Designing for Empowerment: Traditional Textile Production in Laos

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This item was submitted to the proceedings of the Loughborough University Textile Design Research Group INTERSECTIONS Conference 2017 by the/an author (Nanci Takeyama).


Additional Information:

Publisher: Loughborough University (© The Authors)

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to consider the role of the designer when collaborating with craftspeople and artisans on projects that use design as a tool for heritage preservation. It addresses the experiences of the Singapore-based research team design for, which, with funding by Nanyang Technological University, has engaged with traditional craft-based communities in Laos over the last six years. The group’s mandate is to investigate and identify the systemic reasons why such cultures and their practices are on the verge of disappearance, and to seek actionable, sustainable solutions that support their well-being.

Keywords: Textiles; Meaning of symbols; Crafts; Systematic empowerment

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Introduction
We live in a time of change. The great paradigm shift that has taken place between the industrial revolution and the digital age demands of us transitions that we neither completely understand nor have fully acknowledged. While technology has allowed us to move and create increasingly fluidly, even so we still live in a world full of material things and values. Our passion for the material has led to overconsumption and, consequently, a polluted and out—of—balance environment. Humankind is now in a crucial moment of our history—a crossroads of survival—as our environment gradually becomes unfit to sustain us. Rignot (2014) forecasts that global warming has reached a point of no return, while Pimm and other scientists (2014) predict that if we do not act fast, humankind will be on the brink of mass destruction in the next 20 to 30 years. Economy-based societies conventionally use Gross National Product (GNP) as the central measurement of development and implied quality of life. And yet increased interest has been shown in the more holistic index of well-being known as Gross National Happiness (GNH), created in 1972 by the King of Bhutan. GNH takes into consideration a country’s economy, environment and political situation along with the lives of its people with respect to their physical, mental, social and workplace well-being. An article by Jha (2010) sums up studies by economists that clearly demonstrate that economic development is neither an indicator of well-being nor happiness, and political correspondent Stratton (2010) has reported on how British prime minister has aimed to make happiness the new GDP. In short, our addiction to the material is gradually destroying our planet, and is not buying us happiness in the meantime, either.

This calls for action, a real shift towards economic models that put people and the environment first. Because the work of designers is closely related to the production and consumption of goods, they, too, must reflect on their own responsibilities and roles with regard to the environment. Such awareness in the profession seems gradually to be growing. In the last decade we have seen more designers reposition their role and contributions towards making peoples’ lives better. Such a stance takes as its basis people’s needs rather than wants. The author herself desired to make a shift in her own design practice towards more socially meaningful initiatives. Taking under consideration her location in Singapore, the existing resources there and in the region, and how a project might bear meaningful results, she decided to tap into the cultural wealth and craftsmanship of Southeast Asia. Laos was chosen because it is one of the few countries in the region that still preserves a strong relationship with material through its invaluable hand-dyed and hand-woven textile tradition. It would provide a suitable contrast to Singapore, a global city-state that rapidly saw such vital connections between people and their environment vanish in the last decades due to rapid economic development.

The aim was to bring together the best of each country: Laos with its long craft heritage, and Singapore with its thriving economical resources. Predicated on dialogue and exchange, the project would be a two-way learning experience to benefit both. In 2011, with a group of alumni from Nanyang Technological University, the author created a research group called design for (www.designfor.co), an open platform for collaboration on Social Design projects. By creating a network of partners, the hope was to reflect on ways in which design could be used as a platform of discussion to promote a sustainable world in a holistic way. The design for name was chosen as a catalyst for the possibilities brought about by design that takes a humanistic view, advocating cultural understanding and preservation. With design as its mediator, then, the group proposed the model shown below that brings together the three pillars of its research: meaning (understanding symbols and patterns); making (establishing systems of production); and sharing (systems of empowerment and dissemination).
Many Laotians today live in a rural communal setting. Until the 1980s, most women hand-dyed their own threads with natural pigments and wove their own household textiles such as blankets, curtains and traditional attire. One of design for’s interests in studying the Laotian craft tradition was to identify the significant values ascribed to producing objects manually, in line with nature’s rhythms and with longstanding cultural traditions.
Social design, or cultural appropriation?

In order to build a theoretical framework for this project, the research group conducted a literary review to examine intersections between craft, design and cultural preservation. One of the important resources taking up collaborations between artisans and designers was found in a guide jointly published by the Craft Revival Trust, Artesanías de Colombia S.A., and UNESCO (2005). In addition, decades of research with craft communities in Brazil were addressed by Borges (2011), who voices the critical need for “respect for the work rhythm of the artisan, respect for the signs that have resisted over the years, respect for the whole system of symbols that culminates in an object.” “The potential dangers of a badly carried out intervention are many,” she writes, “and their effects can be damaging. The older a tradition is, and the more 'away from civilization' the community it belongs to, the greater the dangers and the greater the necessary care.”

In line with Borges’s thoughts, the design for research group wished to explore the systems of symbols and practices inherent to the Laotian textile tradition, in order to identify what supports the preservation of culture and what works against it. From the earliest stage it was understood that the role of the designer is not merely to design objects inspired by Laotian culture—such a misguided direction in many cases leads to cultural appropriation.

The role of the designer in the project, therefore, was to understand the systems and practices behind the culture, so as to be better able to propose efficacious systems that promote its sustainability and preservation.

Southeast Asia exhibits some of the richest handicrafts practices with regard to materials and techniques, however many of those skills have already vanished or are endangered due to rapid economical development and shifts in values. Traditionally in Laos, weaving techniques had been passed down from mother to daughter. Now they are taught by a few remaining master weavers at community and vocational centers. Because weaving is hard work, under-valued, and not well remunerated, many with highly developed skills choose to leave the craft and find easier, better-paid jobs in the city.
Meaning: Understanding the woven vocabulary

In order to better understand the Laotian textile tradition the group made several field trips, living for a few days within craft communities. Members of the team were received and welcomed as guests, partaking in homemade meals with ingredients harvested from the surrounding forests and rivers. The participants also learned traditional bamboo weaving, dyeing and silk weaving. Beyond such techniques, as graphic designers the team wanted especially to learn about the visual language contained in Laotian textiles. Graphic documentation of these visits focused on the most important motif in Laotian iconography, the Cosmic Serpent. (Depending on context this is called Naak or Ngueak in the Laotian language, and Naga in Pali). An animistic figure that predates Buddhism, the Cosmic Serpent was used in many textiles produced for use in shamanistic rituals. Today the symbol continues to be significant to the cultural identity of Laotians.

Although the team had hoped to learn from the Laotian weavers themselves about the symbolic significance of the Cosmic Serpent in the context of their textiles, it soon found there was very little consensus among them, and even among scholars, regarding its nomenclature, meaning and various forms. This is because the patterns and the stories behind them have been disseminated orally through generations. Hardly any publications compiling the names and typologies have been released in Laos. It was therefore decided to focus research on this very topic, to find the connections between a pattern’s shape, its name and meaning. Although this is an important part of a textile, it is nonetheless often overlooked in favor of materials and techniques used in production. This approach was possible due to the author’s expertise in Asian iconography; her work in investigating the meaning of forms in Asia.
The serpent has appeared as a symbol in every culture from the earliest of times. In addition to fieldwork findings and academic research, the team studied the serpent as a universal symbol, to understand its meaning from a broader sense. Later it focused this research on Southeast Asia and developed thematic visual explorations to both encourage visual thinking and deepen the understanding of the Cosmic Serpent and what it represents.

The most important themes about the Cosmic Serpent were narrowed down through word-based mind maps. The meanings found to be most relevant were duality, fertility, and transcendence. These keywords became the starting point and the overarching themes for deeper exploration through visual maps and metaphors. This critical stage helped the team to translate abstract ideas, meanings and concepts into images and forms. The exercise also led design for to want to share its findings with the weavers and to do a collaborative design workshop.

**Workshop and design collaboration**

The team returned to Laos to give a workshop to weavers at the Houey Hong Women's Vocational Centre in Vientiane, a deserving non-profit group that is trying to keep the weaving tradition alive. The program was divided into two parts: (1) learning the meaning of symbols and (2) designing collaboratively. The focus of the former was storytelling and understanding the meaning behind patterns. The latter addressed the application of those patterns. A workbook was created as a tool to encourage these local artisans to recall and reflect on the meaning and stories of the Cosmic Serpent.

Designed to enable a hands-on approach to its subject, it invited the weavers to write, draw or work on its pages freely. Structured as a sequence of exercises in storytelling through written and spoken words, images, drawings, collages, photos and other media, it included examples of common Cosmic Serpent motifs found within the culture of the Tai ethnic group, so that the weavers could cut and paste motifs and share their own memories related to the symbol. The pages also provided space for the artisans to re-interpret and re-express their favorite stories, memories or traditional motifs by creating Cosmic Serpent motif applications.
The first day began with the participants’ sharing of stories about the Cosmic Serpent. One such story tells of the mythical origin of the Laotians as children of Cosmic Serpents. Another addresses how the weaving patterns were bestowed to humans by the Cosmic Serpents. These creation legends intrinsically connect the Laotians to their origin and to the origin of their craft, underscoring the significance of keeping such imagery alive. By the end of the second day, the participants had created their own application of patterns and incorporated them into bags and cushions as a way to visualize their skills and knowledge as finished products. On each subsequent field trip, the group collected and compiled variations on three key patterns of the Cosmic Serpent identified in this way.

As the participants came to realize the deeper layers of meanings these familiar patterns hold, and learned more about their significance to Laotian culture, they were increasingly eager to delve deeper and learn more about the meanings of the patterns they weave.

**Scholarly connections**

Because of the lack of literary references, the design for team went to Chiang Mai to consult with Lao-Tai textiles expert Cheesman. That meeting pointed us to the work of Doré (2008), who unveiled the origins and meanings of some of the most important patterns of the Cosmic Serpent, helping us clarify our own prior understanding of the motif’s meanings. Later the most important motifs were identified their meanings correlated as follows:

- Nak Phan Hang – duality
- Nak Taun Tao – fertility
- Kong (Khom) Nak – transcendence

With this conceptual framework established, the team then decided to work with Laotian weavers to design three separate collections of products exploring these concepts and designs. These items would be donated to the artisans, to serve as examples showing different possibilities for their craft.

In this way, research into the meaning of the woven patterns thus addressed the very building blocks of visual communication: shapes, materials, colors, and textures. Because the goal of this project was preservation of cultural integrity, and heeding the aforementioned words of Borges, it was important to the team to first establish authentic saliency of the patterns’ meanings, so that the role of the designer became one of facilitator, rather than someone devising his or her own inspirations.

**Making: Establishing a production system**

The collections were named so as to link each pattern with its inherent meaning. This was as much to convey those meanings to the general public, as to re-establish and solidify knowledge of them among the weavers themselves.

As no one on the research team had prior experience working with textiles, its members engaged in a sewing workshop to better understand the potential of fabric as a product material. Design for paired up with A Craft Initiative, a group of Singaporean artisans who have dedicated themselves to creating and
promoting hand-sewn goods in Singapore. Design for members had the opportunity to work and experiment with a variety of fabrics in order to grasp the potentialities and constraints of the material. This also enabled the Singaporean students on the team to appreciate the value of handmade, one-of-a-kind goods.

The final step of the project was to apply the newly acquired skills. Design for members designed and assembled their own works. Thanks to this form-play exercise, the team was able to create different products that were later developed into a unified collection featuring pouches, bags, laptop cases and garments. It was literally a hands-on way for team members to appreciate the value of the handmade and one-of-a-kind. Design for’s collaborators in Laos intend to market their products within the range of USD 20, as a comfortable price point for tourists. The reality is that their works are in competition against machine-made goods. Setting a price point higher than mass-produced goods reinforces recognition of the true value of authentically made, handcrafted works. It honors the natural environmental resources spent, the time invested, and the craftmanship involved. The products therefore were positioned as ambassadors that relate the stories about the patterns’ legacy, the materials used, and indeed the people who craft them. This exercise of rethinking the market value of the products emerged naturally from discussions with the Laotian collaborative partners about attention to detail in the finishing, such as using high-quality zippers, buttons and lining.

![A team member participates in a sewing workshop](Source: Author’s image)

**Figure. 7**  A team member participates in a sewing workshop

**Prototyping**

For prototyping, the design for team worked with Houey Hong Women’s Vocational Centre and Saoban Craft, making several trips to Laos for many rounds with regular feedback from weavers. In this way the team ensured that the weavers had direct ownership of the very patterns that traditionally have been so closely connected to their spirituality and important rituals. This process took several months to complete as every step was done by hand, and because of the inherent difficulties in long-distance communications about specifications and technical drawings. Members of the team travelled several times to Laos to follow up on key stages of the production process.

The design for team spent more than six months from the initial commission of textiles to the production of the final prototypes, a process that was more challenging than imagined in order to attain the highest quality by international standards. To recapture some of that time, for the sewing of the final prototypes the team enlisted the assistance A Craft Initiative in Singapore. This streamlined the process and enabled the team to sort out unexpected problems on the spot quickly regarding the sourcing of zippers, buttons and other materials.

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Figure 8 Nak Phan Hang — Duality Collection
Source: Author’s image

Sharing: Empowerment for the community
A full exhibit of the three collections and their research and development process was held in 2014 at the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) as part of their ‘Handmade in Asia’ series. Entitled ‘Handmade in Asia: Weaving the Cosmic Serpent in Laos.’ the exhibition was a collaboration between the museum and Nanyang Technological University’s School of Art, Design and Media, and was organized as part of the diplomatic mission to celebrate 40 years of bilateral relations between the Lao People’s Democratic Republic and the Republic of Singapore. On 20 February 2014, Prime Minister Thongsing Thammavong of Laos opened the exhibition at a reception hosted by Lawrence Wong, Singapore’s Acting Minister for Culture, Community and Youth.

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Figure 9   Exhibition at Asian Civilizations Museum, Singapore
Source: Author’s image

The exhibition closed on 27 April, and during its two-month run some 80,000 guests visited. A few parallel activities were held at the museum to enhance the audience’s understanding of weaving as a living part of Southeast Asian culture.

Weavers from the Houey Hong Women’s Vocational Centre gave demonstrations using naturally dyed silk and supplementary weft patterning techniques. The design for team facilitated talk sessions so that these weavers, artisans from A Craft Initiative, and members of its own team could share insights about the project and the various roles undertaken within it. Design for also gave guided tours of the exhibition, talking in depth about the process with other designers and textile enthusiasts. These events celebrated and heightened awareness of the need to preserve the rich craft traditions of ASEAN countries.

Through these many activities the team was able to establish a true dialogue between Laotians and Singaporeans. In a fast-paced society such as Singapore’s, the project offered a different perspective, a slower pace and a more holistic view of life, something much needed today.

A symposium was organized well, bringing together prominent Asian scholars who presented their understanding of the meanings of the Cosmic Serpent as found in their own cultural backgrounds.

Undoubtedly one of the most rewarding outcomes of this process was witnessing the Houey Hong weavers proudly representing their country and demonstrating their skills to eager audiences in Singapore.

Conclusion

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Through all these activities the aim has been to identify and reveal the many layers of systems that sustain a living textile tradition in Laos. The inherent meanings of patterns, the materials involved including natural dyes and fibers, and actual weaving techniques were investigated. The team created product designs that re-established lost links between patterns, nomenclature, and meanings. It disseminated information to weavers through a workshop, and other than the one cited above, organized several other exhibitions to heighten awareness of these systems and the value of products made with respect for local culture, the environment and the craftsman. Design for’s work in Laos gave each member new understanding of what it means to have a relationship with material that is not based solely on economy. It gave pause to re-think the ways of production in today’s world.

The industrial revolution stripped objects from their stories. Machine-made goods removed the element of human touch as they disconnected people from natural resources and the environment on which those resources depend. We are now inundated by a plethora of such objects devoid of any human connection, and this trend will perpetuate as long as mechanization and robots are substituted in place of human labor. We are so disconnected from the daily objects we use that most of us are not even aware of the many cases of exploitation happening in factories around the world in countries where labor rights are limited. Whether through ignorance or our blind addiction to material goods, we remain unaware of the plight of those who work under truly dire conditions to produce the items we happily consume. For the sake of economical development, not only have we have surrendered our connections to material things, but also to the food we eat, our shelter and our very health and well-being. Because they play an integral role in the production and consumption of goods, designers must turn their eyes and ears to the voices behind the objects, both those from the past and those here with us now, in the present.

We need to build networks to make those voices heard, and to make visible the hands that create all the objects that surround us. Then consumers will have the opportunity to respond and take responsibility for the systems they choose to support through their purchases. Will your choices support exploitation or empowerment? Perhaps only when it comes to such a stark contrast will we begin to place the well-being of people first.

In this project designers acted as facilitators to reinvest marketable objects with the unique qualities of the culture from which they spring. Further, in disseminating this knowledge designers ultimately took on the role of storyteller, or cultural ambassador.

With regard to handicraft, designers must respect and understand the depth and importance of cultural heritage. To that end the author believes a paradigm shift from the mere design of things to the design of systems themselves is required. Only then will design be able to make a valuable contribution to society.

Acknowledgements
The author/s would like to extend thanks to the gatekeepers of crafts in Laos and all over the world. This research has been funded by Nanyang Technological University and Ministry of Education (MOE), Singapore

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Nanci is the founding director of 'design for', a group engaged in utilising scholarly research, to advocate cultural understanding and preservation by using design as a dialogue. In 2013 this group won an Honourable Commendation for Wenhui Award for Educational Innovation 2013 - Educational Innovation for Cultural Expression, by Asia-Pacific Programme of Educational Innovation for Development (APEID), UNESCO.