

Laotian Perspectives, Standards, and Meaning of Plain Silk Cloth

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Abstract

This article aims to interpret the meaning of plain silk cloth from a Laotian perspective and propose national plain silk standards based on this meaning. The study utilized data collected from 25 key informants, who included ten weavers, five silk shop owners, and ten customers, and it applied interview guidelines and non-participative observation in collecting data. The content analysis method was employed for data analysis and consisted of three steps: bracketing, horizontalization, and clusters of meanings. The data analysis reveals five aspects of signified meanings of the silk plain cloth: 1) preference and taste, 2) alternative material use, 3) luxuriousness 4) utility, and 5) confort and care. The signified meanings and signifiers are proposed to be the outline of standards that could be further developed into complete details. The integration of silk production into markets will transform silk products into commodities, thereby jeopardizing the value and meaning ascribed to traditional silk products. However, standards would enable traditional meanings and values to be preserved while silk production grows and is transformed into modern silk production.

Keywords: Lao weaving, plain silk cloth, meaning, standards perspective

Introduction

Weaving is a cultural heritage practiced mainly by women. It involves transferring techniques and methods, such as preparing raw materials, designing patterns, dyeing, and weaving techniques from generation to

generation (Esterik, 1999). Lao textiles reflect many of the cultural values of Laotians, such as caring, affection, courtship, social status, and loyalty to their group. Moreover, textiles represent beliefs, knowledge, and wisdom accumulated over multiple generations. Silk cloth is a textile that is common among lay people and is part of the national dress or costume of Laos. In the past, Laotian women typically would weave silk after finishing their household chores. They engaged in sericulture, that is, breeding and feeding silkworms, as well as cleaning and spinning silk yarn, and weaving the yarn into cloth (McIntosh, 2002). Nowadays, silk cloth production has changed in many ways, including motif, color, design, size, weave density, and the use of synthetic yarn (Hall, 2004). According to Sisane (2018), president of the Lao Handicraft Association, before 1990 hand-woven silk was intended for personal use, but now it is woven more for commercial purposes and produced to meet customers' demands. Although the silk production of Laos PDR changed in many aspects, its essence remains, i.e. natural silk yarn production, weaving, natural dyeing, etc. With the growing presence of the market economy in Laos, the aspects that comprise silk's cultural values could be fading. This article examines how people involved in its production and distribution have ascribed meanings to produce plain silk cloth, and how these meanings can be retained without compromising its growing economic importance.

In more than 30 years of implementing the policies under Lao PDR's New Economic Mechanisms (NEMs) based on the free market, the government played a vital role in encouraging the weaving industry and expanding its role in the economy (Phimphanthavong, 2012; Punya and Rehbein, 2020). During the period 1995–2015, the Lao garment export industry registered a trade surplus of about \$85 million, which grew to a record \$120 million in 2017. One of the most influential factors supporting garment exports was the special tariff granted by developed countries such as the United States and those in the European Union. In 2018, Laos received the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) from 36 countries worldwide (Association of Lao Garment Industry, 2018; Department of Foreign Trade Policy, 2018). In addition, the Industrial Development Strategies 2016–2030 of Laos (2016–2030)

designated Lao silk and cotton handicrafts among the nine major export products of the country (Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia, 2016). Foreign investors also play a crucial role in developing Laos's textile and garment sector, with some textile factories owned by foreign investors in countries such as China, Pakistan, Australia, Vietnam, France, Taiwan, Netherlands, Denmark, Italy, Thailand, and Japan (Manolom, 2020). The transformation into industrial production necessitates production standards. "A standard is a technical document designed to be used as a rule, guideline or definition. It is a consensus-built, repeatable way of doing something" (European Committee for Standardization, 2021). Standards have three benefits for manufacturers: streamlining internal operations, innovating and scaling up operations, and creating or entering new markets (International Organization for Standardization: ISO, 2021).

As described above, the shift in Lao silk weaving towards commercial and industrial production requires product standardization. There has been a strong argument that the commoditization processes propelled by market capitalism will suppress the values of commodity to market prices. The aim of this research was to retain the values by transferring the meanings in which values are maintained in national plain silk standards. The specific research questions were these: What are the signified meanings of silk fabric in the perspectives of weavers, traders, and consumers; how can these meanings be integrated into the constructed standards? This article maintains that while silk production is becoming more commercialized, traditional values can be retained while at the same time serving consumer demands. Interpreting the meaning of silk weaving with this phenomenon will help in understanding Lao identity by recognizing the essential experiences that are upheld and preserved through this weaving heritage.

Objectives and Conceptual Framework

This research examined the signified meanings and signifiers of plain-woven silk and proposed standards based on the signified meanings

and signifiers. The theoretical framework that was used to guide the study and analysis begins with Saussure's semiotic theory. This theory explains the signs that we use for communication; they contain meanings which can be either intentional or not intentional. According to Saussure (2011), a sign is composed of two parts—signifiers and signified. The signifiers refer to the physical forms of the sign, while the signified meanings refer to concepts that the signifiers denote. The analysis of signs following Saussure's formulation consists of two parts—the signifier and the signified, referring to the words we speak or write to explain a thing and the idea or belief behind the words (Charoensin-olarn, 2001). From this idea, it is possible to understand signified meanings and signifiers of the meanings of plain silk cloth through the diagram below.

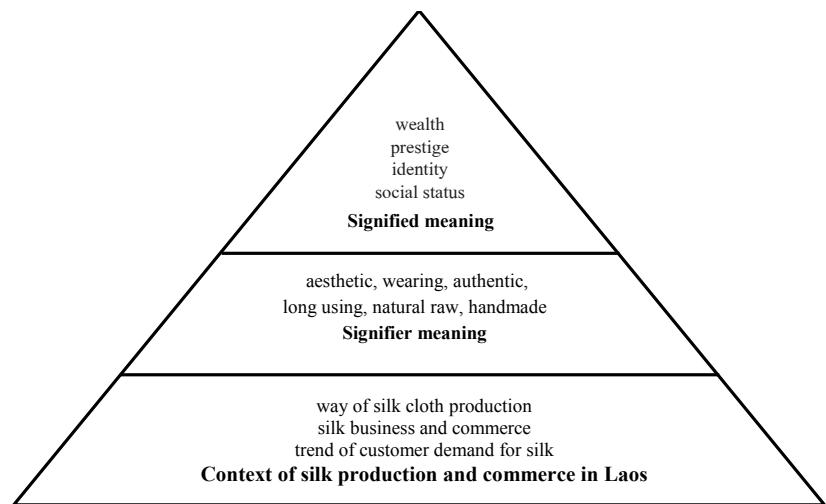


Figure 1 Research Conceptual Framework

The postulation of semiotic theory that everything can be taken as a sign, substituting for something else which does not necessarily exist exactly at the same time when a sign represents, is in agreement with symbolic interaction theory (Mead, 2001). Symbolic interaction theory sees

society as the product of the everyday interactions of individuals. Individuals interact with one another, creating symbolic worlds, and in return, the symbolic worlds shape individual behaviors. The interaction of processes helps to create and recreate shared and interpreted meanings that affect individual interactions.

This article employs semiotic theory as an entry point; however, the analysis extends to include sociological and broader social science approaches to social relations. In particular, in recent decades there has been a growing recognition of social or cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1972) as a type of symbolic interaction that can play a vital role in creating economic prosperity. This article is based on the perspective that it is possible to retain or preserve cultural values and meanings in modern or industrial production processes by transferring the meanings or cultural values into standards to shape production in industries.

Research Method

This qualitative research study applied the phenomenological approach to understanding the essence of the people's experience by interpreting and creating meaning from shared and individual experiences (Creswell, 2013). Below are details of the research.

Key informants: The data were collected using the purposeful sampling method to select key informants (KI) (Patton, 2002). A total of 25 key informants were chosen, consisting of three groups: ten silk weavers, five silk shop owners, and ten customers. The weavers had at least one year of weaving experience. The entrepreneurs owned either small, medium, or large enterprises. The customers were those who bought at least one piece of silk.

Tools and techniques: Three types of interview guidelines were employed, one for each group. The guide questions consisted of four to five open-ended questions, which allowed the respondents to answer candidly. The main question that all KIs were required to answer was this: "In your opinion, what is the particular quality or standard of a piece of plain silk, and why?" Each group also had an additional question; the one for the weavers focused on the changing methods of

silk weaving production and the increasing demand for silk in the market; for the owners, on trends and silk demands; and for the customers, on the objectivity of deciding which piece of to buy.

Data collection: This research project was reviewed and approved by the Center for Ethics for Research on Humans, Khon Kaen University, as Project Code No. HE633215, on 6 March 2021. Utilized in the data collection were semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation. This method and approach allowed the researcher spontaneous understanding of the complex behaviors of members of society (Fontana and Frey, 2005). The interviews followed these three steps.

Key informant appointments: In establishing the key informant groups (KI), an advance appointment was made with the silk weaving group and the shop owners. The customers were approached at the silk shop, and interviews were conducted after the agreement document was signed.

Interviews with the KIs: The semi-structured interviews began upon meeting the KI as scheduled. Rapport building began with greetings, self-introductions, and informing the KI about the research objectives. After securing a signed consent form and permission to record the conversations from the KI, the interview commenced with fieldnote taking to guide the conversation. The researcher used the WH questions: what, where, when, why, and how to elicit holistic and more in-depth information. During the interview, the researcher also observed and noted the KI's activities related to the issues for consistency. The interviews took approximately 45 to 60 minutes.

Data validation: The researcher simultaneously applied the triangulation method to compare the interview and observation methods. If there were any conflicts in the information provided, the researcher verified and confirmed the accuracy by asking the key informant for clarification.

Data analysis: After transcribing the audio recordings, the researcher applied Moustakas's (1994) three steps in data analysis: the researcher first selected key texts by bracketing, then grouped them

into similar and related themes, and finally interpreted and formulated a new meaning and theme through deep and deliberate reading and analysis of key texts using sign theory to generate signifiers.

Findings

The findings are presented in terms of three major topics: 1) the context of silk production and commerce in Laos, 2) signified meanings, and 3) the proposed standards.

Context of Silk Production and Commerce in Laos

The following paragraphs explain Lao silk and its context by describing the silk-weaving process, silk business and commerce, and trends in customer demand for silk.

1. The silk weaving process

There are three types of silk weaving in Laos; household, community weaving groups, and full-time employment. All weaving types utilize traditional looms and other equipment from their hometowns. This type of weaving is common throughout Vientiane. All weaving groups revealed the changing of silk production in many dimensions: goals, producing methods, time, labor-consumption, and products. The first type, the household weavers, are employed in full-time jobs such as government officers and company employees; therefore, silk is produced for use in their families. By contrast, the other groups of weavers focus on generating income and, hence, spend time and labor in weaving. The second type, the community weaving group, was initiated and supported by the government sector. This group collects silk orders from customers and shares them with the group members. Group members can take their looms and weaving equipment to the group's building and come to weave any time, whenever they are free. Members share the orders, weaving resources, and profits. The third group, which consists of hired laborers, works full-time at a private silk factory. On workdays, the regular working hours are 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Some laborers also can work part-time in the evening. The silk

shop owner as the manager is responsible for marketing, producing, selling, and delivering the product to customers. The workers could earn an income of about 8,000 to 12,000 baht/month.

For the silk yarn preparation, the first two groups mostly purchase yarn from the market. However, the factory owner provides the raw silk and sewing equipment for full-time employees. Because of limited natural materials and high costs, weavers prefer to buy chemical colors for dyeing silk yarn. In Vientiane, there are service shops for preparing silk yarn, such as dyeing, tying the yarn for *mat-mii* patterns, and spinning the yarn into tubes. These services save time for the weavers to focus on their craft.

Regarding weaving time, the first group spends approximately two to three hours per day, while the second groups spend six to eight hours per day. The products produced by these groups fall into five main categories: *sin* (sarong), *tiin sin* (the lower panel that is sewed onto the sarong), *pha phuen* ((plain cloth), *pha biang* (*sabai* or shawl),¹ and *pha khao-ma* (loincloth). However, the quality differs according to the purpose and input of resources. The first group weaves as a hobby, hence a part-time job, but the other two groups weave for income, and therefore, certain skills and quality of the products are required. The president of the Lao Handicraft Association (LHA) describes silk production below.

The demand for silk is increasing, but the number of local people breeding traditional silkworms has decreased. LHA holds training projects on traditional silk production to strengthen the silk business, especially sericulture. In addition, the government office coordinates with international organizations to set up local and upland ethic minority community-based silk weavers (Chai [Pseudonym], 2021).

2. Silk business and commerce

The Lao silk business is continuously expanding, as observed in the abundance of new silk shops opening in its capital city, Vientiane.

¹ A *sabai* or shawl is used by a woman to wrap over one shoulder and around her chest and back.

Silk businesses can be categorized into three groups: 1) hawkers, 2) shop owners, and 3) enterprises or factory owners. Silk hawkers produce and sell their products at the market, and some of them also collect silk products from their neighbors to increase the scale of income. Generally, these sellers live in Vientiane or nearby cities. These sellers frequently bring their silk products in baskets and sit down with their mats on the ground at fresh markets such as Talad Khua-Din, Talat Sao, and several night markets. Some of their best-selling products are *sin mat-mii?* and *pha phuen* (plain silk). The price of *sin* varies from 300 to 5,000 baht per piece, depending on the quality and the pattern's aesthetic appeal. Silk sellers usually sit on footpaths all day long from 6:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. On average, their daily income is between two thousand and five thousand baht.

The second group of silk shop owners sell souvenir items and other textile products such as silk, cotton, and other fabrics as well. These shops also sell other silk products such as Lao, Thai, Indian, and Chinese silks, and souvenir products, in addition to dried food and other handicrafts. The two kinds of silk shops are those in the fresh market and those in the supermarket or shopping center. The fresh market shops are typically a square room of about 3 x 5 meters rented per month to sell products. The sellers display the textiles on the shop's front shelf, a common sight in Talad Khua-Din and Vientiane's night markets. A *mai mat-mii* cloth costs between 400 and 8,000 baht, depending on the quality and the pattern's aesthetic appeal. The features of those shops in shopping centers such as Vientiane Center, Talat Sao, and Itecc Mall are generally the same. Most shop owners buy silk products directly from weavers but occasionally take silk products from walk-in sellers. A shop owner expects a 25-40 percent profit from selling a silk product mostly to domestic and Thai tourists.

The last group of silk enterprises and factories have private shops selling silk products of various origins, such as Europe, Thailand, and Laos, as well as different textures and prices. Some silk shop owners have built a factory behind or near their shops. They hire weavers, tailors, and designers to accommodate customers' specifications,

such as clothing for weddings and traditional Lao dresses. Shop owners include people of various nationalities, including Laotians, Thai, Japanese, Vietnamese, and many more. In October – November, at the end of Buddhist Lent (*Wan Ok-phansa*), silk products sell well because of their role in weddings, and festivals as well as Laotians' myriad ceremonies and traditional merit-making events, such as the Boun That Luang. The latter takes place every year at That Luang Stupa for three days during the full moon of the twelfth lunar month (November).

Additionally, the convenience of faster electronic banking and delivery services nowadays brings greater profit for silk shops selling their products online. A female shop owner describes the growing number of silk shops in Vientiane,

In the past ten years, the number of silk shops and textile factories has multiplied because Lao silk has become more famous among Lao and foreign tourists alike, especially the *sin mai mat-mii* for souvenirs. Both Lao and foreigners own private silk shops and factories in Vientiane, such as the Kanchana Lao Silk shop and the Carol Cassidy Lao Textiles factory (Thong [Pseudonym], 2021).

3. Trends in customer demand for silk

All silk shop owners agree that the demand for silk products in the market has increased over the past decade, brought about by the promotion and support of the Laotian government's tourism sector. This increasing demand is noticeable in the rising number of silk shops opening in Vientiane. Domestic and foreign tourists, especially Thais, are its main customers for personal use items and souvenirs. The best-selling products are *sin mai mat-mii* and *pha phuen* (plain silk).

A Thai tourist explained that Lao silk is inexpensive when considering its quality and aesthetic patterns, "Every year, I visit Laos to buy silk as souvenirs for my relatives, as well as for personal use. Each time I spend at least 8,000 to 20,000 baht on silk products."

A souvenir shop owner noted that Thai tourists usually buy silk textiles; however, tourists from other countries also buy Chinese,

Japanese, and Korean silk products. Customers typically buy one to three pieces per person of silk fabrics, especially *sin mat-mii*. Moreover, Thai traders order silk products in large quantities for resale, bargain directly with the shop owner via social media, and transfer money online. The shop owner then delivers the products through private shipping services, which take no more than five days to receive the product. A shop owner shared her experience,

Nowadays, the demand for silk in the market is increasing; I have learned how to sell my products online. Currently, I can sell silk products both at the shop and online, such as through Facebook, Line, and the web. My main income has come from retailing to tourists, both Laos and foreigners. In addition, I also sell wholesale to Thai sellers who order online for retail in their country (Bua [Pseudonym], 2021).

Signifiers, Signified Meanings of Plain Silk Cloth

The analysis is derived from the question: "In your opinion, what is the particular quality or standard of a plain silk cloth, and why?" Our analysis revealed five signified meanings, namely 1) preference and taste, 2) alternative material use, 3) luxuriousness 4) utility and 5) comfort and care. These will be presented below.

1. Preference and taste

The signified words, "preference and taste," are ascribed to two signifiers, texture uniqueness and silk fabric elegance. All KIs agreed that the silk fabric's natural sheen is a reflection of its texture quality. Silk fabric has a glossy sheen when its fibrils reflect light at various angles. This unique characteristic makes silk fabric desirable, luxurious, and expensive. Wearing silk clothing conveys a sense of elegance and confidence, drawing people's attention to its beauty and social appeal that elicits conversation. Where do you get it? How? What is the essence of the pattern? How much did it cost? Lao people love to wear silk clothing when going to work or participating in activities outside their homes, as high-quality silk is a mark of prestige, wealth, and social status.

The second silk fabric signifier is its aesthetic appeal. Although silk fabrics look flat, there are tiny visible knots in them, which indicate that traditional methods for spinning, dyeing, and weaving were used in their production. However, the sellers do not favor pronounced knotting because customers prefer a cleaner-looking fabric for a dress. Knots may resemble flaws and will not appeal to customers. Overall, in “preference and taste,” the silk fabric’s natural beautiful luster reflects the uniqueness of its texture. A customer narrated her experience in buying plain silk fabric,

I usually wear a silk dress or *sin mai* for working at the government office. So every year I generally buy plain silk fabric to make new clothing. Even if the price of plain silk without knots is high, I’m willing to pay, because I can make a beautiful dress out of it. Sometimes I will buy plain silk with a bit of knot that appears at the edge of the fabric, not at the center (Sai [Pseudonym], 2021).

2. Alternative material use

Our analysis revealed that the signified and signifiers of meaning are increasingly concerned with alternative use of material in silk production: authentic silk yarn, traditional weaving, and mixed materials. The KIs agreed that using a whole piece of natural silk fabric is ideal. This reflects Lao people’s preference for natural silk products and traditional hand weaving, even if artificial silk fabrics are available in the market. A weaver explained some of the unique properties of authentic silk fabrics; they are not rough or dry and have good sheen and heat dissipation, making them ideal for both formal and informal occasions. Embedded among the livelihoods of Lao women, especially in the rural areas, are traditional silk production or sericulture techniques and the transfer of knowledge from generation to generation. Hence, it is not surprising that all KI groups prefer handmade silk fabrics.

However, there are two new and widely-accepted synthetic yarns among Lao people, silk produced by machines and weaving mixed materials. While all KI groups prefer authentic handmade silk material,

the price of products using synthetic materials and machines is attractive to the sellers and customer groups. Silk production has been exposed to the modern technologies of weaving machines and substitute materials and Laotians to a certain degree accept imitation products. A customer shared her experience of buying plain silk with artificial thread. She usually buys silk fabric made with natural silk yarn, but she sometimes buys a piece of silk with synthetic threads if it looks particularly stunning and unique. She wears garments made of this silk quite often, especially to attend informal social activities. This indicates the change of signifiers, i.e. that although wearing plain silk at informal social events is becoming increasingly common and accepted, authentic or natural silk cloth is still associated with formal social events. The signified meanings are therefore negotiated and interchanged between conservative meaning and modern meanings driven by markets.

3. Luxuriousness

From our analysis, the beauty of silk’s texture signifies high quality, and the more beautiful the cloth is, the higher the price. Good silk attire will be worn at important events, such as special ceremonies at the temples, big feasts, such as wedding ceremonies, and formal gatherings. The beauty of silk texture is therefore the signification of luxuriousness to which are ascribed to: 1) smoothness, 2) denseness, and 3) folding recovery. All KI groups recognized smoothness, but the other two features were important to only one group, the sellers or customers group. The weavers group explained two aspects of silk texture that are attractive: weave with a high-grade silk yarn (*mai yod*) and the overall features of the cloth. These fabrics are costly, because of the time spent on production, materials, and labor in the weaving process. As a result, the prices of finished products are high, and only customers who are relatively well off can afford to buy them. The price of plain silk varies according to silk grades—fair, good, and excellent. High-grade plain silk costs 3,000 baht or more for a piece measuring 90 x 180 cm. Silk shop owners said that well-to-do customers such as civil servants and business people are willing to pay more for beautiful silk, and spend approximately 20,000 to 30,000 baht. Moreover, some

customers buy the entire piece of plain fabric and are willing to pay the full price without bargaining. This section argues that a person who wears elegant silk, which is visible by its smoothness and density, demonstrates high economic status and wealth.

4. Utility

Utility refers to comfort and value which are associated with two signifiers—silk's unique texture and its usefulness. First, all KIs agreed that someone who wears silk feels comfortable because of its unique texture and good heat dissipation. One weaver respondent described the nature of silk fiber's natural moisture as smooth and not too dry. Moreover, long-time users of silk also reported that although silk does not absorb heat, it dissipates heat very well when worn. The second signifier, usefulness, was borne out from customers' two perspectives: fair price or affordability and long-lasting use. They argue that a reasonable price reflects customers' expectation of comfort when wearing it. Nowadays, avid silk customers have many options depending on quality and cost. For an elegant silk dress, spending 5,000 baht for the textile alone is expensive, especially after adding up the costs for the designer and seamstress. Moreover, silk's durability plays a significant role in the customer's buying decision. Although a dress may be expensive, it is expected to be long-lasting and thus, worth the price. Therefore, patrons are willing to pay the premium. As mentioned previously, customers pay not only for the fabric but also for the tailor or seamstress. A silk customer shared her ideas relating to her expectations on the fabric's comfort and value,

I usually have a suit—or sometimes two—made every year. Typically, I pay about 10,000 to 15,000 baht for an outfit, which consists of a women's top and a *sin*. This price does not include the *tin sin* yet. I can wear it for two to three years so I think it's good value for the money (Sorn [Pseudonym], 2021).

5. Comfort and care

Comfort and care include the textile's comfort in wearing, color uniformity, sizing standard, and resistance to shrinking and washing

discoloration. All KIs strongly agreed on the latter as the most essential feature of quality fabrics. While the sellers favored natural or traditional colors, the weavers and customer groups did not. The weavers explained their preference for modern dyeing techniques for silk yarns because of these chemicals' higher and long-lasting coloring pigment quality and more a comprehensive range of color options along with being affordable and easier to dye. Thus, natural or traditional colors are not a significant issue for weavers. This affects the sellers' marketability and management, because it is difficult for buyers to distinguish between natural and synthetic colors, while the costs of the two methods are considerably different. Moreover, fading is a concern raised by the customers' group. A customer shared her experience with cheap silk products bought at the fresh market where the fabric shrank after she had it made into a dress and washed it. She speculated that the materials used were probably made from other fibers and not natural silk thread.

The last signifier, "safety when wearing silk," arose from the customer group's opinion that allergic reactions and skin irritations may occur for those who wear silk clothing dyed with chemical or synthetic materials, especially those who wear it for a long time. Thus, from the weavers' perspective of having limited time to prepare natural colors for dyeing and increased productivity and profit, the chemical dyeing method is preferred.

Plain Silk Cloth Standards

As mentioned in research method section, the questions we asked KIs about their perspectives of qualities and standards of plain silk cloth. The signified meanings and signifiers also reveal some kinds of standards. The table below summarizes suggested standards of plain silk based on the signified meanings.

Table 1 Proposed plain silk cloth standards

Signified meanings	Signifiers	Proposed standards
Preference and taste	Silk's unique texture Fabric's beauty	Sheen Knotless Even color Natural silk yarn/fabric Handmade
Alternative material use	Lower price Worn at casual/informal events	Sources of production (mass industries or small-scale firms) Types of silk yarn (synthetic, natural, mixed) Dyeing methods (natural or chemical material)
Luxuriousness	Beauty of silk texture Dressed for formal social events	Smoothness Good heat dispersion Resists wrinkling Denseness
Utility	Uniqueness Usefulness	Comfortable when worn Affordability (prices) Long-lasting
Comfort and care	Quality of the product	No fading after washing No shrinking of fabric Not irritation or allergic reaction when worn Standard size Even color

Conclusion and Discussion

The economic sector of Lao PDR, especially the textile industry, grew continuously throughout the three decades when its New Economic Mechanism (NEM) policy was being implemented. Subsequently, the country's silk production was also influenced and shifted from home weaving to production on a commercial scale. This shift of direction and the rapid expansion of the textile industry call to mind the development of Lao PDR, and the integration of silk production into the market economy. The growing 'commoditization' and meanings of plain silk cloth are now determined by markets, while cultural values have been marginalized. This research reveals the signified and signifiers

of meanings of plain silk from the perspective of those involved in production, distribution, and consumption, and it proposes that these meanings be preserved by further integrating standards into the plain silk textile industry. The Lao people's reproduction of the weaving culture and the creation of new meaning reflects their profound perception of self and identity.

This study revealed that plain silk cloth is increasingly produced through modern methods, while weavers or former plain silk business owners have become laborers or raw material suppliers. Consequently, the subsistent form of plain silk production will be weakened and, eventually will be replaced by industrial forms of production. This indicates that plain cloth production has shifted away from the observance of Sisane (2018) that before 1990, Lao people's purpose for hand weaving was for personal and not commercial use. Currently, however, the distributors of products who play an important role in the supply chain of silk product distribution to the global market are the shop owners who as middlemen in transferring wholesale silk products to retailers abroad, thus affording end users competitive prices (Boudreaux, 2019). The findings concerning alternative material use in plain silk cloth production demonstrate the market-driven development in Lao PDR (Esterik, 1999). The diversification of products and the different grades of silk cloth worn at different social events reflect the concept of habitus of Bourdieu (1972). This change has increased both opportunities and constraints for preserving meanings and values of plain silk. On the one hand, the use of plain silk in broader social events will ensure and promote wider markets. But on the other hand, the pressure to lower the price to meet the demand of wider markets will drive the industry toward relying on synthetic yarns and machines. This will eventually undermine the small producers, and new meanings and values will replace the present ones.

The signified meanings reveal the Lao people's identity through their definition of silk. Conservation, preference and taste, and wealth signifiers are the essence of their experiences preserved and integrated through the silk production process. Although there are several plain

silk products on the market with different grades and varying prices, Lao people still prefer handmade silk cloth, using natural silk yarn because of its natural sheen and moisture. Although people who are not wealthy cannot afford to buy superior silk fabrics, they select silk products befitting their economic status. In the market, the price of plain silk ranges from the hundreds up to three thousand baht per piece. The signifiers of luxuriousness embedded in silk cloth signify identity. In producing meaning, this research uncovered Lao people's acceptance of new materials and their changing mindset to recognize modern technology. Weavers eventually accepted synthetic materials because of their quality and affordability as well as the fact that they take less time to prepare than natural materials. The word "worthiness" is a new meaning that reflects the customers' expectations of using their silk products in the market economy system. Financially limited consumers put considerable thought into making purchase decisions; therefore, discounts and gifts are offered as strategies to encourage and let them feel the value of spending (Mark and Yongmin, 2017). For example, customers purchasing silk fabrics in bulk get a discount of 10-20 percent or gifts during a sales promotion. These changing ideas and beliefs represent new meanings, unveiling the transition from traditional to modern silk production.

Limitations

This research focused on interpreting perspectives and constructing meaning of Lao people's plain silk cloth. The collected data, therefore, do not include patterned silk or ikat silk fabrics.

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