

## **Fabric Woven Process to Commercial in the New Economic Mechanism in Laos**

Kasem Manarungwit, Niyom Wongphongkham and Mongkhol Donkwa  
Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Khon Kaen University, 40000 Khon Kaen, Thailand

**Abstract:** A culture that has been integrated into the livelihood of Lao women has been maintaining from the past until now is the fabric weaving. Due to the globalization and the changes of the way of living, national administration and materialism, this becomes the important role of Lao women's fabric weaving and process in terms of Lao culture and economy. This research was to study Lao fabric weaving evolution and to study the Lao fabric woven process to commercial in the new economic mechanism. This study was conducted by using literatures and field observation and interviews in Vientiane with 23 samples which consisted of experts, academics and practitioners. The results found that the Lao fabric woven process to commercial in the new economic mechanism was for wearing and portraying the inherited culture. Without concrete evidence but verbally, this culture has been existing for >7,000 years. According to Chinese history, Laos had traded silks and fabrics with China during Tang era around year 618-906. This trading at that time was common in Asian countries that allowed the flow of goods. Since then, it led to art transference in fabric weaving process. During the colonial age, some countries that came for trading or colonizing brought their own cultures into the governed countries that turned to be the livelihood as a part of living of local people until the national administration was altered into the new economic era. The government proposed an economic plan aiming to change the agricultural-based to industrialized community to resolve the poverty. The livelihood alteration to fit in global economy led to the trading change in fabric woven process in aspect of marketing. It could be divided into two groups, the fabric woven process and fabric market. Firstly, the conventional fabric woven process, it used materials and motif patterns obtained from ancestors that exhibited the original culture. Most of the products were for domestic markets distributed by middle merchants who played an important role in controlling the fabric price. The second group was mainly for demands from outside the country to respond the individual customer need. This type of market needed the process and procedure in marketing, producing and motif patterns that could compete with other producers. The customer took the price of the product as the first priority that lessened the cultural originality in the fabrics, only handicraft by Lao women remained.

**Key words:** Woven process, Lao fabric, new economic mechanism, culture, economic

---

### **INTRODUCTION**

The significance of woven fabrics which has been bound with religious ceremonies and livelihood of Asian people for more than a century is the social heritage. It reflects the origin, migration, social structure and commercial system including abstract ideology which is obtained from surrounding phenomena. Conventional fabric weaving or thread preparation, dyeing and motif patterning are classified as feminine activities. They are social archives through sights of women who create those fabrics while men are more responsible for other arts like metal molding, wood and stone carving and poetry. Due to the limitation of fabric weaving techniques, the pattern structures of fabrics from Asia are similar including the influence of cross-border cultures that lead to the similarity in patterning and structures of the fabrics. Particularly, the cultural impact of Dong Xon bronze drum

which was prosperous in Vietnam 500 years B.C until 100 A.D plays the significant role in motif designs of woven fabrics in Southeast Asia. It contributes to the development of empowered symbol that latterly is interpreted differently in local tribes resulting in various patterns on the fabrics. However, the fundamental structures of the pattern still remain such as hook, sharp hook, spiral, 8 pointed star, wave, triangle, boat, elephant, bird and human motifs.

This symbol is still in use by people who worship spirits which might formerly be seen as being non-civilized and usually by minorities in remote and isolated areas. Another important influence of major Asian woven fabrics is the structure from Sari Patola silk originated from Gujarat state, India and this fabric became an important good imported into other kingdoms in Southeast Asia since the 15th century. Popularity and inspiration derived from Sari Patola silk among Asian has

not been fully understood. It was found that the pattern structures, color and motifs of this silk were imitated by indigenous people and those living in remote areas. The imitated structure are a 4 m fabric in length equipped with sided ornamenting motifs along both rims of the fabric, triangle-cone-shaped decoration at the edge, star-shaped ornaments in the middle of the fabric and red, yellow and green as the main colors. The genuine Patola fabric was unaffordable for normal people. In some occasions, it was used for trading the independence of slaves and for empowered people's clothing (Songsak and Naenna, 1992). To weave the Lao fabrics for daily use, Lao women from different tribes were responsible which made the positive and negative impacts to them. In term of positive impact, they used this chance to enhance their hierarchy to be attractive to their beloved men and applauded by their relatives. As sayings of accosting and marriage proposal words, the importance of weaving fabrics among women at that time was a woman value that was complimented and widely accepted by men. For those women who are not accepted, they would considered themselves as being incapable of weaving for various purposes like for sale or for their men (husbands) when traveling to trade with others. Then, they could not be wives. Currently, the fabric weaving or production of Lao tribal women is not only worthwhile in term of economy value but also a national cultural mission of Laos. Wearing woven textiles has become a Lao unique culture. "A woman who wears woven skirts with breast-cross cloth is praised by society." This also includes tribal children wearing their own tribal woven clothes. They are complimented as ones who conserve their own cultural identities. In contrast to those women wearing Western clothes and men who abandon the idea of realizing being a part of or supporting the value of woven fabrics with women who are requested to take significant role on this matter, they are reproached by the society. The various patterns on woven fabric are developed by people living in the middle and South of the country because their original patterns on the fabric are woven with Kid and Jok techniques more than any other techniques.

Later in 1981, the government proposed the first economic plan targeting to develop the agricultural practices. In 1985, the second economic plan changed the economic system into central economy (complementary economic management). After the national development due to the second economic plan, in 1989, the government launched a new policy of national development called New Economic Mechanism (NEM). It

aimed to continuously conduct the free trading. From economic plan 2 to plan 6 in 2006, the government focused on fundamental infrastructures and investment in foreign countries. In particular, it is to alter the natural economy from agricultural-based society into industrialized country (due to the national economic plan from 2000-2020) to delist Laos out of the least developed countries. The government has modified the economic development plan of the country in compliance with national and global economic force (Laos, 2006). The expansion of globalization into Lao society due to the modern capitalist economic development plan has push the self-sufficiency manufacturing system out of the former base. This progressively fuses the community-level manufacture with the capitalist economy and it prioritizes the price and financial value more than creativities of community which is the base of local wisdoms and cultures. According to the field observation and the interview with a member of fabric handicraft group in Vientiane, Mae La, she told that "In the past, around 20 years ago, the woven fabrics were only for household purposes like for merit ceremonies, social events or for relatives because the fabric weaving was one of indicators of social status and it was the role of women. Until I was 20, the weaving turned to be commercial. The weaving process started from the bottom of the fabrics then there were people bringing them to be fully woven and finished. They also ordered which patterns they wanted which were from actual samples or from books. We also had our own patterns to weave for the markets. The patterns were inspired from surroundings such as chicken, bird and trees. Then, they were arranged before weaving. The bottom of the woven fabric was 30 cm in width and 80 cm in length (depending on the loom size). We sold it for 150 Baht per piece and two pieces daily. The weavers were my daughters, daughter in law, nieces or people around the area. Now I have 6 looms. The threads I buy are from the morning market because there are all colors I need. In Vientiane, there is no enough area to grow mulberry trees to feed the silk worms. The instant silk threads are then more convenient" (Information obtained from the interview of Mae Lan, fabric handicraft group, Chantabuli district, Vientiane on 9th May 2013).

The fabric weaving and woven fabric process of Lao tribal women are not only cultural missions but also lead to the prosperity of economic value since the communist economic system has been used in 1984 through NEM: New Economic Mechanism. The government supports the economic relation with foreign countries. From 2011-2015, Lao PDR is in the 7th national social and economic plan

which leads to the alteration of manufacture and trading. This was then the rational of this study on the fabric woven process to commercial in the new economic mechanism in Laos. It was also to present aspects, analytical and synthesizing ideas to seek for the approach in the fabric woven process on commercial in the new economic mechanism that was progressively transferring from the agricultural based to commercial based society including the policies of national economic plans. This could change the fabric woven process in Lao PDR.

#### **Objectives:**

- To study the evolution of Lao woven fabrics
- To study the fabric woven process to commercial in the new economic mechanism

#### **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The study of the fabric woven process on commercial in the new economic mechanism was qualitative-based and study tools were the observation, structural interview, non-participatory and participatory observation. It aimed to study the evolution of woven fabrics in Laos including the woven fabric process in the new economic mechanism. The study contexts were divided in different periods to research the evolution of Lao woven fabrics. The first one was the great kingdom period (1954-1975). The second one was the national administration alteration age (1975-1981) until the period of national social and economic development plans 2-6 in the new economic mechanism (1981-2010). This led to the changes related to the woven fabrics and commercial process in Vientiane, Lao PDR.

#### **RESULTS**

In the study of the fabric woven process to commercial in the new economic mechanism, the researcher analyzed data derived from documents and information derived from structural interviews in the field and non-participatory and participatory observation. Then, the derived data was analyzed and suggested as follows.

##### **Evolution of Lao woven fabrics**

**Great Kingdom Period (1954-1975):** The fabric weaving of Laos would have been more evolved if there was no warfare in the land and colonization of foreign countries because the Lao silks were renowned for 1000 years. It led to the migration of people out of the kingdom. The land was almost empty.

Arts created by ancestors were deteriorated including the art of woven fabric. It was ceased by the warfare without any chance to pass to the next generations because this type of art concealed with artistic mystery of Madmee weaving technique.

The valuable woven fabrics were destroyed by the war (The Japan Foundation Asia Center, 2001). In the middle of November 1975, people of the country gathered and requested to cancel the administration system controlled by the colonial supporters and nation-selling dignity system to free the tribal Laos from the oppression and to protest for the full revolution. A new national administrative system was proposed that allowed people to take part in the democracy. It was to drive the nation into the peace, independence, harmony, sustainable development and social progress to enhance the livelihood for Lao people. Additionally, the national assembly of The Lao PDR who was a patriotic group of people was established to form a meeting of representatives from all parts of the country to resolve the requested problems and needs of people (Valuable treasure of Laos, Research Institute of Lao Culture, Patrick GAY. TRESOR DU LAOS). After receiving the independency, Lao PDR revived the cultures related to livelihood, arts including handicrafts. In this period, the genuine silk threads derived from silk worms and cotton were used in fabric handicrafts because in the area of Vientiane, mulberry trees grown for silk worms and cotton trees were available. They were raw materials to weave the original patterns and unique fabrics by their own weaving techniques (Fig. 1).

Although, the various patterns of Lao woven fabric, their origins are still unknown because of the migration of Lao people into Vientiane during the war in transition



Fig. 1: The silk filature by a Vientiane woman. Cited [infacebook.com/once upon a time in Laos Lane Xang](https://www.facebook.com/onceuponatimeinlaoslaneXang)

period. People from different states moved to one place with different patterns of woven fabrics. The original pattern of Vientiane woven fabric was therefore, unable to identify. In Vientiane, the patterns found were made by people from the Northern, central and Southern regions depending on where their ancestors migrated from. The main tool to weave the fabrics was an on-floor loom that could be used to weave a 1.2 m wide fabric or an on-waist loom which was generally used by tribal Laos. A limitation of the on-waist loom was that it could only weave 30 cm wide fabric which were used as a cross sheet of a skirt. One piece of skirt made from woven fabric consisted of a top, body and bottom. At the bottom of the Vientiane skirt, it was shallow in width until the migration of Tai Daeng people during the war into Vientiane. They introduced the wide bottom skirt that became widely popular. This could be noticed from the skirt that it had two types, short and wide bottom. The base of origin of all fabric patterns was from the pre-historic era. They were usually in shapes of imaginative animals and beliefs such as monsters like Singha, Saho, Elephants, Moam, Naga or ghosts. They could be also from tools and artifacts like stupa and temple hall or from linings and motifs imitating living and non-living natures such as water and terrestrial animals, elephants, horse, fish, earthworm, shell, leaves, flowers and rice fields. Motifs were also associated with Buddhist-based livelihood or fairy tales based on local beliefs which were transferred into fabric arts. The tools to create this were the on-floor and on-waist looms. The threads were from silk shells. Natural dyes were from barks, leaves or local plant seeds which were in 4 main colors red (from shellac bark), blue (from indigo), yellow (from Kae which was a climbing tree) and orange (from betel palm). The first age of trading was based on the good-exchange method or using purchasing and buying methods as recorded in Chinese history. Laos had been trading with China since Tang family (618-905). The skills of cultivating mulberry trees, filature, dyeing and fabric weaving of Laos were favored by Chinese merchants. They then brought goods from China to exchange with Lao silks. The role of woven fabric was to exhibit the social status and used in local dancing which reflected that the fabric weaving of Lao women was the cultural mission integrated in their daily lives. As the expansion of handicrafts, the product manufactures exceeded the household use. It was then necessary to exchange the products with other families who made different kinds of essential products. This type of trading was limited to locals and for exchanging the productivities. Once “money” created as a medium to exchange, an area that the product exchange took place

was called “Lad”, e.g., Lad Buag, Lad Saen, Ta Lad and Kon Talad which turned into currently used word, Talad (or market). When there was a Talad (or market) that was usually located in an abundant area, it then turned to be a center of community called Xiang or Vieng and turned to be a word, Muang or city.

#### **National administration alteration period (1975-1981):**

The handicrafts were affected by the change in this period. Even though more channels were opened to trade with other countries, it was not effective because only surrounding countries came into Lao PDR. This brought about the labor migration from handicrafts to industrial sector due to higher income. Moreover, the open of the country for trading also led to more commercial activities and mechanisms. As the results of this, it also caused an impact to the fabric woven process. The threads used in the weaving process were more modernized. With the lower cost of production and raw materials, a variety of fabrics was developed such as artificial silk threads and chemical dyes imported from China available in the morning market and other markets. These cheap materials were attractive to fabric producers and the fabric price was set by the customers. This contributed to the use of different types of silk threads, i.e., main and lining threads could be made of artificial or genuine silk. The genuine was used for weaving the bottom part of the skirt but for the bottom and the body of the skirt, the synthetic silk threads were used. The artificial silk threads with background colors could be used to weave before connected to the bottom part of the skirt woven with genuine silk threads. The skirts could be without the top parts, only the body and bottom parts that were made of the artificial silk threads. The tool used to weave the fabrics was called a loom. The motif patterns were created by a technique called Jok. The motifs were obtained from original patterns from ancestors, weavers and customers. In this period, the fabrics were from a factory with basic colors and then they were woven with the bottom parts. This led to an increasing number of handicraft groups that wove the bottom of the skirts. The wage for labors to weave the bottom skirts was 100 Bahts daily. Two pieces of skirt bottoms were woven which could be sold at 150-200 Bahts per piece. The 7-15 looms were used to weave the skirt bottoms which could yield a significant income to the handicraft groups. The raw materials could be supplied from local markets. The motifs were original ones such as Naga, bird, elephant and chicken spaced with lining motifs to build the rhythm of the pattern. The motifs that the weavers designed were leaf, bird, chicken, sky and cloud which needed a skillful weaver to construct

the shapes by hands. The weavers were complimented as designers. Customers who needed their own motifs, they had to seek for available motifs in the market to apply in the own-desired fabrics.

In this period, the Lao handcrafted fabrics were commercially exploited because the main economic activities were depending on handicrafts while the industries were in the phase of expansion and production-base movement to reduce the investment cost. The industrial base was moved to Lao due to the low minimum wage. This led to the investors move their production sites to Asia. The handicraft groups then turned to be the producers for middle merchants to bring the desired goods to the customers. The middle merchants also could design the patterns then ordered the designed products for the groups. This lessened the contact between the producers and the customers. The handicraft groups were therefore, exploited by the middle merchants as they were the ones who set the prices and led to the lack of design diversity of the fabrics. Even the raw materials that could be obtained locally, the materials could be from the middle merchants or the producers. For those materials that were in special need of the customers, the middle merchants also were in charge of this. Various materials were imported because of the lower price of production.

The cheaper price of the products and higher marketing competition led to the various materials for woven fabrics. The genuine silk threads turned to be synthetic. The main threads that were genuine or synthetic silk turned to be artificial ones which depended on the terminal price from the customers. The diversity of marketing competition brought about the middle merchant system and the existence of novel markets, techniques and marketing competition methods. Trading activities during this period were quite stagnant because only a few types of fabrics were able to be on sale like skirts and cross-breast cloth which were used in important ceremonies. For the fabrics made of genuine silk that were high in price from a thousand to ten thousands Bahts and the lower income of people, this type of fabric were not then widely used. In the morning market, the affordable skirts and cross-breast sheet patterned with beautiful motifs that were made of synthetic silk threads were more generally on the shelves. The average price was in range of a hundred to thousands Bahts and they were available for children and adults which could maintain the domestic consumption and production. However, the fabrics woven from genuine silk thread were still used by Lao ladies in very important events like the merit ceremony of Pra Tat Luang and other important events to welcome country guests. The real silk was used to exhibit their cultures

through the beautiful motifs and original colors of the fabrics. The production of the fabrics was separated. The bottom parts were hand-made and the body part was separately woven then they were connected together to make skirts or shirts. When purchasing these fabrics, the details of the fabrics had to be complied and customized by the buyers before wearing which was different from the traditional one, the bottom part of the skirts was woven in the desired size then the body part with background color was immediately woven with the bottom part until ready to wear. Figure 2 illustrates the domestic marketing process and impact to domestic market.

**Fabric woven process to commercial in the new economic mechanism:** The analyzed study results in the new economic mechanism from 1981-2010 was based on the context scope as follows.

**New economic mechanism period (1981-2010):** The 3rd summit of Lao People Revolution Party on the 27-29th of April 1982 had planned the communist system to enhance and continuously strengthen the proletariat dictatorship through three issues of revolution. Firstly,

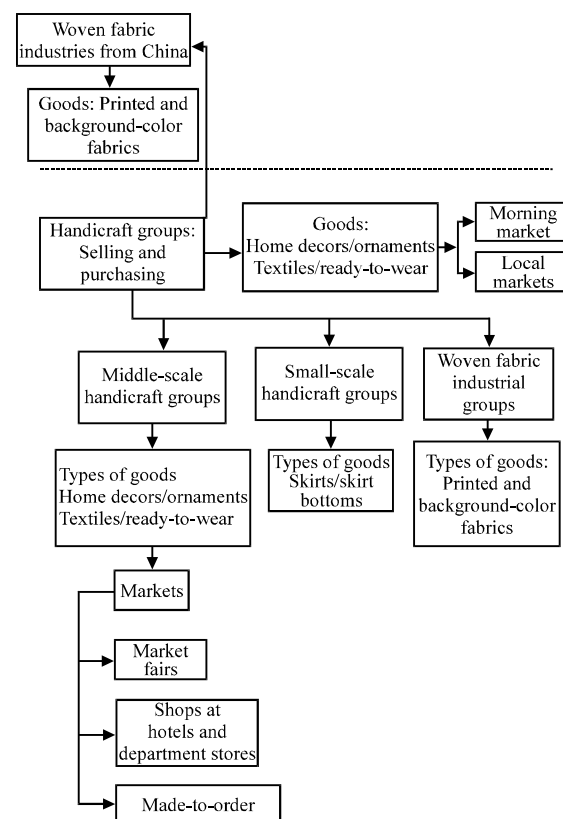


Fig. 2: The domestic marketing process and impact to domestic market

the production revolution was to extend the system collectively. The second revolution was the expansion of productivity to enhance the scientific techniques. Lastly, it was the revolution of progressive ideology to extend the timber-based to industrial activities to build the natural economy to construct the small-scale productivity into a large-scale one due to communist system (The history of Lao from the past until now, Institute of Esan Art and Cultural Research, Mahasarakham University, 2008).

Vientiane is not only the center of commerce and investment but also a city with charming tourist spots because the cultures and history still remain in this city together with the modernization due to globalization such as the marketing competition among handicrafts that are needed to seek for more various markets through the national industrial and commercial council. The handicraft groups were thus to adjust themselves to the modernization. The raw materials were more diversified which were imported from China, Thailand, Taiwan or even from customers. The role of genuine silk threads was lessened due to the high price. Dyes were also chemicals derived from these countries as well. Dyeing process was called hot-dyeing. Sometimes, natural dyes were also used which depended on the customer demands. The reduction of the production cost was then important. The purchase of raw materials was eventually controlled by market price and wage rate that was once monthly into chartered rate.

A weaving skill was also vital to the wage. The fabrics with simple patterns that did not need a skillful weaver, the wage was then lower which was depended on the difficulty of weaving processes, size and patterns. Some types of fabric patterns needed a month time to finish while some of them only required only 1 day. The main tool used to weave was called a loom because the customers of the handicraft groups preferred the traditional weaving. However, the fabric productivity could not be able to respond the demand. To increase the number of weaving looms was to increase the productivity. Because of more looms available in the handicraft groups, the weaver training was then to increase the skill through the complicated processes to weave the fabrics that was designed by the weavers to respond the market demand. However, sometimes, the weaving techniques were customized by customers to compete with others in the market. Some fabrics were woven with various methods to differently space the threads, colors and motifs. The application of the traditional patterns with modern patterns for marketing purposes was also found depending on the customer demand. This led to the optimization of weaving procedure to supply the current marketing trend and demands.

## **DISCUSSION**

The woven fabric production was transferred into the new economic mechanism after the Lao People Revolution Party constructed the national economic and social plan. This led to the alteration from agricultural to industrial community. The researcher used the concept by Kongsompong (2010) to analyze. The strategy to make a product in multi-cultural society is to make satisfaction as the first priority and it consists of product utility, quality and marketing mechanism. All this components is linked with economic and administrative systems, raw materials of the products, manufacturing processes, yielded products, product categories and distribution process. This causes the impact to woven fabric process because of the government policies that focused on the business competition for the economic growth. Thus, the production of the woven fabric which was for domestic consumption and external exportation was mainly based on the price to respond the need of the customers. The production cost reduction made an impact to the price of the products and to the customers who preferred the traditional patterns. It brought about the variety of September 30, 2015 the fabric manufactures and quality. Due to this, the traditional weaving process was altered including the raw materials, motif patterns, colors and quality that were optimized for those customers who required the products that showed the real identity through the fabrics.

## **CONCLUSION**

This research on the fabric woven process to commercial in the new economic mechanism in Laos found that the weaving process is inherited from generation to generation. The fabrics woven for practical products are concealed with livelihood, traditions and religious ceremonies. The alteration of national development plan that focused on the centralized economic system brought about the change of the purpose of the fabric production from household uses into commercial purposes. Due to the marketing competition, it led to a variety of competition. The most influential factor of domestic commercial process was the middle merchant who controlled the price and bought the low-priced products from the manufactures. The manufacturers under the control of middle merchants produced different products such as fabrics parts and industrial textiles. The middle merchant used the marketing strategies to find the manufacturers and wove the different parts of the products together with the low costs of raw materials then sold them to minor traders in markets. For

the external market process, the registered manufacturers were depended on the national commercial and industrial council. Their target was to extend the market of skirts and fabrics. Due to the administrative and marketing changes, they also launched the made-to-order products for the major group of customers to compete in the market. According to the market competitions among handicraft groups, the materials and prices used for the production were set by the customers. The product designs could be from the customer orders which were in compliance with market demands. The variety of product prices was imposed by the customers that brought about the optimization of raw materials. The government also supported this industry that focused on the exports to make profits to the country through the textile exhibition fairs. It emphasized on the fabric production to export. The labor system was based on the chartered system. The fabric production was varied in terms of the manufacturing procedures which were the influence of customer marketing demands especially those related to the cost of raw materials.

As the results of alteration of the administration and fabric production purposes which was once for cultural purposes, currently, the whole procedure was altered due to the marketing mechanism. Because of the contact with other countries, the trading strategies were then subjected to the alteration by the international agreement. In the next coming years, there will be the Asean Economic Community or AEC. It is then essential to be ready for this change to improve the livelihood of the country together with national economy because the commercial path is always changed due to marketing mechanism. The manufacturers inside the country are therefore, needed to be prepared with this technological change.

### **SUGGESTIONS**

**General suggestions:** There should be the labor development skill training to improve the quality of fabric and product design because in this current commercial situation, not only the price of the goods but also manufacturing quality including the product design is vital. The customers from different countries have different demands. Some of them preferred the traditional

and modern patterns to make their own products. Some of them need unique designs. This is therefore, the reason to have the labor skill development training due to the lack of skillful labor related to this field.

The investment subsidization of small-scale enterprise to compete in the export market should be encouraged. Because of the variety of domestic goods and the price, counterfeit goods from neighboring countries and the use of low quality materials are increasing which lead to the increase in competition in domestic markets and they are preferred by low-income customers.

**Suggestions for further research:** This research studied the new economic mechanism. Once the economic and social plan 7, 2011-2015 is proposed, the economy and investment are continuously expanded. Due to the AEC, the Lao woven process is to develop one step forward. It is then interesting to continuously monitor the process and business related to the Lao woven fabrics.

This study targeted only the handicraft group inside Vientiane as it is the important trade center but there are many fabric manufacturing sites that are currently seeking for new market demands. The number of members under the control of national commercial and industrial council is increasing. This leads to the growth of the woven fabric industry due to the national economic growth which is required to further study in details.

### **REFERENCES**

- Kongsompong, K., 2010. Multicultural Marketing Management. Sasin Graduate Institute of Business Administration, Bangkok, Thailand, Pages: 307.
- Laos, 2006. National Socio-Economic Development Plan, 2006-2010. Committee for Planning and Investment. State Publishing House, Lao, Vientiane, Pages: 29.
- Songsak, P. and P.C. Naenna, 1992. Textiles of Asia: A Common Heritage. Thailand Bibliography. Chiang Mai University Publisher, Chiang Mai, Thailand, Pages: 248.
- The Japan Foundation Asia Center, 2001. Legends in the Weaving. The Japan Foundation Asia Center, Lao, Vientiane, Pages: 146.