂ້າວ).’ Women often make them by themselves with synthetic threads. In the past, they made them with cotton threads.

<sup>17</sup> Supplementary weft techniques are of two types: continuous and discontinuous.

<sup>18</sup> In the villages where I conducted research, people did not use the weft *ikat* technique. Villagers said that it was not until the 1990s that they learned and started weaving weft *ikat* cloth for sale. For personal use, weavers only use a minimal warp *ikat* on some *sin*.

*biang* [ຜັງບ່າງ],’ shawls to wear to the temple; ‘*na pha nang* [ນັ້ນຜັງນັ້ນ],’ faces of floor cushions), even while they are still weaving it; they rarely use the word ‘*pha* (ຜົກ),’ or cloth, to refer to it.

Traditionally, weavers use silk and cotton yarn. They breed two kinds of silkworms, tropical and temperate, and they distinguish three colors of cocoons: yellow, light yellow, and white.<sup>19</sup> They grow cotton in fields using shifting cultivation. I have seen only one kind of cotton, which was white in color, but I have not seen the cotton plants, which I plan to do in future research.

**The Textiles They Weave:** Women weave both for personal use and for sale. Informants stated that they started selling textiles around the year 2000.<sup>20</sup> ‘*Sin* (ສິນ),’ the traditional tube skirt for women, has become the most dominant product since 2009,<sup>21</sup> although ‘*pha* (ຜົກ),’ or cloth,<sup>22</sup> is also still popular. Today, 100-percent silk textiles are produced for sale only.<sup>23</sup> Weavers seldom weave 100-percent silk textiles for their own use. They also use cotton and now synthetic yarn to weave textiles for sale, but these prices are much lower than for silk textiles. Most textiles

woven with cotton or synthetic yarn are *sin* sold to other villagers for daily use, while 100-percent silk textiles are taken to sell in cities such as Vientiane and Luang Phrabang.

For personal use, women mostly weave *sin*. Besides *sin*, they weave the items for the brides’ trousseau, called ‘*kheuang kha* (ເຄືອງຂາ).’ I will give details of marriage customs and the brides’ trousseau later. Women also weave ‘*pha biang* (ຜັງບ່າງ),’ shawls to wear to the temple; ‘*pha khao* (ຜັງຂາວ),’ white cotton cloth (Fig. 3); ‘*pha da* (ຜັງດາ),’ cloth with which to carry a baby (Fig. 4); and ‘*pha ap* (ຜັງຫັບ),’ towels for bathing. Today, when they weave textiles for themselves, the cloth is rarely entirely silk, but is usually a combination of cotton and silk or synthetic yarn.



Figure 3: ‘*pha khao* (ຜັງຂາວ),’ or white cotton cloth, Muang Na (2010).

<sup>19</sup> Informants said that they call the colors ‘*daeng* (ດາວັງ),’ ‘*saet* (ສະເຕ)’ and ‘*khao* (ຂາວ).’

<sup>20</sup> Villagers stated that machine-made silk threads were also easily bought at this time, facilitating the production of 100-percent silk textiles for sale. Vertical heddles also became common at almost the same time that textiles began to be sold.

<sup>21</sup> Since 2009, the major market for hand-woven textiles has been domestic rather than international

<sup>22</sup> They call textiles of rectangular shape ‘*pha* (ຜົກ),’ which are sold to foreign tourists, and, they believe, used as wall hangings.

<sup>23</sup> Cloth used to decorate around the top border of a mosquito net is made completely of silk. That is the only example of 100-percent silk textiles for personal use that I discovered during my research.

Except for 100-percent silk textiles, which are exclusively for sale, the line between cloth woven for sale and for personal use is rather ambiguous. When asked whether the textiles are for sale or for personal use, weavers often answer, "Both are possible. If someone wants to buy it, I can sell it. If my family likes it, I can keep it for us."

**Use of Textiles Today:** As I wrote in the introduction, the villagers in the areas where I conducted research have ceased to use special woven textiles for rituals. However, here I give several examples of previously woven textiles that I observed being used during fieldwork.

When a '*mo mon* (ໝໍມົນ)', or shaman, conducts healing rituals, carried out during a '*boun sang khan* (ບຸນສັງຂານ)' ceremony, he dons the same type of woven item used as a blanket for babies and as a door curtain (Fig. 5). During a '*boun song sa kan* (ບຸນສົງສະການ)' funeral ceremony,<sup>24</sup> a textile with the same design produced for door curtains is used to cover the coffin when family members take it to the '*pa xa* (ປ່າຊ້າ),'

During '*boun than* (ບຸນທານ),' a funeral ritual for Lao Phout, relatives prepare a bed for the deceased.<sup>25</sup> The textiles surrounding the bed are not special but common ones for daily use. Moreover, some villagers use both cloth bought in the



Figure 4: '*pha da* (ພ້າດາ),'

or cloth to carry a baby, Muang Vaen (2013).



Figure 5: '*mo mon* (ໝໍມົນ),'

conducts a '*boun sang khan* (ບຸນສັງຂານ)' ceremony, Muang Kouan (2012).

market and hand-woven cloth together (Fig. 6). Thus, for this ceremony, they do not seem to distinguish between hand-woven and commercial textiles, much less hand-woven textiles for special use and those for daily use.

This mixed use of textiles is common for textiles for daily use as well. Villagers do not distinguish between hand-woven textiles and ones bought in the market and

<sup>24</sup> This ceremony is held by both Lao Phout and Tai Daeng.

<sup>25</sup> The beds are called '*khong than* (ຄອງທານ).' In Muang Vaen, the beds have a decorated pole in the center; these beds with center poles are called '*meng* (ມັງ).'

use both types in the same ways. In short, while specific textiles for rituals have disappeared,<sup>26</sup> female villagers continue to weave textiles for daily use, as well as for sale, without strictly distinguishing between them. Weaving is still viewed as an important duty, ‘*viak* (ວິກ),’ of women; thus, weaving skills are still common.



**Figure 6:** ‘*meng* (ເມັງ),’ or beds for the deceased, surrounded by cloth that was bought in the market as well as hand-woven cloth, Muang Vaen (2010).

### Weaving is women’s work

Among the Lao-Tai people in the Xam Neua and Xam Tai areas, all individuals are divided into two genders: ‘*phou xai* (ຜູ້ຊາຍ),’ or men, and ‘*phou nyung* (ຜູ້ຍຸງ),’ or women. Their daily work is also divided into two domains: men’s work and women’s work. For example, when a ‘*boun* (ບູນ)’ is held, that is, when a host family treats guests to a feast serving the meat of domestic animals, fish, sticky rice and alcohol, men organize the rites and accept guests in public. However, steamed rice and alcohol, which are indispensable to such feasts, are exclusively prepared by women. In other words, *boun* can only be held when male and female family members (e.g., husband and wife) cooperate. In such divisions of labor, weaving is categorized as women’s work.

My research shows that the majority of Lao-Tai women in these villages possesses weaving skills and is engaged in various stages of textile production.

<sup>26</sup> I saw cloth for a ‘*mo mon*’ only one time during my research. I also have seen foreign tourists come to the village with pictures of ceremonial textiles several times. They asked if there were such textiles there, and the villagers always answered that they did not make them anymore. These data indicate that villagers know about ceremonial textiles but do not now make them.

Indeed, the level of skill and preference of women varies; some women are highly skilled weavers while others are not. Some women prefer to stay at home to weave, while others prefer to work outside the home. However, even the women who are not as good at weaving and prefer to work outside the home still take part in weaving. Regardless of a woman's preference or productivity, all women have certain weaving skills and produce textiles in the villages where I conducted research.

However, informants rarely regard weaving as '*asip* (ອາສີບ)', an occupation. They say their *asip* is '*het hai het na* (ເຮັດໄກເຮັດນາ),'<sup>27</sup> or farming. They grow rice in the paddy fields and practice shifting cultivation on the slopes of the mountains. They grow plants and vegetables among rice plants or in small gardens. They keep domestic animals such as buffaloes, cattle, pigs, goats, chickens and ducks, and have ponds to raise fish. Women take care of the fireplace in the home and cook for the family, look after babies and small children, and do other tasks. Weaving is one of women's responsibilities and part of their regular workload, as is farming.<sup>28</sup> In this way, weaving is a common skill for women.

## Weaving and Marriage

In Xam Neua and Xam Tai, weaving is seen as important women's work; thus, all women commit to textile production. One of the reasons for this is that weaving is directly connected with marriage customs. Villagers say, "Women in Xam Neua/Xam Tai, if they cannot weave, they cannot get married."<sup>29</sup> Weaving is linked to marriage, because women must learn how to weave and prepare '*kheuang kha* (ຄේංຂ້າ)' the brides' trousseau, by the time they get married.<sup>30</sup> This custom exists today, even though parts of it have been abbreviated or changed.<sup>31</sup> Marriage is an extremely important event in a villager's life. When people meet for the first time, they usually ask each other what village they live in and whether they are married or not. This convention indicates that marital status is important, since it demonstrates the life stage they are in and how the person should be addressed: formally, as married and mature members of society, or not. In other words, if a person is not married, that person is not seen as a mature and independent member of the society.

Lao-Tai people in Houa Phanh Province construct patrilineal families. Only sons (not daughters) live with parents after marriage, except when parents have no son to take care of them. Property is supposed to be divided equally among sons, while daughters normally do not inherit any property. This is because daughters are supposed to marry into another family, become daughters-in-law to that family and inherit property through their husbands. This custom affects rites for ancestors and funerals.

After marriage, a woman joins the groom's family and shares the

<sup>27</sup> The meaning of this phrase is 'to make fields of shifting cultivation and rice paddies.'

<sup>28</sup> McIntosh (2007) points out that weaving skills are learned as informal education for women.

<sup>29</sup> They said, "*Tam houk bo ben/dai leo, ao phoua bo dai* (ຕໍ່ຫຼັກບໍ່ບັນ/ໄດ້ແວ້ວ, ເອົາຜົວບໍ່ໄດ້.)"

<sup>30</sup> Many previous studies have reported that woven textiles are indispensable for marriages of Lao-Tai people and that there is a custom that the bride's family prepares textiles as gifts for the groom's family (Gittinger and Lefferts 1992, Connors 1996, Kanlaya 2001, Sumitr 2003, Cheesman 2004a, Gittinger 2004, McIntosh 2007).

<sup>31</sup> For example, they can buy some of the items in the market; thus they do not necessarily weave all of them.

responsibility to conduct rites for the ancestors of her husband's family. Hence, a Tai Daeng woman married into a Lao Phout family becomes Lao Phout and follows Buddhist customs, while a Lao Phout woman married into a Tai Daeng family follows Tai Daeng customs. When a woman passes away, her funeral is held using the same rituals as her husband and she is buried beside him.<sup>32</sup>

In addition, Lao-Tai have taboos regarding the selection of a marriage partner: cousins and brothers- and sisters-in-law cannot marry. In this system, all married women in a house are from outside the family and the single women in that house will soon marry into another family. Thus, for women, a bride's trousseau is very important since the items are given to their new relatives as she joins her husband's family.

I interviewed 158 women<sup>33</sup> in Xam Neua and Xam Tai Districts regarding their trousseau. Seventy interviewees provided information about the types and amounts of cloth assembled for their trousseaus. Interestingly, even though the amounts varied, the items were the same:<sup>34</sup> a large, rectangular pillow;<sup>35</sup>



**Figure 8:** 'pha kang (ຜ້າກັງ),' or a door curtain, Muang Kouan (2012).



**Figure 7:** 'mone tao (ໝາອນຕົ້ງ),' or a big pillow and 'pha nang (ຜ້ານັ້ງ),' or floor cushions, Muang Kouan (2012).



**Figure 9:** *mung* (dam) (ມັງ[ດຳ]) or a mosquito net, Muang Kouan (2012).

<sup>32</sup> This statement is based on research in Muang Kouan. Neither Lao Phout nor Tai Daeng cremate the dead in this village.

<sup>33</sup> I interviewed women in 10 villages located in the areas mentioned in the 'Research Methods' section.

<sup>34</sup> Sumitr (2003) reports on the items for the trousseau of Tai Daeng women in Xam Neua and Xam Tai Districts. The items he lists are the same as mine: *sin*; blankets for babies; door curtains; mosquito nets; (small) pillows; floor cushions; sleeping mats; and big pillows.

<sup>35</sup> The large, rectangular pillow is called 'mone tao (ໝາອນຕົ້ງ)' in the Xam Tai area and 'mone ing (ໝາອນອີງ)' or 'mone kao (ໝາອນຕົກ)' in Muang Vaen. It is characterized as 'mone nyai (ໝາອນໃຫຍ), a big pillow.

'*pha nang* (ຜັນໜັງ),' a floor cushion (Fig. 7); '*mone (noi)* (ໝາອນນົ້ອລ)', a (small) pillow; '*seua (none)* (ເສື່ອນອນ)', a mattress for sleeping; '*pha kang* (ຜັກກັງ)', a door curtain (Fig. 8); '*moung (dam)* (ມັງ(ດໍາ)),' a mosquito net (Fig. 9); '*pha hom* (ຜັຫົມ),' a blanket; '*pha toum* (ຜັດຕູ້ມ)', a baby blanket (Fig. 10); and *sin*, a tube skirt. I provide five examples of brides' trousseaus (three from Muang Vaen and two from Muang Kouan) in Table 1.

No.	Village	Year	The number of the items							
			mosquito net	door curtain	sleeping mattress	blanket	pillow	big pillow	floor cushion	<i>sin</i>
1	M. Vaen	1981	1	some	10	80	40	some	40	70
2	M. Vaen	1993	*1	3	8	10	20	2	20	20-30
3	M. Vaen	2006	*1	1	*some	4-5	20	2	20	90
4	M. Kouan	1984	1	4	16	10	20	1	20	30-40
5	M. Kouan	2008	1	4	24	16	20	1	20	20

\*: market purchase

**Table 1:** Five examples of brides' trousseaus



**Figure 10:** '*pha tum* (ຜັດຕູ້ມ),' or a blanket for babies, Muang Kouan (2012).

These examples show that the types of trousseau items appear constant and common throughout this area. The choice of items for the brides' trousseau itself is significant. First, many of the items are gifts for the groom's relatives. The *sin* is a typical example. These garments are given to the groom's female relatives, such as the bride's mother-in-law and her new sisters-in-law. Brides say that a big pillow is given to their father-in-law. Floor cushions are often given to the groom's relatives if there are a sufficient number of them in the trousseau.

Second, except for *sin*, all the items in the trousseau are for household use (Figs. 11, 12). These items include mosquito nets, sleeping mattresses, blankets and pillows, door curtains that partition the communal space for sleeping and floor cushions that are indispensable when hosting guests. Door curtains and floor cushions are frequently exchanged for new ones when sons marry

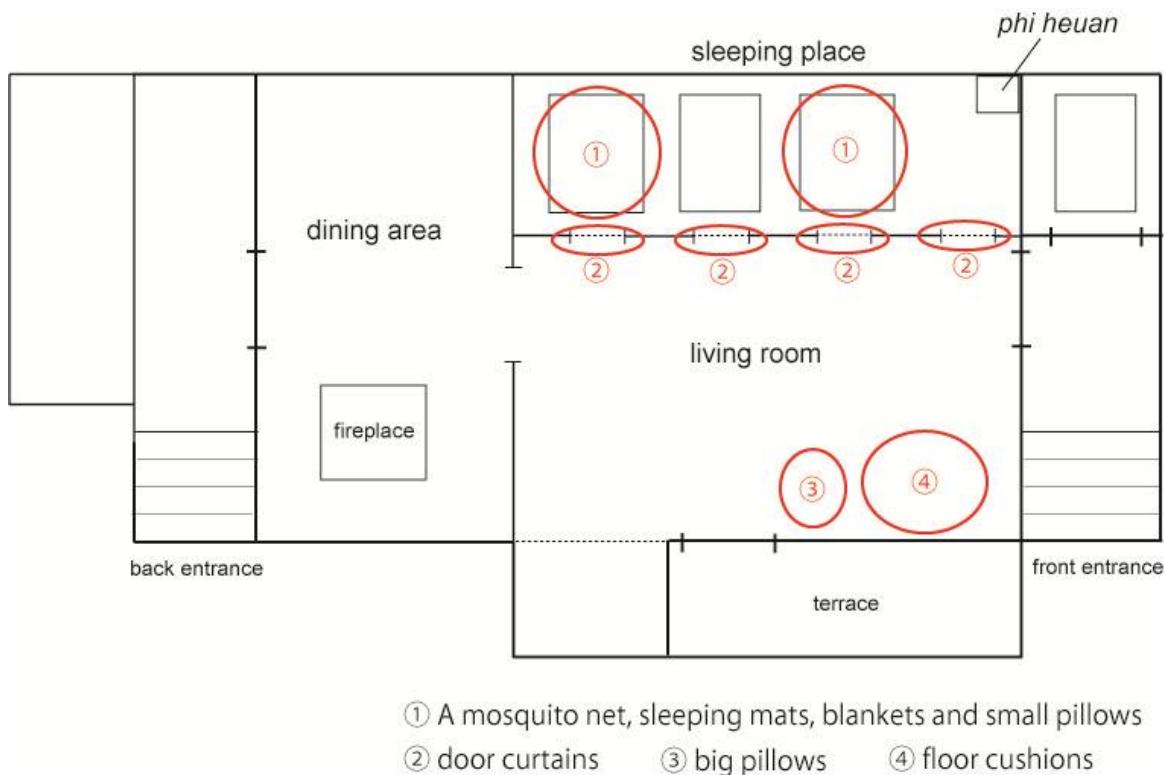
and new ones have been provided as gifts from their bride's trousseau. In this manner, these items are closely connected to the house, or '*heuan* (ເຮືອນ).' A new bride, indeed, furnishes her new home. Marriage binds people to a house, where they give birth and raise children. The house is the setting where a woman develops and strengthens relationships with people, mainly the groom's relatives, with whom she cohabits.



**Figure 11:** 'heuan (ເຮືອນ),' or a house in Muang Kouan (2013).

attend and observe the negotiations from behind their male relatives.<sup>38</sup>

In Xam Neua and Xam Tai, a Lao-Tai couple getting married holds two ceremonies. The first is the engagement ceremony,<sup>36</sup> in which the groom's relatives visit the bride's house and ask her relatives and ancestors for her hand in marriage. The groom's father and his brothers discuss the engagement with the bride's father and his brothers in the living room and agree on the terms. This discussion is held in the space in front of the 'phi heuan' (ຜູ້ເຮືອນ), or spirit house.<sup>37</sup> Female relatives do not join in this discussion but do



**Figure 12:** The inside of the 'heuan (ເຮືອນ)' pictured in Figure 11.

<sup>36</sup> The ceremony is called 'chot pavat (ຈົດປະຫວັດ)' for a formal engagement and 'lom phai (ລົມໄຟ)' for a simple one. It is also called 'dong noi (ດອງນ້ອຍ),' or small wedding.

<sup>37</sup> In Muang Kouan, when the engagement ceremony was held in 2011, the hosts opened the curtain door of the space enclosing the 'phi heuan.' After an agreement had been reached, a low table was brought into the space and elderly male relatives had dinner in front of the 'phi heuan.' In Muang Vaen, an informant told me that the purpose of the engagement ceremony is to obtain permission from the bride's ancestors in the 'phi heuan,' although people do not pay much attention to the ancestors today.

<sup>38</sup> Village officials often join the discussion as observers of the terms of the engagement.

After the engagement, a bride prepares textiles for her trousseau for the second ceremony, called '*dong nyai* (ດອງໃຫຍ່),' or big wedding, which is held approximately a year later. The groom's family is expected to pay a '*kha dong* (ຄ່າ ດອງ),' a bride price that includes the cost of the two marriage ceremonies. Correspondingly, the bride's family prepares the bride's trousseau, primarily consisting of gifts for the groom's family.

I will now describe the process of *dong nyai* that I observed in Muang Vaen village in March 2013. Both the bride and groom were teachers in the two local high schools, and they already had two children.<sup>39</sup> The engagement ceremony had been held a few years ago. On the morning of the *dong nyai*, the bride's family held a feast at their house in Phiang village, about 10 km from Muang Vaen village. After the groom and his relatives reached the bride's house, the feast began. The bride and her family counted and packed the bride's trousseau and loaded the items onto a truck. Guests of the bride's family gave money and rice<sup>40</sup> to help them. Several guests also contributed '*pha nang* (ຜັກນັງ),' or floor cushions, and '*mone (noi)* (ໝາອນນັ້ອຍ),' or (small) pillows, to add to bride's trousseau. After the feast, the groom's relatives took the bride and the trousseau to the groom's house. The bride's relatives, excluding the bride's parents, went along with them. It was '*khalam* (ຄະລຳ),' or taboo, for the bride's parents to go with their daughter to attend the ceremony in the groom's house. This part of the rite is called '*song phai* (ສົ່ງໄຟຟ້າ),'<sup>41</sup> or to take/send the daughter-in-law (to the groom's house).

When the groom and bride reached Muang Vaen where his parents lived, they exited the car and walked to his house holding umbrellas that were given to them by the groom's mother. The groom's mother also gave the bride a set of weaving tools to carry to her new home. In front of the groom's house, seats were set up and goods, including the bride's trousseau from her parents' house, were placed on the seats. The bride and her relatives sat next to the goods and waited for the ceremony to begin, at around 3 o'clock in the afternoon. The groom's relatives came to the house one-by-one to help and to attend the ceremony. The groom's female relatives brought *sin*, which would be given to the bride, and handed them to the groom's mother. While waiting for the ceremony to begin, the groom's family provided dishes of food and alcohol to the guests. At the beginning of the ceremony, the groom and the bride walked to the front entrance of the groom's house, carrying the umbrellas and, for the bride, the set of weaving tools that the groom's mother gave to her. Outside the front entrance, the groom's mother waited for them with a bowl filled with water. She poured water on the groom's feet and then did the same to the bride's feet. This part of the rite is called '*hap phai* (ຮັບໄຟຟ້າ),' or accepting the daughter-in-law.

<sup>39</sup> If a woman gets pregnant before the engagement, the relatives of both sides have a meeting to negotiate whether the couple will get married. If the conclusion is affirmative, they are engaged. If their decision is negative, the relatives of the baby's father must pay compensation to the woman's family, and usually the baby is adopted by another couple. I met two women who were engaged, and each had a baby but did not finish the marriage ceremony because their fiancés went to school in town. Before the marriage ceremony, the women and their babies lived in their parents' house. One of them had a marriage ceremony when her child turned two. Then she moved to her husband's house with her child.

<sup>40</sup> They usually bring '*khao san* (ຂໍາສານ),' or threshed uncooked rice, to help the bride's family hold feasts for guests.

<sup>41</sup> In Xam Neua dialect, the word '*phai* (ໄຟຟ້າ)' is pronounced '*pheu* (ເພູ້).'

Afterwards, the couple entered the house. In the center of the room was a low table for the '*het khouan* (ເຮັດຂວັນ)' rite; it held cooked meat of domestic animals, rice, alcohol, two eggs and cotton threads for '*mat khaen* (ມັດຕະເນ), or tying the wrists.<sup>42</sup> The *sin* that the groom's female relatives brought for the bride were also placed on the table (Fig. 13), as was some money put on empty plates by participants.

The *mat khaen* rite was the highlight of the wedding, because the bride formally became a daughter-in-law, a member of the groom's family, once it was completed. When the *mat khaen* ceremony was over, all of the participants went outside to a field and had a feast, drinking alcohol and dancing until midnight.

This process shows that these ceremonies are necessary in order for the groom's family to accept the bride as a new member of the family and household. They will all live together in the same '*heuan* (ເຮືອນ),' or house, in which the groom was born, where his parents live, and where the spirits of their ancestors come and go. These are important steps, bringing the bride formally into the groom's parents' house; she cannot be a full member of the groom's family before the steps of these ceremonies are carried out. After the *dong nyai* ceremony, a bride leaves her parents' house to formally become a daughter-in-law living in her husband's parents' house as a member of their family.<sup>43</sup> The taboo that the bride's parents are prohibited from going to the groom's house with their daughter also illustrates the finality of the bride becoming a new member of her husband's family. As in this case, it was not unusual for a couple to have children before marriage in Xam Neua and Xam Tai Districts when I conducted fieldwork. Having children does not necessarily mean that a couple is married and co-habiting. The *dong noi* and *dong nyai* ceremonies must be held in order for the bride to become a full member of the



**Figure 13:** *Sin* on the left side of the '*pha khouan* (ພາຂວັນ),' or the low table used for the '*mat khaen* (ມັດຕະເນ)' ceremony, Muang Vaen (2013).

<sup>42</sup> The ritual proceeded in the following way. The couple and their relatives sat around the low table. The '*mo a* (ໝູ້ອາ),' reciter of prayers, sat in front of the couple and recited a blessing for them. After the recitation, the guests brought cotton threads to the couple and tied the threads around the couple's wrists.

<sup>43</sup> There is no regulation about which son should live with the parents. In this case, the groom's parents did not have any son living with them yet, thus the couple and their two children were expected to live in the husband's parents' house. However, in practice this case is somewhat exceptional. Because the bride teaches at the high school near the house where she was born, she and her children stay in her parents' house from Monday to Friday, come to the husband's house on Friday evening and stay there on the weekend.

groom's family, which means co-habiting in the same house.<sup>44</sup>

The day of the *dong nyai* is the first occasion for the exchange of textiles between members of the two families. A bride brings her trousseau to the groom's house, and the groom's female relatives give *sin* as gifts to the bride's female relatives. Moreover, women in Xam Tai bring to their new home not only textiles but also a set of weaving tools when they get married. However, in Muang Vaen of Xam



**Figure 14:** Mother-in-law giving a set of weaving tools to the bride before the bride enters the former's home to conclude the marriage ceremony, Muang Vaen (2013).

Neua District it is customary for the mother-in-law to give a set of weaving tools to her son's bride (Fig. 14), as described above. Both customs indicate that women are supposed to continue to weave after (as well as before) marriage. In Muang Kouan village, a 35-year-old female villager showed me the *sin* she wove at the age of 30 and said, "I won't sell them because I want to give them to my daughters-in-law when my sons get married." Traditionally, women stop weaving at around 40 years old, in part because their eyesight is not sharp enough to weave intricate designs. Instead, they spin yarn for their daughters' textile production. Actually, women at that age do not need to weave because their daughters and daughters-in-law weave and give them textiles. From my observations, half or more of all *sin* that a woman owns were not bought from other sources nor were they woven by the owner, but were given to her as gifts by others.

## Textiles as Property

Weaving is embedded in the marriage process, enabling the bride to become a member of the groom's family by living in the same *heuan*, or house. After marriage, women continue to weave and exchange textiles to develop and strengthen social relationships. The villagers of Xam Neua and Xam Tai Districts

<sup>44</sup> The future bride is regarded as a full member of the groom's family only after the *dong nyay* ceremony is completed. However, after the formal engagement ceremony ('*chot pavat* [ສົດປະຫວັດ]') is held, a woman can, in practice, live in either her fiancé's house or her parent's house. Sometimes a bride chooses to live in her fiancé's house, but more often she chooses to stay in her parents' house, especially in cases where her fiancé does not live at home (e.g., he is away at school). An engaged man continues to live in his parent's house, not in his fiancé's parents' house, except in the case in which he is going to marry into the bride's family because they do not have a son of their own to live with them. After the *dong nyay* ceremony, the couple lives together as relatives of the groom's family. If the groom's parents still have no son to live with, the newly married couple lives with them.

frequently exchange various things among themselves, such as rice, alcohol and occasionally money, as well as labor, to maintain their social relationships, since these relationships are critical to them. Hand-woven textiles are also gifts of exchange and help to strengthen social relationships. When we remember that daughters normally do not inherit property from parents and their lives depend on the families into which they marry, we can imagine the important role textiles play as gifts of exchange. Exchanging textiles particularly helps women maintain relationships among female relatives. Thus, it is logical that the day of the *dong nyai* ceremony is the beginning of these important relationships and is also the first occasion to exchange textiles between a bride and a groom's female relatives.

Therefore, textiles have value as gifts to develop social relationships. This role makes textiles valued property. Every house has a '*pavaem* (ປະຕົມ),' a lidded, cane basket, or a cabinet (that has replaced the *pavaem*), and both are usually kept locked. Unused hand-woven textiles are stored in the *pavaem* or in the cabinet, along with '*ngeun* (ຈູນ),' money, which includes both silver ingots and currency (Fig. 15). The grouping of these two precious objects shows that textiles should be regarded as property, not only because they can be sold, but also because they can be exchanged and thus play a crucial role in maintaining social relationships in village life.



**Figure 15:** Textiles and other goods stored in a '*pavaem* (ປະຕົມ),' or a lidded cane basket, Muang Kouan (2012).

## Conclusions

In this paper, I state that village life in Xam Neua and Xam Tai is based on the division of labor between men and women; thus, marriage is crucial. I point out that weaving is categorized as women's work and is directly connected with marriage, since weaving produces items for the bride's trousseau. In Houa Phanh Province, Lao-Tai people construct patrilineal families. Sons live with their parents and inherit property from their parents, while daughters normally do not inherit property. When a woman marries, she becomes a member of her husband's family. Based on this custom, women need ways to construct and strengthen relationships with relatives. Exchanging textiles is one of them. The day of the marriage ceremony is the first occasion to exchange textiles between a bride and groom's

relatives. In Muang Vaen, it is customary for the future mother-in-law to give a set of weaving tools to her son's bride, while in Xam Tai, the brides' parents prepare a set of weaving tools for their daughter when she gets married. As the customs show, even after marriage, women continue to weave and exchange textiles to develop and

strengthen these relationships. Textiles are regarded as valued property, partly because of the important role they play; thus, unused textiles are stored with money and in locked containers.

The title of this paper posed the question, "Why do they weave?" Women weave partly because textile production is a good source of cash income. However, women are also motivated to weave by their cultural context. Today, of course, weaving to earn money should not be ignored as motivation, and this motivation has also been changing their customs. I argue, however, that women maintain their social custom of weaving not only because they can sell textiles for money. On the contrary, women living in Xam Neua and Xam Tai Districts produce textiles because they are motivated to weave through a particular cultural context, since weaving is embedded in the marriage process through which a bride becomes a member of her groom's family, living in the house of her in-laws. Marriage is the most significant rite of passage in village life for women and textiles play a crucial role in this process.

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