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Weaving Lao Silk Into Indigo Nights□□ラオスの絹を織って藍色の夜へ

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The air turned chilly as the sun sighed into the nearby hills. It picked up the smells of dust mixed with metallic and dung flavours. Miss Phaeng watched, holding her breath as the last sliver of red fell out of sight. Casting a quick mantra to the spirits of nature, she swallowed a glass of *lao lao* to start the evening.



Leaning mindfully over her loom, Miss Phaeng raked her nails across the piano strings of silk warp, plucking each to test its tension. A black sheet of pin-straight hair fell over her face, hiding the claret birthmark shaped just like a spider, that crept over her right cheek, one leg disappearing into the fine hairs of her temple.

The coarse ivory silk recently spooled from the cocoons gathered in her garden pushed back against her hand.



A woman in Xieng Khouang twists silk filament together to make warp thread. She wears a 'plain' woven silk *sinh* with sewn on woven edge (*tin sinh*). Her daughter wears a *mutt mee* (ikat) *sinh* with a less ornate *tin sinh* befitting younger girls.

She felt the fizz of anticipation low in her belly as she gathered all the many shuttles holding the weft silk and dumped them into an old blackened basket. Inhaling its heady stink of ash, grass and smoke, she placed the basket next to where she would sit.

Her mother had warned her of the importance of finishing the warp before sunset, as the spirits would tangle the threads on an unfinished loom. She had a broom ready to scare them away, and the *lao lao* was supposed to purify her soul against such happenings, but she would remain vigilant as she worked through the night. After all, her wedding was only a week away and this was to be her wedding skirt.

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Deep purple, indigo and red of *mutt mee* dyed silk shone from the spindles stained with the sweat of her mother's hands and now hers. Each spindle had been polished with oil and relentless use and they skidded effortlessly across the sheet of warp threads.

The previous day she had arranged the three hundred bamboo pattern sticks, which defined her complex design though the warp threads. She sighed, for an infinitesimal moment daunted by her task.

Dreams married to ancient symbols filled her eyes and her intent. Despite it still being cool, the wet season had come early. Lightning spattered the hills with grey green flash shadows. The low rumbling caused her sharp-eyed red dog to hustle nearer to her feet, growling and turning in agitation. The dragon spirits had returned to the world and weddings were now permitted. Her tribute and display of worthiness was to weave her wedding *sinh*. The more adept and complex, the greater the money that would be given to her parents by the groom's family in gratitude for raising such a creative and capable daughter.



Her insistently garrulous but now dead grandmother was her teacher. She would scold the eight year old Phaeng as she fell asleep at the loom, exhausted after sunrise forays to get water and a day of sonorous state-provided teaching.

"The bears will eat you, if you sleep!" her grandmother threatened, betel stained teeth bared like the forest beast of which she spoke. "If you fall off the loom, you will become a bear," she insisted thrusting her face close to Phaeng's; so close, the red spittle stained the silk warp. Later she would die, the red oozing from her mouth being the blood of TB and not the hunger suppressing betel.

This old lady who had lived off the rice fields eating eels, weeds, frogs, crickets and tiny fish, had rough scaly hands as strong as pincers, hands that could create achingly glorious weaves confined within rigidly straight selvedges. The pieces were reversible, the

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designs etched neatly into both sides. Her supplementary weave suffered no vagrant threads. She had taught her granddaughter well.

Phaeng kicked the dog from beneath her as she rose to give offerings and prayers in preparation. She had made a posie of marigolds and jasmine which she tied to the uprights. She then sprinkled the loom with holy water given to her by her cousin who had become a monk. In honour of him she had dyed some silk with marigolds to add the flames of power to the *naga* design she planned to begin with.

She set fire to a bowl of chilies to make sure that acrid smoke would persuade the *naga* spirit not to blow his wild winds and disturb her concentration. Then some incense to ensure the spirits of the silk would guide her well.

Her neighbours thought Miss Phaeng a bit crazy when she worked on her weaving at night. Most preferred to lock themselves inside, afraid that passing *phi phetu* might take seed in their souls. But Miss Phaeng had traveled. She had seen people at all hours of the night working and enjoying themselves without loss of sanity or being consumed by the spirits of those who had not made merit.

Sitting alone with her snuffling dog, she threw the first shuttle of silk across the warp, poisoning the pristine ivory with a streak of midnight blue. The sun was now well on its way to Burma, and the dark settled around her like black snow, smooth and silent. The kerosene lamps sputtered but stayed alight. Next month she had heard the village, only 40 kilometers from the capital, would be getting electricity. Too late for her.

She leaned into her work, eyes swimming into the threads and mesmerised by each throw of the shuttle. She worked silently, the only noise being the insects croaking and trilling in the indigo night, and the bamboo's groan as she pressed the pedals that separated the alternative warp threads.

As the night became cooler, she adjusted the thin pillow on which she sat within the square confines of the loom and pulled her old *sinh* more tightly around her legs.

Her mind was crowded with memories, impressions, dreams, and visions. Snakes and buffaloes, grandmothers with milky eyes and few teeth, grandfathers with bent backs and ulcerated legs.

As her arm flew she wrote her mother's life into the silk, then her grandmother's. Her grandmother appeared in the silk, pale and exhausted, sunken into the kapok pillow as she rasped her last prayers for a more propitious rebirth.

She wove the fair skinned French official who took her aunt as a concubine, leaving her poor and with three ghostly children when he was called back to France. She wove the grave where the children were buried after malaria killed one after the other.

Other shapes emerged. Flames leapt from the silk as thatched houses burned while French planes flew overhead. She fashioned trumpeting elephants being shot by the colonists with their royal consorts. At a point of calm she created the placid faces of monks on the morning *tak bat*, receiving the offers of sticky rice with chants of blessing.

The weaving entered a new phase as Vietnamese faces emerged in the margins dressed in black baggy pants and carrying the paraphernalia of war. While they faced the weaver, the backs of Lao women carrying all they owned as they fled from ceaseless American bombing appeared dark and bent with terror as the fire rained from the sky. Miss Phaeng's hands threw arcs of white phosphorus burning into the air, scalding and stealing oxygen, clinging to screaming children.

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Holes appeared in the textile where bombs had pierced the fabric, the selvedge withering under the effects of defoliants and other chemicals heaved onto the hapless peasants below. She created airfields where American men in civilian clothes boarded planes and smoked locally grown opium to mitigate the images of the ravaged people.

Faces of deformed babies their limbs curled in defence against the chemicals that killed the forests, appeared in a complex supplementary weave, surrounded by protective *nagas* who held their souls up to the limpid eyes of Buddha the Compassionate.

As the household dog settled more tightly under her seat, legs twitching and growling at a canine dream, Miss Phaeng plummeted deeper into the trance of the night worker, tossing the multicoloured shuttles and moving the patterns sticks from above to below the loom, as each design floated into view.

Her nails, stained dark with indigo plucked at the stray ends of the interwoven colours, shepherding each to its place.

Sweat glistened on her skin despite the cool of the night. It ran in rivulets along her neck blending at a confluence along her shoulders, spreading like a Rorschach blot against her cotton blouse.

The fabric of her *sihn* spread tightly around her buttocks as she settled into the rhythm of her weaving. More *nagas* roared under the hands with flowers drifting between the rays of power that shone from their heads, before streaming into her hands.

She sighed as a *baci* tableau emerged from the silk, like the one she would have as part of her wedding. Guests sat around the focal cone of banana leaves clasping threads that linked them together in common humanity while an old man chanted wishing them health and delight.



She puzzled at the lines that then appeared until she recognized the scaffold of a dam being built near her home. The sharp angles were picked out in colours from hemp roots.

Behind the scaffold glinted a river pregnant with fish soon to die: their ancient migration routes cut off by the massive structure. She picked out weeping women leaving the land of the ancestors, leaving the buried placentas that bound their children's souls to the household. She wove helmeted engineers watching as the women filed by, while in the background the forest ebbed like a receding tide.

She wove men struggling to make new land productive, opening its surface for the first time, their heart-beats quickening at the nightmare of buried munitions. Too deep a cut and the angry *nagas* of the earth would erupt and rip their hard resinous bodies into charred lumps. As Miss Phaeng ran her shuttle, a man

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appeared in one corner, his leg ending in a flash of red where the foot should be. She captured a look of surprise and puzzlement on his face as the man's blood mixed with the new earth and the buffalos fled for the remnant forest. Laq insect, blood red, blended into the mangosteen brown of the earth.

It was almost three in the morning when Miss Phaeng started to shape the expensive cars of the nation's rulers, gliding effortlessly up the new asphalt of the capital. She wove their fixed smiles above white shirts and crisp black suits that hid the deafness of their ears to the cascading rage of the people. She wove smiling politicians taking money from smiling businessmen.

The voices of her mother, her grandmother whispered to her, urging her to hold the selvedge straight and true, to weave faster and make the cloth sing. And sing it did with the tones of the Lao women who had been making silk and weavings its glistening glory for hundreds of years. They called to her. Teasing and threatening, "Don't fall off the loom no matter how tired." Laughing, crying, dying and singing, they were with her as she finished the work.



Her eyes pricked and her body sagged with fatigue, shoulders sighing and sagging over the loom as the first rays of the returning sun shone on her back.

As the rooster crowed its late strangled greeting to the day, she felt the first stiffening pangs of her period. Miss Phaeng cut the work from the loom and threw it at the rising sun.

Epilogue

Hand woven silk, sticky rice and ant egg soup are cultural icons of Laos. While you can't put a bowl of the ubiquitous but seasonal soup in your bag, those fortunate enough to visit Laos can take home a sample of the weavers' skill. It's part of women's cultural lineage – though it is not an exclusively female domain, and is still a part of Lao living culture; the elegant silk sinh (tube wrapped skirt with ornately woven hem) still being extensively worn.

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But western fashion and the advent of cheap Chinese clothing, the gaudy colours attracting the eyes of young modernistas, is dimming the luster of Lao silk. Once a part of young girls' socialization, Laos silk mavens are now having trouble attracting those who want to spend hours at the loom.



This despite evidence that most rural households generate the cash needed to keep the wolves and corrupt officials from the door by producing silk. Once again cultural and economic homogenisation is being conveyed via the vector of development.

"For the first time I have more trainers than students" said Kommaly Chantavong, the founder of Laos' first Fair Trade Cooperative Mulberries and Nobel Prize nominee. It was she who re-trained the weavers after the Pathet Lao had declared silk to be a fibre of the bourgeoisie and had ordered women to weave proletarian cotton instead. Kommaly had kept alive the patterns imprinted from pieces her grandmothers had left her. Carol Cassidy, who some have claimed resurrected Lao silk, found her talent in Kommaly's workshops. It would be ironic if the ancient art remains only alive in Western exports businesses.



The old women whose eyes shone with the dreams of designs are now leaving the earth and taking their knowledge with them. Many are illiterate in the ways of words but write through their designs and know forests for the colours they yield.

"You should write a book before they all die" many of the weavers have said.

Yes I guess I should. I started with a short story the one you can read above. I have incorporated stories told to me by women themselves although the plot and political tinge is mine alone. My friend Paul Wager a luminous gifted photographer whose work can be seen here and here is pleased to be my pictorial muse. But despite living in a Buddhist nation for over 6 years, we are not suitably enlightened to yet live off air, so am looking for someone or an organization who is willing to trust us to the tune of USD8000 so that we can

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travel in our adopted home and capture the skills, designs and knowledge of the older ones and prepare a gleaming manuscript. In doing so we hope to re-instill pride in the young and a burr in the knickers of the development agencies who on the whole refuse to equate silk weaving with progress or dignity.

Melody Kemp is a freelance writer who has lived in Asia for over 23 years. A gypsy by necessity and nature, her caravan is firmly parked in Laos right now where she is pleased to hang out with weavers and document the devastation (and the benefits) of development. You can contact Melody at musi@magma.ca.

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