

# **Fashioning Lao Identity: Textiles, Representation and the Grand Fashion Show**

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## **Abstract**

When models wearing contemporary Lao fashions stepped out on the runway of the Grand Fashion Show, they catapulted the question of how contemporary Lao fashion designers represent themselves, Laos, the Lao, Lao textile traditions, and their vision of contemporary Lao fashion into the limelight. In this paper, we focus primarily on questions of identity, representation and authenticity projected by fashion show organizers and designers. We draw on observations and photographs of fashions we took at the Lao Handicraft Festival Grand Fashion Show, interviews with designers and written material from the Festival and the fashion show. Using content and representational analyses, we examine the use of traditional Lao styles and elements as well as the contemporary Asian and Euro-American styles presented at the show. We find that most of the fashion-show designers emphasized past and current Lao fashions through the preservation of Lao styles and elements that emphasize their authentic origin and the unique cultural heritage of Laos. At the same time, they were redesigning these styles with the creative integration of elements from non-Lao fashions that potentially extend the styles across the borders of Laos and into the international world of fashion.

## **Introduction**

The Grand Fashion Show of the Lao Handicraft Festival highlights Lao textile companies and their products. The Lao Handicraft Festival (the Festival) is an annual event in Vientiane, the capital of Laos. It is organized by the Lao Handicraft Association and the Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry; the Grand Fashion Show is one of its major events. The Grand Fashion Show reveals how the Festival and participating companies present themselves and their products and, in the process, how they represent Laos, Lao identity and culture, and Lao textile traditions.

Our project focuses on Lao textile designer-entrepreneurs who own and operate relatively small textile and fashion businesses that have developed out of the cultural and social changes in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR; also Laos) over the past quarter of a century. We examine how they use Lao textiles to create contemporary fashions and how they present themselves and their designs at a national handicraft fair fashion show. Specifically, we examine how the Tenth Annual Handicraft Festival in 2011 and its Grand Fashion Show represent Lao identity and Lao textile tradition. We ask what authenticity claims and concerns are expressed by Festival organizers and embedded in the marketing styles of Lao silk textile designer-entrepreneurs as they re-envision and reweave their traditional textiles for new markets. We explore how a Lao textile may 'change' as it moves across cultural

boundaries and into the international fashion milieu, taking on not only new styles but new shapes as well.

We begin by tracing the development of Lao textiles and textile companies. We then introduce the concept of identity and its representation and authenticity in fashion, and then present and discuss our observations from the fashion show.

## Textiles in Laos

Textiles and textile production in Laos have a long and storied history (Bounyavong and Nanthavongdouangsy 2001; Nanthavongdouangsy n.d.; Ireson-Doolittle and Moreno-Black 2004; McIntosh 2004; Van Esterik 1999). The textiles produced by the Lao weaving businesses we study are inspired by clothing, household items, festival wear, Buddhist ritual items, and trade goods produced by Lao village women and royal weavers. Women in some Lao villages specialized in silk textiles, but Lao women in all villages wove cotton cloth. This village-based weaving continued at least into the 1950s, though factory-made cloth from Hong Kong and Japan gradually displaced handmade cloth in many areas during the 1950s and 1960s. More than a decade of war (1962–1975) on Lao soil disrupted textile production and life itself in many areas (Ireson-Doolittle and Moreno-Black 2004: 122–126). By the early 1970s, most village weavers in the Vientiane Plain had stored their looms (Barber 1979), with the exception of women in Hatsayfong District near Vientiane, who continued to weave elegant silk skirt lengths and skirt borders, marketing them locally and in the nearby capital city.

The Lao People's Revolutionary Party that came to power in 1975 viewed the elaborate hand-woven silks that Lao women had been making since at least the 14th century as the cloth of royalty and of the elite (Christie 1982; Ireson-Doolittle and Moreno-Black 2004; Van Esterik 1999). The Party stifled silk production, but it encouraged the weaving and wearing of traditional cotton textiles using similar skills and designs. Closed borders, the resulting lack of factory-made cloth and government policy that Lao women wear traditional skirts (*sin*) also encouraged the return to weaving in both village and town. The end of the era of Soviet-style communism in the late 1980s brought economic liberalization to the Lao PDR. This included the promulgation of laws regulating outside investment, contracts, inheritance, property rights, trade and, by 1991, a constitution. Slowly and cautiously, private entrepreneurs began to open businesses.

When the master weaver and co-owner of Phaeng Mai Gallery in Vientiane won the 1991 UNESCO prize for her intricate and complex tapestry, Lao weaving received an important stamp of approval from a well-known international organization (Vallard 2011).<sup>1</sup> Several well-positioned women, including the UNESCO prize winner, established companies producing 'artistic textiles' based on traditional Lao silk weaving

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<sup>1</sup> The prize-winning piece was both a tapestry (i.e., wall hanging) and a piece that utilized the weaving technique called "tapestry." For extensive discussion of this prize, see Vallard 2011.

techniques and motifs.<sup>2</sup> The emergence of these weaving businesses and their galleries heralded not only a revival of silk weaving in Laos but also movement of Lao textiles into the international market.

The success of artistic textile companies established in the 1990s inspired others to model their work on this success by establishing their own companies and—in some cases— ‘borrowing’ the loom modifications and designs of successful companies. In 2001, more than a decade after the end of socialism in Laos, only a few Lao businesses produced artistic Lao textiles for export. Even among the four companies we initially studied in 2001, three of them sold at least half of their textiles in Vientiane. By 2006, however, three of the companies were exporting at least 65 percent of their production (Ireson-Doolittle and Moreno-Black 2010: 161–162). Recent economic development, especially in energy and mining, benefitted the Lao who are associated with these activities, mainly educated Lao and upper-level government officials. Members of their families are now also purchasing from some of these companies. Lao textile designers recently expanded their vision of Lao textiles as they move into new markets. In the process they have recontextualized Lao motifs, weaving skills and techniques, and clothing styles (Van Esterik 1994) demonstrating how Lao fabrics can be used to make sophisticated clothing for local elite and international venues.

Government policy has responded to the success of these textile companies. The owners of Phaeng Mai (one of whom won the UNESCO prize in 1991), working through the government-encouraged Lao Handicraft Association, were among the founders of the Lao Handicraft Festival, an annual event that began in 2002. In the same decade, the owner of Nikone, an active textile exporter, was praised as a model of Lao entrepreneurship in the government press. The Lao government supports the Lao Handicraft Festival every year. Importantly, owners of these companies have regularly received visas for international business travel.

These examples, the Nikone model of Lao entrepreneurship and the UNESCO prize winner, demonstrate that textiles not only serve to reproduce ancient motifs, they also have become signifiers of Lao nationhood after communism and conveyers of Lao government policies (Van Esterik 1999).<sup>3</sup> Thus, these designers influence culture and images of economic success in Laos.

As represented in this study, the designers and their businesses are unique in several ways. Their work is based on still-living textile traditions involving intricate textile designs and techniques, their businesses were established and are owned mainly

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<sup>2</sup> We use the term ‘artistic textile’ to designate complex and often intricate textiles integrating motifs and techniques drawn from one of several textile traditions found in the Lao PDR today and in the recent past. The weaving practices were well established and customary ways of creating everyday and ritual fabrics. These traditions are part of the “unique cultural heritage” touted by both Mr. Vongsay and Mrs. Chinda in their Grand Fashion Show speeches (see below). Some of the most common weaving techniques are supplementary weft (both continuous and discontinuous), tapestry and *ikat*. It may take a skilled weaver several months to make a larger piece with a complex and intricate pattern.

<sup>3</sup> This phenomenon is not limited to Laos. For the role of silk textiles as symbols of Japanese and Thai society, see Yakimatsu et al. (2008). For the role of the kimono in delineating Japanese identity, specifically women’s identity, see Goldstein-Gidoni (1999). See McIntosh (2004) for textiles as signifiers of Phouthai (a Lao-related ethnic group) identity.

by women, and they are economically successful; some of them emerged in the uncertain economic and political climate of post-Soviet Laos.<sup>4</sup>

### Identity, Fashion and Authenticity

Many scholars have grappled with the idea of identity (Mead 1985; Baker 1999; Eisenberg 2001; Maness 1993; Buckingham 2008). Eisenberg suggests that identities are not answers, ideals or ends, but rather questions, projects and journeys (2001). Since fashion is part of the culture that individuals experience, it can also become an important aspect of personal identity. Identity then is dynamic and multilayered—partly personal and unique, and partly social and shared (Buckingham 2008; Crane and Bovone 2006; Eisenberg 2001; Mead 1985; Cazden et al. 2000). Textiles, particularly when crafted into clothing, have the power to communicate messages about identity to a general audience through how they are produced, used, worn, or otherwise manipulated (Green 2009). Clothing and adornment reveal the wearer's conceived and projected identities as well as ideological values.

For example, Thai dress, including Thai skirts (*pha sin*) and T-shirts, became fashionable among the Tai of the Dehong Prefecture of China's Yunnan Province as a way of displaying wealth within their communities and expressing difference from the dominant Han Chinese, thus “destabilizing the cultural imbalance between themselves and the Chinese” (Siriphon 2007: 219). Across the border in Laos, in another example, skirts (*sin*) woven with Sam Neua techniques and designs were not popular among urban women in Vientiane during the first decades of the Lao PDR. However, as the Lao state became more ethnically integrated and weavers and textiles from Sam Neua<sup>5</sup> became more visible in Vientiane and internationally, Sam Neua *sin* and textiles became more desirable. The increasing availability and fashionability of Thai clothing among wealthier Dehong Tai individuals in China and of Sam Neua textiles in Vientiane suggest that, indeed, fashion lies at the crossroads of collective and personal identity dynamics (Aspers and Godart 2013; Crane 2000; Kawamura 2005).

In their discussion of the approaches to the study of fashion, Crane and Bovone note:

Firms that produce fashionable clothing represent a particularly interesting case for the study of cultural production for two reasons: (1) the necessity to innovate by altering the symbolic values attached to styles of clothing. Several times each year new collections must be created which are expected to combine elements of previous styles with new and different ideas; and (2) the necessity to produce clothes whose symbolic values resonate with those of consumers ... (Crane and Bovone 2006: 321)

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<sup>4</sup> This study is part of our broader work on five artistic textile companies and their designer-owners based in Vientiane and marketing their products internationally. Our previous work focused on their personal histories and the commodity chain relationships of their companies. In this paper, we expand our previous work to encompass the fashion offerings of other companies as well. See Ireson-Doolittle and Moreno-Black (2010; 2004); Ireson-Doolittle, Moreno-Black and Pholsena (2002).

<sup>5</sup> A remote area of Laos peopled mainly by ethnic groups.

In particular, they suggest that small entrepreneurial firms—like those participating in the fashion show we studied—are likely to have face-to-face relationships with their clients that permit the firms' owners and designers to assess their customers' attitudes and tastes as the designers go through the process of defining and redefining the symbolic values that their clothing styles express (Crane and Bovone 2006: 322). The distinctive style of designers striving to develop their own character can incorporate shared memories and experiences (Ling 2011). These can include ethnic and cultural memories and experiences. Clothing designed with inherent hybridization can have the ability to resonate with cultural identity, resist colonial power, and create a dialogue with local communities and ethnic groups about cultural and political issues. The Grand Fashion Show we analyze presents numerous instances of such hybridization. As suggested by Hansen (2004), examining stylistic choices used by designers as a complex and heterogeneous process—as we do in our study—can clarify these dynamics.

Authenticity is tied to the concept of identity. Similar to cultural heritage, it is “a mode of cultural production in the present that has discursive recourse to the past” (Silverman 2007: 344; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998). Consequently, it is not surprising to find claims of authenticity at fashion shows that highlight cultural heritage. Authenticity seemingly refers to something that is genuine and real, has been well established, and is specified by custom. However, the literature demonstrates that authenticity can be based on more than the apparently static past. Graburn (1976) noted that authenticity is multiple and multidimensional, while Appadurai (1986) described a ‘machinery of authenticity’ requiring work by experts in museums and the academy to certify the authenticity of cultural items. Buyers, promoters and even social scientists who advise, exhibit or interpret the work of particular artisans can “become key partners in the ongoing creation of cultural realities” (Kasfir 1999; Price 2006: 608). In fact, this paper may become part of the ‘machinery of authenticity’ for Lao textiles and fashion clothing.

Cohodas' work on Karuk basket making among Native Americans of northern California showed how Karuk baskets became icons of Karuk identity to collectors (Cohodas 1999). This generated significant interest in northern California baskets and provided market opportunities for native basket weavers to create and sell their own innovative and unique works of basket art, based in part on techniques and styles of Karuk basket-weaving (Field 2009: 510). These “new” baskets made claims to authenticity *and* originality. Field used Cohodas' ideas in his work on indigenous San Juan potters and their pottery in eastern Nicaragua to identify four kinds of authenticity: ethnographic, original high art, engineered, and brand-named authenticities. Three of these are relevant to our Lao case. *Ethnographically authentic* objects “accurately represent a bounded, named culture, cultural group, or cultural identity” (Field 2009: 510). *Authentic original high art* must be “the product of a well-known and highly appreciated producer and identifiable and valued... itself” (Field 2009: 511). Finally, “the art and craft of minority groups can also be affixed with *name-brand authenticity*” (Field 2009: 511), much like items branded with a corporate logo.

Similarly, Wherry suggests, “Handicraft artisans and entrepreneurs sometimes create multiple meanings of authenticity to accommodate, modify, and at times resist, the effects of globalization on local culture and local economic life” (Wherry 2006: 5). In

his study of wood carvers in northern Thailand (see also Cohen [2000]), he demonstrated that interaction between producers, buyers and sellers in a particular political and economic situation produced various authenticity claims while contesting others.

Authenticity, then, can be multiple, multidimensional, situated, and subject to changing social, economic and political conditions. Identity, authenticity and hybridization are central elements of the Lao fashion scene as presented at the Grand Fashion Show.

## **Methodology**

We attended the tenth Lao Handicraft Festival in October 2011. Our purpose was to learn how the companies we were studying and the broader community of Laotian textile producers presented themselves, their products and Laos itself at this national and potentially international event. We attended the Festival every day, observing the opening ceremony, craft demonstrations and the Grand Fashion Show in particular, and browsing the exhibition and sales booths of handcrafted textile producers from all over Laos. Speeches, brochures, observational notes, photographs of the clothing and models taken throughout the fashion show and interviews are our main sources of data.

For the purpose of this study, we used the tools of content analysis to identify and examine the ways Lao identity was represented in the clothing at the Grand Fashion Show, the material used to promote the fashion show and interviews with some of the designers. The project, grounded in anthropology/ethnography and sociology, was informed by overlapping theoretical approaches including feminist, representational studies (Babcock 1993, Silverman 2004) and analysis of the process of self-commodification (Bunten 2008). We drew on these to provide an understanding of how the fashion designers produced and reproduced Lao identity through the fashions they presented at the Grand Fashion show.

Content analysis is a research tool used to determine the presence of specific words or concepts within texts, interviews or artifacts. Researchers quantify and analyze the presence, meanings and relationships of words or artifacts, and then make inferences about the messages within the culture and time of which these were a part. In this study, in addition to written promotional material and narratives from interviews, we conceptualized the items of clothing highlighted at the fashion show as texts/artifacts that could be read and analyzed.

To conduct content analysis on the photographs, we began by grouping the fashions into categories and then examining the presence and use of traditional Lao styles, weaving techniques and inclusion of motifs. Both researchers working together reviewed all of the photographs. We also examined the use of non-Lao styles such as inclusion of Japanese or Euro-American styles and designs. Using representational analysis (Babcock 1993; Silverman 2004), we then constructed an analysis focusing on how these Lao fashion designers and the items they produced present and represent not only their personal identities, Lao culture and nationhood but also the fusion and border crossing of fashion elements of other cultures with Lao clothing.

## Lao Handicraft Festival and Grand Fashion Show

The Grand Fashion Show was a ticketed gala event attended mainly by government officials, urban Lao women, a few accompanied by men, resident foreign diplomats and people involved in handcrafted Laotian textiles. Each of the ten participating Lao companies modeled six or seven outfits produced by their company. Nine of these companies were primarily textile companies producing fabric, home products and/or clothing. The main products of the tenth company were jewelry and accessories.

The Lao Handicraft Festival aimed to promote and develop Lao handicraft products that are unique and represent Lao identity. The Grand Fashion Show program made that clear. The inside front cover of the program contained only a few words: “Lao Handicraft Festival 10,” dates, location, “Lao Products, Lao Identity” and festival sponsors. The two opening speakers at the Festival, presidents of the two main sponsoring organizations, presented complementary visions of the Festival and perhaps of Lao identity itself. Mr. Kissana Vongsay of the Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry observed that the main objective of the Festival was to

“enhance solidarity of craftspeople” and “to preserve...handicraft occupation[s] [in order to] promot[e], protect..., preserv[e], and present...Lao handicraft designs and products.”<sup>6</sup>

Secondarily, he noted that the Festival enables Lao craftspeople and exhibitors to “learn...new design and innovative techniques from other exhibitors...which might upgrade [product quality] and respon[d] to...domestic and foreign markets.”

Mrs. Chinda Phommasathit, president of the Lao Handicraft Association, said that the Festival highlights the “cultural heritage unique to Laos.” The Festival, she declared, will “upgrade product quality moving toward commodity production and export to overseas market[s]” and will “promote...new design[s].” The Grand Fashion Show was organized, she explained, “to provide opportunity for producers...customers...[and] media (both national and international) to meet, as well as [to] provid[e] [a] platform for...new designs in response to...demand.”

Mr. Vongsay focused on maintaining handicraft jobs and on preserving and enhancing production and product quality, while acknowledging the importance of market demand. Mrs. Chinda stressed innovation rather than preservation: future fashion would be new, more modern, and responsive to outside influences. The Festival itself was a celebration of Lao cultural heritage from its opening speeches, workshops and demonstrations of handicraft production, to its many display and sales stalls. Textiles from all provinces of Laos were on display, with textiles occupying more booths than any other single handicraft. The Fashion Show was one of the highlights of the Festival.

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<sup>6</sup> Festival speeches were given in Lao. Our quotes are from the official English translation made available to English-speakers in the audience.

## Fashions and Clothing

The Fashion Show began with the introduction of a number of sponsors dressed in their best (see Photo 1 for one example). Their clothing represented current styles for Lao elite adults.

One company, Nor Phao, clearly anchored the show in the past, with clothing based on past royal designs created by just one man, a “direct descendant of the Royal House of Luang Prabang” (Chin 2013). Several designers, including Poum Poum, presented wedding attire based on past and current styles. Every textile company but one modeled at least one women’s outfit based on the *sin*, a traditional tube skirt featuring a lower figured border usually woven using a supplementary weft technique. All of Chinda’s collection, but only two designs from Your Silk, were based on the Lao *sin*. Some of the *sin* designs were contemporary interpretations,



varying in color, length and other features from the current styles represented by the sponsors.

Some *sin* outfits were topped by striking modern blouses: strapless blouses (Kheua Mai), blouses with ruffles (Poum Poum) or puffy sleeves (Lao Cotton), or blouses integrated with a small jacket. This *pha sin* outfit from Chinda, for example, introduced an empire waist blouse with vertical tucks across the bodice, lightly covered by the suggestion of a jacket (see Photo 2). Other *pha sin* outfits featured colors or color combinations not usually worn, such as a fuchsia *sin* (Ammalinh) or a turquoise blue blouse with a purple *sin* (Nor Phao).

Variations in color, length and blouse style indicated both variation in style by age of the wearer and changes in Lao women’s fashion. Contemporary

**Photo 2:** This *sin* by Chinda is similar to the styles represented by Lao women sponsors; the blouse, however, differs from those styles and is an example of Lao style with Euro-American elements.



**Photo 1:** Fashion show sponsors dressed in traditional Lao style clothing. The authors used this example and photos of three other sets of sponsors to represent traditional styles for elite Lao women.

fashion in nearby Thailand and other countries also may have influenced these designs. In short, Lao styles were being refashioned by a number of the designers to express a clearly Lao, but more contemporary, identity, while retaining many costume elements from past and current styles.

Company	# of Outfits Offered	# Outfits Non-Traditional Style*	# Outfits Entirely Non-Traditional**
Phaeng Mai	6	6	2
Your Silk	8	5	5
Poum Poum	7	1	1
Maicome	6	5	3
Ammalinh	6	3	3
Nor Phao	7	1	1
Lao Cotton	8	7	1
Chinda	6	0	0
Kheua Mai	8	6	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>18</b>

**Table 1:** Traditional vs. Non-Traditional Fashion Show Offerings, Lao Handicraft Festival 2011

\* Outfits in the style of other Asian or European/American costumes (e.g. Vietnamese ao dai, circle skirt, pants suit).

\*\*Outfits with no discernible traditional Lao design, technique, motif, or style elements.

Over one-half of the modeled clothing (34 out of 62, or 55 percent; see Table 1) was *not* based primarily on Lao styles as represented by the formal attire of fashion-show sponsors or on past royal styles as represented by the designs of the royal descendant. Some of these outfits (n=16) had Laotian elements, such as commonly used motifs or techniques. For example, a skirt and blouse ensemble by Lao Cotton featured a cap-sleeve tank-type shirt with shirring on the sides atop a drop-waist skirt with a wide, woven yoke utilizing discontinuous, supplementary weft technique and Lao motifs. Also, Pheng Mai's Mongolian jacket-collar striping used the *ikat* technique. Both of these techniques, supplementary weft and *ikat*, were drawn from local weaving traditions. However, some of the outfits (n=18) seemed to have little reference to a uniquely Lao or Laotian "cultural heritage." Instead, they seemed appropriate for events in nearly any world city. These included a navy blue suit by Your Silk, a salmon-colored pants suit by Ammalinh, and a jade-green, strapless tea-length dress with a sweetheart neckline and bodice detailing with contrast piecing by Kheua Mai.

In short, the show demonstrated both preservation and innovation in Lao clothing design as it elegantly presented updated styles, skillfully repackaged past elite styles, and flamboyantly displayed new and modern designs. Several companies employed a few commonly used motifs, stylistic devices, or techniques—or simply the skill of Laotian weavers—to move into a more international fashion arena.

We found this particularly true in two companies that participated in our larger research project: Phaeng Mai and Maicome. Phaeng Mai played a leading role in initiating and establishing the Lao Handicraft Festival, while Maicome is a newcomer to the Festival, but not to the textile business. Both found inspiration in the "cultural

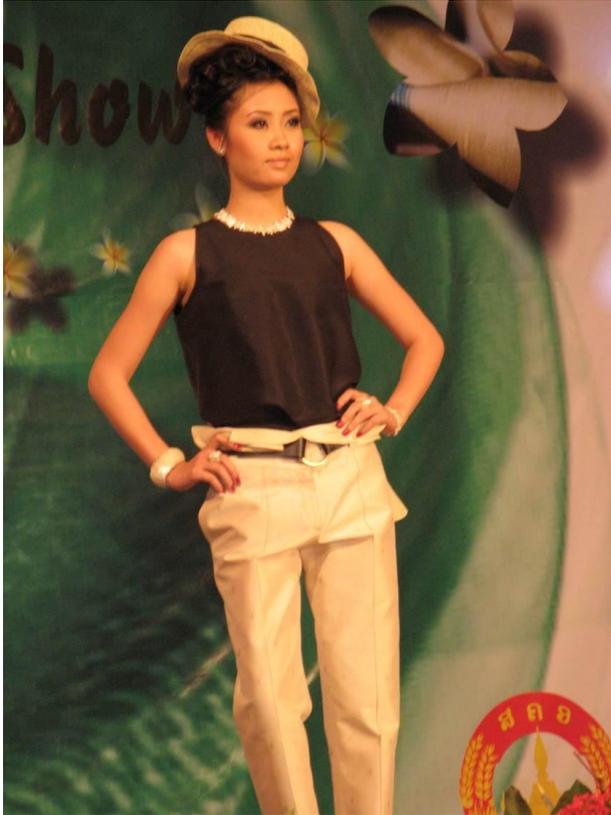
heritage unique to Laos,” referred to by Mrs. Chinda, one of the introductory speakers. But their fashion collections seemed to be tailored for sophisticated Asian audiences both inside and outside Laos, rather than for Laos alone or for the global market. Indeed the fashion designer-owner of Maicome indicated her fashions were designed to “jump off the runway and [even] outside the country.”

Of the two companies, Phaeng Mai designs were more clearly based in the cultural and textile heritage unique to Laos. For example, a Phaeng Mai owner-designer reported that an ethnic Lao-Tai costume had inspired a black, full-length skirt topped by a red tunic with exaggerated side slits and with *ikat* triangles in the pieced v-neck collar (see Photo 3). Another Phaeng Mai offering was also ethnic Lao-Tai in inspiration, with its bold, red stripes on a black, silk tunic top. The remainder of her collection had various Asian inspirations. Two of these contained Lao *ikat* accent pieces: a Mongolia-influenced *ikat* jacket collar on a Vietnamese-inspired long jacket paired with long pants, and a strapless, *ikat*, color-block black top over a flowing, gold full-length skirt with a matching gold Japanese-influenced cummerbund (*obi*). Four of the six presented outfits contained some *ikat* or discontinuous supplementary weft— techniques long used in Lao weaving. Two ensembles, however, had no discernible reference to Lao elements: a red dress inspired by the Japanese *obi* and a green and gold suit with Chinese-style frog closings down the left side of its long, straight skirt.

The Phaeng Mai designer-owner told us she wanted to project “a general Asian or oriental image” in this collection. She said that she deliberately chose design ideas from Phouthai and Tai Dam (Lao-Tai ethnic groups) garments, as well as from clothing styles found in Vietnam, Japan, China and Central Asia. She reported that her major markets were in Japan, Singapore and Europe. She indicated that when people think of Phaeng Mai, she wants them to think about “high quality and modern design using traditional techniques transferred into the new modern market.”



**Photo 3:** A Phaeng Mai design inspired by the Tai Dam, a Lao-Tai group. Phaeng Mai also presented a second design inspired by a Lao-Tai group, the Phouthai.



**Photo 4:** Some outfits, like this pants ensemble by Maicome, did not contain any traditional Lao elements. For example, this Maicome offering had no bordered skirt, no star or other familiar motif, and no commonly used intricate weaving technique (e.g., *ikat*, discontinuous weft).

While only one Maicome fashion show offering included a Lao *sin*, two others included Lao elements, though in decidedly contemporary outfits. The modernized *sin* outfit combined bright colors, fuchsia and bright blue, with the fuchsia of the blouse echoed in pink diamonds incorporated into the design of the lower *sin* border and shawl. A distinctive pants outfit employed a common Lao woven motif in black to emphasize the black pants; a bright-orange, collared shirt complemented the black pants. A gold blouse with asymmetrical sleeves and a square of supplementary weft-figured weaving topped an orange, straight skirt. Maicome's three other designs, like the previous ones, were aimed at young people in Laos and other parts of Asia. These, however, did not contain any Laotian elements: a black, sleeveless shirt tucked into belted, white pants with a broad, folded waistband (Photo 4), a white, drop-waist, fringe tank dress reminiscent of American 1920s flapper style, and a dress with a 1950s structured bodice and long circle skirt, pieced with striped and solid matching colors.

Maicome's designer-owner indicated that her ideas for this collection came from magazines and TV. She wanted to update the Lao *sin* for younger Lao women, but she also wanted her products to sell outside of Laos. Her main markets were in Laos and Thailand. She reported that this collection would be featured in a Lao magazine after the Festival was over. Some ensembles from her collection appeared on the website advertising the next Lao Handicraft Festival.

## Discussion

Traditions and authenticity ... are not self-evident categories—rather they must be defined and narrated in discourse....Tradition thus becomes not just something invented in an identifiable (recent) past..., but a way of talking about the past and the present through the identification of certain practices that require preservation. (Silverman 2007: 344; Cassia 2000: 289)

The Lao Handicraft Festival was designed as a series of performances to define, narrate, present, authenticate and market tangible artifacts of Lao handicraft traditions, Lao identity and Laos as a nation. From the opening speeches, to the many staffed booths, demonstrations of production techniques, workshops and the Grand Fashion Show itself, authentic handicraft traditions of Laos were presented as part of a “cultural heritage unique to Laos” (Mrs. Chinda’s speech) and in need of preservation (Mr. Vongsay’s speech). The association of Lao identity with Lao products was plainly presented in the fashion-show program: “Lao products, Lao identity.” Moreover, textiles from all provinces of Laos were on display, with textiles occupying more booths than any other single handicraft. The textile traditions of Laos were clearly a central part of this grand performance of cultural heritage and collective identity.

Events like the Festival and Fashion Show socially produce authenticity (Wherry 2006). Steeped in the Festival discourse of cultural heritage and handicraft traditions, even entirely non-traditional Fashion Show clothing carried at least the veneer of authenticity. The “machinery of authenticity” (Appadurai 1986) was at work, as speakers promoted the unique cultural heritage of Laos, buyers flocked to stalls of innovative items created using traditional techniques and even social scientists (the authors) participated by connecting Festival textiles and fashions produced for market with village textiles and clothing produced in the recent past. (Kasfir 1999; Price 2006). Three of Field’s four kinds of authenticity were evident at the Grand Fashion Show. “Ethnographic authenticity” (Field 2009: 510) was produced when designers utilized clothing styles or textile designs that accurately represented Lao culture or Lao identity like the *sin* produced by Chinda or *ikat* striping in the weaving. A unique and brilliantly rendered textile or piece of clothing, like the best of the royal Nor Phao collection, could be considered “authentic original high art” (Field 2009: 511). Some of the companies represented at the Fashion Show were approaching “brand-named authenticity” (Field 2009: 511). Discerning consumers recognized their work as distinctive and aesthetically beautiful. For example, Maicome was known for its high quality and its production standards, while Phaeng Mai was acclaimed for its exquisite Sam Neua tapestry pieces. For all of the companies participating in the Fashion Show, claiming an authentic cultural heritage could inform both marketing strategies and effective representations of Lao identity (Silverman 2007: 343).

Grand Fashion Show offerings were clearly ‘fashionable.’ That is, they offered both innovation and preservation of the ‘symbolic values’ of the designers and their consumers (Crane and Bovone 2006), sometimes in the same ensemble. Thus, a modern or innovative version of a Lao *sin* could represent its wearer as modern or cosmopolitan but still Lao, thereby representing both her personal and collective identities. Indeed, in non-governmental settings, a person makes a deliberate statement by wearing *sin* at all. Additionally, through the selection of design and motifs used on the *sin*, a person expresses an opinion about the *sin* as a national and cultural symbol. As Green (2009) suggested was true for the Highland Malagasy, we propose that the manipulation of particular Lao motifs and the incorporation of design elements from other cultures can express the wearer’s identity while addressing and exploiting the perceived understanding of Lao identity by others.

Correspondingly, a designer is able to reflect symbolic values and make statements about the relationship of Lao identity to other nations and cultures through

the construction of the *sin*-related garment. Designer-owners with different experiences and clientele responded with different kinds of fashions. Chinda, for example, whose clientele is almost entirely Lao women, presented mostly *sin*. Maicome, on the other hand, presented mostly outfits for younger people and for cosmopolitan Lao and non-Lao consumers. As Assam (2008) found in relation to kimonos in Japan, Maicome's reinvention of the *sin* into a more fashion-oriented garment may be viewed as a counter movement to more conventional styles.

Looking more broadly, we see that the clothing styles presented in the Grand Fashion Show reflect broader social and cultural changes in Laos and in the relationship of Laos to the international community. Our interpretation of the fashion show suggests that two processes are occurring simultaneously. Laos is moving outward to connect to the wider Asian and Euro-American worlds, while also moving internally to meld various previously distinct Lao ethnicities, all while deploying the trope of 'authentic cultural heritage.' Phaeng Mai and Maicome both create hybrid outfits. Phaeng Mai incorporates Phouthai and Tai Dam clothing colors and design elements in some outfits and combines traditional Lao techniques with style elements from other Asian countries in others. Maicome creates silk fabric and clothing that invoke the beauty and apparent timelessness of Lao textile traditions but that are presented in pants and dress styles more likely to be found in Thailand, Europe or the United States. Our analysis of interviews with two of the designers reveals their desire to represent Laos as able to contribute to and connect with the broader Asian fashion scene. The clothing included in the Grand Fashion Show demonstrates this connection through the incorporation and mixture of Asian, European and American style elements.

In moving outward, on the one hand, Laos and Lao identity are becoming more connected to economies and societies in a broader global context. Consequently, as Laos and Lao identity become more cosmopolitan, so do Lao clothing styles, especially through the fusion of elements from the clothing of Europe, America and other Asian nations. Not incidentally, growth of the Lao economy is creating an urban elite who can afford these fashions.

On the other hand, as Laotians become less rural and isolated and more urban or connected with urban centers, rural-based ethnic identities that highlight differences between ethnic groups may be in the process of becoming less salient. As a result, the creation of internal and international border-crossing fabrics and fashions, many of which contain traditional Lao designs or techniques, may anchor these offerings in an authentic cultural heritage. Even the fabrics and fashions that do not contain overt Lao elements but are handwoven in Laos using silk or cotton may therefore also be seen as authentic.

Designer-owners create designs for specific audiences. Most of the fashion-show designers emphasized past and current Lao fashions while redesigning them for modern Lao use. The continued use of more traditional elements in their updated, more formal clothing suggests the designers' targeting of an older, wealthier and more urban audience as well as the importance of retaining these elements for more ritualized family and religious events. The more contemporary and cosmopolitan styles may make Lao textiles more understandable and accessible to non-Lao, while the veneer of authenticity may further attract non-Lao to these products. Also, we speculate that elite Lao who operate in an increasingly international arena may find the styles with an

element of 'Lao-ness' more understandable and attractive than, say, Euro-American styles, and so be more likely to wear them. At least this must be the hope of these talented designers.

Finally, our study of the Grand Fashion Show of the Lao Handicraft Festival may provide an example of the standardization of Laotian ethnic identities, a process analyzed by Goudineau (2013). Standing on the borders between fashion worlds—both internal ethnic and international borders—has provided a vantage point from which to view one aspect of this ethnic standardization while observing the creative integration of costume elements that seems to extend across the borders of Laos and into the international world of fashion.

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