



# Cultural Partnership Initiative

Safeguarding of Lao Textile: Important ICH of Lao PDR

Challenges surrounding the survival of Lao textile: skills of weaving

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### **Safeguarding according to the 2003 Convention:**

“Safeguarding means measures aimed at ensuring the visibility of the intangible cultural heritage, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education, as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage”

### **Abstract:**

Lao PDR or know as Laos, has rich in cultural diversity especially Intangible cultural heritage which is divers among the multiple-culture of ethnic groups. Particularly, mentioned on domain of textiles, woman of different ethnic groups display their identities on their traditional costume by producing an exceptional of woven.

In this topic of safeguarding on Lao textile is dedicated mainly to the Lao ethnic group as a majority population of the country, who has a long history and complicated techniques of weaving through their history of revolution. Hence, in term of textile doesn't exist only in the Lao ethnic group but in the entire of the nation, neither only Lao woman but commonly across others Lao woman minority groups.

Besides the country's history, the ways of safeguarding on Lao textile have been developed under the globalization, social change and economic growth. By the Consequence, this paper will examine the historical background of Lao textile, then will analyze the natural crisis, the efforts of maintain and revitalize the element facing by economic condition and a study of Lao policies concerning to the element, then follow by the introduction on the case study of safeguarding of weaving of Mosi in Hansan as Korean ICH.

The aim of this study is to reconsider possible ways of reserving handicraft traditions in the modernization and to explore the woven heritage of Lao nation.

## **Introduction**

The traditional weaving of Lao textile is the dominate form of artistic cultural expression of Lao women and also the woven heritage of Lao nation. According to Lucas Linxinski once says: “...another concern is that of protecting textiles, which are deemed to be the quintessential manifestation of intangible heritage of Laos. The Lao culture has ever been referred to as a cloth culture...” (ICH in international law: 2013, pp130)

Lao weaving and Lao Sinh (traditional wearing Lao skirt) are very closely linked together in Lao society which could not cut out to each other, whether the traditional wearing of Lao Sinh fabric by silk or cloth cotton or to form simple or even luxury pattern which both continue to be passed down from generation to generation as the heritage of family and society.

According to the history of fighting for independence during wartime and postwar, this hand-woven faced an unprecedented crisis as a result leaving their weaving skill behind, overall changes in lifestyle and difficulties of carry on the craft. However, it was not able to throw the traditional wearing here,

Lao women did not let up their own tradition into the modernization and still keep it on going. They produces Lao textile as a key role of women in learning, inheriting, protecting, preserving and disseminating of hand-woven identity of Lao heritage.

This research is a study of historical background of Lao textile, the problem of safeguarding of the elements, the ways of safeguarding this element under the Lao policies and the enhancement and awareness-raising of safeguarding on Lao textile disseminated in its community against the social change and economic growth. In occasion of study the safeguarding on Korean textile in Hansan, Mosi weaving which will describe on some point of view on this element of safeguarding as the comparative study. By using the methodology of literature review such as: discussion on different books, journals, websites or these used as reference material to illustrate what has been researched on the topic before variables. The objectives are:

- To understand their background of transmission and safeguarding on Lao community as a local authority.
- To understand the problem of safeguarding from generations to generations
- To understand the system of safeguarding Lao textile of Lao government
- To remind and consider this element as important ICH to be safeguard in Lao PDR.

## Chapter 1: Historical background

Back to the history of the country before 1893, the royal courts of Vientiane, Luangprabang and Champhasack played their part in maintaining textile arts. Particularly, in Luangprabang was played important role of weaving in exceptional products in offering in royal palace. The royal families supported workshops in neighboring villages to produce court clothing and textiles while themselves supplied silk, colors and pattern used and during that time was able to commission weavers from all of the country. When Laos became a French protectorate in 1893 and had forced a loose territory into 3 parts as: Vientiane (became the French administrative center), Luangprabang (where the king was allowed to keep his royal prerogatives) and Champhasak province (demoted to a province).

After, the Lao struggle for independence from 1945 to 1975. The disruption of wars during this period was the main cause of many families and communities to leave their hometown and moved to the different parts of the country. Families escaped the fighting, left looms and heirlooms behind, Heirloom textiles were buried in Jars or sold by the family members, few textiles left the country and Lao weaving were almost abandoned by this period time, in spite of the need for self-sufficiency.

After formed the Lao PDR in 1975, when Lao trades were cut off from other countries, then women resumed their weaving for household and exchange in decade, weaving once again become a source of women's economic and social power and a more open toward trade and tourism, the demand of Lao woven products increased.

The relocation of communities during the wartime placed ethnic groups in new relations with each other. Some ethnic groups know how to weave only simply way and have learning the more complex Lao weaving techniques in cotton and silk.

Traditionally, Lao women learn how to weave in the age of teenagers, with their grandmothers and mothers. Strand by strand, Lao textiles woven in the complex patterns and motifs of textiles. By the use of oral form, folktales, poems, proverbs and legendary are gathered into the technical means, as story depictions such as: weaving cloth-weaving Nagas; the weaving shuttle of the king's daughter; if you fall of the loom you will become a bear. (Vienkham Nathavongduangsy, Weaving cloth weaving Nagas: Lao woven textile motifs). Besides, the beliefs and culture of personal inspirations are also used in the patterns, the motif patterns of hand-woven in Lao textile symbolized deeply by each different meaning such as examples below:

Naga - a mythological water serpent with unparalleled magic powers and is important to animists as it is believed to be an ancestor spirit, whilst Buddhists revere the Naga as he saved Buddha from the floods.

Butterfly - a short-lived symbol, taboo for weddings, represents beauty and vanity, worn by young girls.

Snake - Associated with fertility and the underworld.

Elephant - An important role in the history of Lao and thought to have rain bearing power

The important of weaving is that a man seeking a potential wife would assess her weaving first which means good weavers attracted good husbands, and weavers have to be patient and moderate to their weaving in those are very meaning of her life as the stories below:

1. if the weaving shuttle bits your head you will not be able to get married
2. if you sit on the loom with your back to the beater you will need more weft yarns
3. if you cannot finish tying the knot for the new warp in the daytime, be careful: the spirit wil tangle the warp yarns at night.

(Vienkham Nathavongduangsy, Weaving cloth weaving Nagas: Lao woven textile motifs)

Most diverse of these stories are the ones woven into a Sinh. The skirt is simple yet elegant, and traditionally every most Lao woman is worn throughout her lifetime. Effectively, textile play a major role in s person's life such as: using in rites of passage at birth a baby, courtship (ceremonies and festivals), wedding ceremony and textile for religion and ritual use such as: ordination ceremonies, cloth for the temples, etc. By the meaning of wearing Lao Sinh is to show respect for persons or groups of individuals who were involved in the society and considered to have immense protective powers and often small charms in both way.

The Sinhs which are worn by majority of the ethnic groups women, each consists of 3 parts in one item such as: the waist border head, the tube skirt (main skirt), and hem border (foot). The length of wearing Lao Sinh is evaluated upon the different time of Social revolution and depending on technical of weaving in particularly.

Lao textiles are produced by three main weaving techniques. There's Matmi or ikat which produces fringy colors and patterns. Chok, meanwhile, produces dense raised patterns, like brocade, creating complex fabrics with many intermeshed and variegated colors. Then there is tapestry, the third weaving technique, which incorporates some of the techniques of chok yet has a smooth, flat finish on the its outside face.

## **Chapter 2: Problem of safeguarding on Lao textile in community**

The challenges surrounding the survival of the Lao textile might have many factors that caused the crisis of the element due to many fluctuations of the society

Effectively, the wartime and postwar were still main caused of relocation of the population especially the skill weavers who had left from their hometown and adapted into the new circumstance and produced variety hand-woven by using different material of local area techniques of weaving also shared and experienced between neighboring villages as well as ethnic groups.

By the encouragement of Lao government cooperated with United Nations assistance, new

weaving technology was introduced to develop a local cotton industry. Lao women's Union (LWU) was transformed from a revolutionary women's group of soldiers' mothers to mass organization initiating and implementing women's projects, including those based on textile production.

Following by the Lao government's shift to the New Economic Mechanism (NEM) in 1986, the availability of new markets further encouraged the return to hand weaving. In the region around Vientiane, a wide variety of cottons and silks began to be produced by different techniques. Families from rural areas of Lao PDR migrated to the capital to find work. Lao Sinh products are for sale to local and visitors. Textiles are important commodities, as households with resident women weavers will always have the capacity to earn cash. In the emerging commercial industry and commercialization, the blurring of group distinctions have resulted in young weavers borrowing designs and motifs, colors and yarns across group distinctions and most Lao weavers are freely to borrow motifs and design element from other ethnic groups.

Upon the economic strategy of development, new weaving designs were influenced by oversea in gradually change in lifestyles and the adoption of western dress. The combination of the new weaving techniques and the new dyes introduce new element into the modern design and these were subsequently adopted and produced from domestically by the weavers in Lao ethnic group.

Traditionally, all colors were derived from natural dyes, now most producers, particularly the ones making textiles for sale to tourists, work with artificial dyes, thus eliminating the messy process of making natural dyes. Likewise, in terms of styles and motifs, tourists' preferences have greatly affected the textiles that are produced. The night market is now full of alien motifs such as simple representations of elephants, clean geometric or spiral designs, and depictions of Buddhist epics copied from friezes in the temples. These catch tourists' fancy partly because there are simple, minimalist themes that they can understand instead of the dense traditional patterns that are incomprehensible

This is the important innovation which speeded up the weaving process dramatically. And, also the combination of many types of chemical dyes were introduced to the new elements into the already sophisticated designs produced

The support this ongoing transformation of Lao textile continues to make sense for community that practices it today to improve product quality, while strengthening collaboration and exchange between communities' designer, with a view to transmission and durability.

In accordance with national export strategy including the period 2011-2015, the government plan to target new sectors that have the potential to generate foreign exchange which is necessary to stimulate economic growth. In these sectors which include textiles and handicrafts of silk and cotton products is also on the list. And currently, many programs and NGOs encourage weaving projects to provide opportunities to upgrade weaving equipment and encourage young women to acquire new weaving skills.

Under the concept of globalization:

1. Media, telecommunication, financial markets, international institutions
2. Various trends and tendencies that might be labelled globalization have existed for centuries
3. An aspect of globalization including an increase number of voices from all parts of the world
4. Various types and tendencies of contemporary globalization, from globalization to localization, from culture to economic globalization

The capital of Vientiane, more importantly, the effects of contemporary globalization-including inter-continental tourism have become entrenched in city. Markets and trends of clothing of Lao clothes are produced by Lao textile which is now weavers design upon the customer pattern used and colors.

Notice that school and university students and government office workers wear Lao Sinh as an official manner in the society. The Lao textile then will be found and buy easily in markets around the cities. By this year, the ministry of Education and Sports has adopted the new curriculum for the students of grade 5 and 6 to the introduction of the new subject of Household containing the lesson learned of handicraft work. Therefore, this curriculum aims to build the student capacity of handicraft made and be able gaining work for the future. Lao textiles in honestly will be the part of the curriculum as a part of preservation in young generation.

### **Chapter 3: Lao government policy concerning to ICH**

By the definition of safeguarding of ICH in the country, which Lao PDR has not yet its own ICH law, so there is still fermented knowledge for safeguarding on Lao textile.

Before, the announcement to the ratification of the President of the Lao PDR for International Convention annual cultural heritage, dated on 19 October, 2009 as a member of convention 2003. The Lao government aware the importance for cultural heritage preservation then the national assembly has adopted the National heritage Law in 2005, which covered culture and Nature as well as tangible and intangible cultural heritage and among state members, since then Lao PDR has implemented this convention's policy into the national policy and practices of the nation.

The Department of heritage has reformed in as to develop and prepare its function to support promotion and restoration of national cultural heritage and response for heritage management specially the tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

The need to promote the activities for safeguarding and research on Lao ICH is challenged by the surrounding of economic circumstance. Especially by talking of the survival of Lao textile in term of weaving skills demonstrates the way of handicraft industries. The Lao cultural policy issue is not only safeguarding ICH itself. But also create unity between the diversity among 49

ethnic groups as well as stimulate the economic growth.

According to the sixth five year industrial and handicraft development plan (2006-2010) and the summarizes of the implementation of previous plans (2001-2005), particularly in handicraft which policy has mentioned on promoting of Lao textile products and to establish a group of professional craftsmanship by using cotton and silk in natural dying process.

**Targets of year 2006-2010 are:**

- The development of the region: to comply with the special potential in local areas. The handicraft industry sector requires the development project in sectors of producing Lao textiles, clothing and handicraft products which are set in 5 project priorities of the 5 central provinces of the country.
- In 4 Southern provinces: 1 of 4 projects is to produce traditional textiles dyed with natural colors, silk weaving, etc.
- In 8 Northern provinces: 1 of 4 projects is the development priority is promoting and enhancing of handicrafts such as cotton, silk, hemp.

**Investment: public investment projects are:**

- Construction of infrastructure project: the promotion of handicrafts and local centers.
- One product, one village project: the training of professional craft, the production community to create a fund to develop and promote the development of handicrafts and families business.
- The study project and editing of master developing plan by 2020.
- Projects that support to the investment of local people are divided into 3 parts which are involved in the handicraft sector such as:

**Northern part:**

The expansion project: production of textile in Huaphanh province

**Central part:**

The expansion project: handicraft activities made by silk in Vientiane capital

The construction of new project groups by establishing handicraft production groups of Lao weavers in advantage such as: weaving, reeled the silk yarn, natural dyeing in Vientiane, Bolikhamxay, Khammoune and Savanakheth province.



**Southern part:**

- The expansion project: weaving of women ethnic groups, reeled the silk yarn, natural dyeing in Champasak, Saravan, Sekong and Attapeu province.
- The construction of new project groups by establishing handicraft production groups in provinces in advantage.

In this case of investment, the government supports the policies of: creating fund for promoting products and provide policy of low interest loans from banking institutions

Hence, Lao textile as an Intangible heritage is considered part of cultural industry by providing its base and main source of inspiration.

Exhibitions, festival, open houses, training schools, weaving competitions and other initiatives have been organized and pursued by the Lao women union or Lao women association and otherwise considered of two major groups of stakeholders were consulted :

- The public sector
- The private sector

To understand the organization and the management of Lao textile upon the government policy, even now Lao PDR has adopted only the National heritage Law which has not much illustrated about the ICH policy neither the system of safeguarding. However, there is a Law of handicraft which refers some parts on Lao textile as a cultural industry.

According to the Handicraft Law No. 02 / NA, dated 25 July 2008, the objective of establish this Law is to organize and implement of growing in handicraft work, producing the quality products, aim to create jobs and income to the local people.

The classification of handicraft acts into 2 kinds:

1. Big factory
2. Small factory (family business)

In 7 sectors of professional handicraft contained primarily in Article 13 that demonstrates a separate sector of traditional textile in particularly and aim to facilitate the conservation, protection and preservation of cultural heritage, which the conservation means not to destroy this element besides must go along with the development of high quality and modern products.

Traditional textile sector is divided into sub-categories such as:

- Weaving
- The natural dyeing

- Sewing, the protection of embroidery
- Design
- weaving pattern (matmee)
- Persecution of cotton, raising silk worm etc.

**Article 16: The Conservation of handicrafts**

1. Research conducted of the processes for producing an outstanding handicraft
2. Collect and designate of the bearers to pass down and transmit knowledge to the next generation.
3. Collect and inventory the outstanding handicraft products to research on, make an exhibition, advertising and publishing to the community.
4. Transform the processes of producing an outstanding handicraft and adopt incurriculum for academic study.
5. Establish handicraft center, professional handicraft training centers and handicraft museums.
6. Register the handicraft works to be a part of intellectual property

Sector textile tradition is reserved in the design, collection, Sewing, embroidery and weaving pattern (matmee) stated in Article 18 which are considered as the important heritage and preserve the heritage follow by the National Heritage Law.

In addition way to the conservation, preservation and protection of national heritage, besides

The development is a major concerning of the government policy and practical measures such as foundation, customs and taxes, protecting of products, providing information, marketing, using of technology, counseling and training and upgrading skills.

National handicraft day, incorporated on November 1 of each year's gathering of entrepreneurs and the craftsmen to join activities together, organize the Handicraft fairs, exhibition handicraft products, workshop and seminars and competitive products.

The festival of crafts which held every year in the capital within the cooperation with the national Chamber of commerce and Industry of Laos and Lao artisans Association. The event aims to promote the work of the Lao artisan across the country, including the remote areas to give them an opportunity for sharing their products and exchange the experiences between each other and intends to be the gallery of all domestic productions.

## **Chapter 4: A case study on textile safeguarding in Korea: Weaving of Mosi in Hansan**

Republic of Korea has a good system of safeguarding in ICH elements in particularly and a developed country and funding significantly to protect its own culture.

In case study of weaving of Mosi in Hansan, The Korean important intangible culture asset No.14, which is has inscribed on 28 November 2011 as a representative list of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity.

The element itself of ramie cloth has been a popular material for Korean clothing and represented a positive way of better understanding Korean clothing culture. The weaving skills have been passed down from mother to daughter or daughter in law from generation to generation and have been transmitted by middle aged women in the township located in South Chungcheong province.

Traditionally weaving has been responsibility of women, women worked together to make Mosi in Hansan, the system of cooperation continues to this day by the Bearer Bang Yeon-ok, as a 2nd generation, a living human treasure of the traditional weaving techniques. By continuing transmitted her technical skills and weaving processes to the transmitters and organize the monthly meeting between the teachers and students to give a better relationship of each other, this called: “Hansan Ramie weaving community”

Hansan Mosi fabric hall which is the museum providing a venue for the inheriting students to continue their traditional line, also to enlightening experience to tourist visiting. This museum comprises the traditional workshops, Hansan Ramie conveyance hall and training hall, traditional hall.

Hansan Ramie conveyance hall comprised of 3 exhibition rooms:

Room 1: 4 themed display areas of exhibitions and Hansan Ramie weaving Experience hall (for visitors to experience on weaving their own Hansan Ramie, but Ramie loom provided here is not the traditional one, but replace an improve Ramie loom instead)

Room 2: Special exhibition area of exhibition for dividing Ramie product display, showing the diversity of Ramie and lifestyle products.

Room 3: Ramie Exhibition of the modern Era, this exhibition room consists of personal accessories in order to overcome the limited products of high cost and low efficiency with handmade process and to enable economical purchase of high quality.

In order to provide the products needed to the market, yarn factory has been established in 2007 to support the products increased.

## Conclusion

The history of fighting for independence was caused Lao people faced many difficulties in livelihood. People left their heirloom behind, as well as Lao women escaped from their hometown and with no doubt it reflected the loosing of heirloom of Lao textile. During this period, Lao textiles were nearly disappeared. Fortunately, after 1975 when the Lao PDR was formed, the country again discovered and reconsidered the important of this national heritage as well as Lao people in whole country.

The development strategies step by step had reflected to the meaning of survival of Lao textile. However, the skills of weaving have been passed down from grandmother to mother and mother to daughter as the transmission of ideas, patterns, techniques of weaving display where the weavers were educated. The motifs of textile show the learning, teaching in the oral form, folktales, poems and proverbs are embodies in as the stories of weaving. Additionally, the nature of those story taught Lao women to be patient and diligent on what they are weaving.

Most of the Lao women wear their traditional costume (Lao Sinh) which is linked closely to the Lao textile, in order the weavers have attempt to expand the products and designs to the tourist as well as the demand for traditional costume has been continuously increased as a result of weaving patterns changed by the cause of economic growth. And also the migration from one to another location and living with other ethnic groups has undeniably diminished the original concentration of weaving. Some techniques had been changed because of the social environment and the weaving materials.

The conflict between maintaining traditional weaving patterns and the products in term of the cultural industry (products) are still ongoing. The art-form of weaving subsequently it has attracted the attention of affluent and educated western based weavers who have descended on Laos to re-establish the trade, in parallel with the new design pattern of weaving and techniques which produce the high-quality textiles in modern patterns. Meanwhile, state policies emphasizing market development encourage factory-based textiles, while tourist demand is entirely for handmade woven textile.

According to government policies and the strategies of development, the context of Lao textile has changed from the use of self-sufficiency into the highly products for business. Sometimes, when it comes to the product which means already changed of the original form, in this manner, textile pattern is now become a part of cultural industry which shows by: the alien motifs, chemical dyed etc. and the globalization is began.

Even though, Lao PDR has no ICH Law as to have a safeguarding system for its elements. Instead of the ICH law, the Lao handicraft Law were adapted to protect, preserve, promote, transmit their culture heritage through formal and non-formal education as heritage of the nation follow by the definition of safeguarding on 2003 convention:

**“Safeguarding means measures aimed at ensuring the visibility of the intangible cultural heritage, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education, as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage”**

On the other hands, in term of safeguarding of the original form of Lao textile is still lacked system of safeguarding the elements because local people aware the value of arts and culture in form of tangible cultural heritage.

Therefore, the Transmission of this element developed by communities around it inspire new form of development best suited to the characteristics of territories, social structure and resources available meet the dual challenge of economic growth and the safeguarding this element that ensure the sustainability.

In case study of weaving of Mosi in Hansan, which is the best practice of learning how to safeguard on ICH, especially in the system of identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion and transmission of its element. The meaning of Sustainable development of this element is to create a central weaving transmission to the interested people who wish to learn weaving. And the skills and knowledge of weaving are transmitted by the bearers of the element in proper way (Designated by the government). This term of study give me more opportunity to experience and to the better understanding the ways of safeguarding ICH in my home country.

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