Queens in the Regime of Beauty
Women and the post-socialist public sphere in Laos

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นับจากที่ระบอบสังคมนิยมซึ่งสถาปนายึดอำนาจในลาวมาตั้งแต่ปี 2518 ได้ละทิ้งอุดมการณ์ปฏิวัติ และมุ่งหน้าสู่การเข้าร่วมการพัฒนาเศรษฐกิจตลาดการค้าระดับภูมิภาค การแสวงหาอุดมคติใหม่เพื่อสร้างความชอบธรรมให้กับชนชั้นนำในเมือง ได้นำ (สังคมลาว) กลับไปสู่การเน้นวัฒนธรรมประเพณีนิยม จากที่เคยได้รับยกย่องให้เป็นสหายแห่งการปฏิวัติในสงครามปลดแอกต่อต้านอาณานิคม มาบัดนี้สถานะของแม่หญิงลาวกำลังถูกทำให้กลายเป็นวัตถุแห่งการคลั่งไคล้ใหม่ในนามของ “ความงามทางวัฒนธรรม” ขณะที่พวกเธอจำนวนไม่น้อยได้ถูกกีดกันออกจากภาวะการนำทางการเมืองอย่างต่อเนื่อง อีกทั้งตอกย้ำและผลักไสให้ถอยกลับไปเล่นบทบาทภายในพื้นที่บ้าน เพื่อเป็น “เมียและแม่ที่ดี” สาวลาวอีกส่วนหนึ่งกำลังโลดแล่นไปกับบทบาทสำคัญในพื้นที่สาธารณะ ไม่ว่าจะในฐานะ นักร้องยอดฮิต นางแบบ นักแสดง ในสื่อทุนนิยม สื่อสมัยใหม่เหล่านี้คือศูนย์รวมของการแสดงที่คนหนุ่มสาวในเมืองรุ่นใหม่ใช้เป็นเวทีแสวงหาการมีส่วนร่วมกับวัฒนธรรมการเปลี่ยนแปลงระดับโลกควบคู่ไปกับการค้นหาวิถีทางต่างๆ ในอันที่จะต่อรองกับกระแสชาตินิยมที่เน้นการธำรงรักษาประเพณีในสถานการณ์สังคมที่เปลี่ยนแปลงซึ่งปรากฏสะท้อนอยู่ในสื่อบันเทิงไทยซึ่งถูกทำให้เป็นตะวันตก ทว่าทรงอิทธิพลอย่างยิ่งในภูมิภาคนี้ บทความชิ้นนี้ สำรวจภาพสร้างแทนความงามของแม่หญิงลาวในปฏิทินธุรกิจ เวทีประกวดนางงาม นิตยสาร และอุตสาหกรรมเพลงสมัยนิยม และจะชี้ให้เห็นถึงการพยายามดิ้นรนเพื่อสิทธิทางวัฒนธรรมซึ่งแฝงฝังอยู่ภายใต้ผิวพรรณอันงดงามเหล่านั้น บทความจะเสนอให้เห็นถึงกระบวนการที่ผู้หญิงถูกพรรณนา และสร้างคุณค่าขึ้นมาในฐานะวัตถุของความงามในสื่อลาว อีกทั้งสำรวจตรวจสอบผลพวงของการพยายามที่จะนิยามความงาม (ของแม่หญิงลาว) ทั้งในฐานะที่เป็นตัวแทนของประเพณีนิยม (ในสังคมลาว) และวัฒนธรรม (ลาว) ที่เชื่อมต่อกับสังคมโลก

คำสำคัญ: แม่หญิงลาว, ความงาม, สื่อ, ภาพสร้างแทนความจริง

Abstract

As the socialist regime that seized power in Laos in 1975 abandons its revolutionary ideals and moves to join the regional market economy, the search for new ideals legitimating the urban elite has led to a reemphasis of traditional culture. Once valorised as revolutionary comrades in the anti-colonial struggle, women are now increasingly the object of a new fetish for 'cultural' beauty. While they continue to be largely excluded from the political leadership and encouraged to take on domestic roles as 'good wives and mothers', young women are also achieving a much more prominent public role as pop singers, models and actresses in the commercial media. This media is central to the performances of a new generation of urban youth seeking greater participation in global culture but also finding themselves negotiating a heightened nationalist emphasis on the maintenance of 'tradition' in the face of social changes reflected in the regionally dominant Westernised Thai media. This article explores representations of women in Lao business calendars, beauty pageants, magazines and the fledgling pop music industry and identifies a struggle for cultural authority underlying the beautiful surface. It will show how women in particular are described and valued as objects of beauty in the Lao media and explores their resulting struggle to define beauty as both a representation of traditional culture and one of global connectedness.

Keyword: Lao women, Beauty, Media, Representation

Introduction

As the socialist regime that seized power in Laos in 1975 abandons its revolutionary ideals and moves to join the regional market economy, the search for new ideals legitimating the urban elite has led to a reemphasis of traditional culture. Once valorised as revolutionary comrades in the anti-colonial struggle, women are now increasingly the object of a new fetish for 'cultural' beauty. While they continue to be largely excluded from the political leadership and encouraged to take on domestic roles as 'good wives and mothers', young women are also achieving a much more prominent public role as pop singers, models and actresses in the commercial media. This media is central to the performances of a new generation of urban youth seeking greater participation in global culture but also finding themselves negotiating a heightened nationalist emphasis on the maintenance of 'tradition' in the face of social changes reflected in the regionally dominant Westernised Thai media. This article explores representations of women in Lao business calendars, beauty pageants, magazines and the fledgling pop music industry and identifies a struggle for cultural authority underlying the beautiful surface.

Since 2002 a range of new glossy magazines have emerged alongside the propagandising state-run media to promote consumer lifestyles and advertise global products. A small music industry has emerged in which teenage singers and bands produce their own brand of hip hop, hardcore and pop music. Annual business calendars showcase teen models and each monthly issue of the latest magazine presents a glamorous cover girl. Celebrities produced in this new atmosphere are also making their way into the regionally dominant Thai media. This complicates the Lao government's desire to gain control over images of Laos from a

foreign media that presents the country as a source of 'tradition lost' in Thailand and more generally in Western media as a contrived French colonial construction and a secretive communist relic of the Cold War. Awareness of this marginalisation has produced desires for global representation among a new generation of urban Lao. In a regional media economy dominated by Bangkok-centred images of Thai modernity, what seems like a desire to 'imitate' Western and East Asian cultural styles is actually a desire among young Lao to step out of the shadows and find their own public space. This article looks at how women in particular are described and valued as objects of beauty in the Lao media and explores their resulting struggle to define beauty as both a representation of traditional culture and one of global connectedness.

Peter Jackson argues that the emphasis on authentic cultural values in neighbouring Thailand has been exaggerated in relation to colonialism and forms part of a hegemonic 'regime of images' that excludes much of the underlying diversity of cultural practice but is not seen to contradict it. This regime subjects the populace to an intense form of state authority while presenting it as a form of liberty from the West (Jackson 2004b:235). I argue that expressions of beauty deployed in representations of traditional culture are a key aspect of the post-revolutionary Lao regime's attempts to maintain control over representations of Laos and are not seen as contradictory to an underlying social experience of, and desire for, global modernity. This emerging 'regime of beauty' may marginalise women from formal politics but also places them in a new politicised public space of representation where they can become cultural ambassadors for Laos.

Historical representations

The role and interests of women was subject to critique in a pre-revolutionary public sphere propped up by American Cold War aid in Vientiane. A new overseas educated middle class produced cultural and social critiques of the wealth centralized in the hands of the small elite. The plight of the modern Lao woman figured prominently in pre-revolutionary social magazines which told of the hardship faced by women who had divorced husbands who were chao su (a Don Juan, a Casanova, admired for having many casual sexual relationships) (Norng Sao 1975:6). It was a commentary about the role of women now lacking in contemporary media. In 1975, all media content was diverted to propagating the ideals of the revolution. Immediately after the new regime came to power, the Lao Women's Union was established to include women within an egalitarian socialist movement but emphasised women's role in fostering social control rather than feminist critique. The union now promotes the role of the Lao woman as a 'good citizen, a good mother and a good wife to her husband' as a pillar of the family who supports her husband and children' (Xayxana 2005b). As revolutionary ideals of equality fade, urban women are subject to a double standard of representation as the bearers of national culture with an emphasis on their role in protecting tradition through reproductive domestic practices and as objects of male desire as teenage feminine beauties, control over which is seen an expression of modernity.

The strength of the woman as 'mother' is a popular literary theme that was been championed in the revolutionary egalitarian discourse of the Lao Women's Union, but is now subordinate to a history of the politics of elite males as pre-colonial kings turned post-colonial revolutionaries. While in Thailand women appear as

heroes in the historical chronicles, in Lao history, if they are not absent, they are branded either cruel foreigners or ideological fictions. King Anouvong's fated nineteenth century revolt against the Siamese is glorified by the Lao who reject the very existence of the female figure, Thao Suranaree (Yaa Mo), said to have led an army to repel the Lao (Evans 2003b, Keyes 2002b, Mayoury & Pheuiphanh 1998). The only Lao woman ever recorded in the reigns of the kings of Lan Xang, Nang Keo Pimpha, was portrayed by court chroniclers as a 'cruel' murderer of kings, and in a recent feminist analysis is suggested to be 'a fictional character invented by some learned men for their own purposes' (Mayoury 1995:25).

It has only been in the post-colonial period that the woman, as mother, has appeared in Lao literature. When mother was in prison (Douangdeuane 2004) retells a segment of the life of the Lao-French wife of famous nationalist historian, Maha Sila Viravong, named Mali under the colonial regime. It recounts the tale of her attempt to flee Laos, her imprisonment and eventual flight across the Mekong to Thailand with her children to be reunited with her husband who was engaged in the fight against the French. Mali was divorced from her first marriage at 15 to a jealous and controlling husband and her own mother was estranged from her French husband who took another wife after migrating to Vietnam. The women refused to be marginalized despite a common fear among Lao girls of becoming a 'divorcee' (Douangdeuane 2004:41). They were able to overcome this with qualities of confidence and bravery associated with their motherhood. The author argues that 'the values that mother taught us are good lessons for us women in order to protect our personal rights, that is to say, not to give in to male violence' (Douangdeuane 2004:53). The story, written by the female children of this woman, is ultimately about their attempt to articulate

the historical role of women in a contemporary society marked by the absence of articulated social memory and a forgetting of values associated with the recent past.

While the new regime installed the Lao Women's Union with the aim of promoting equal participation in revolutionary work for women, as the socialist principles that underpinned such institutions fade, their official role has become primarily domestic. In the 1990s the union promoted the role of the Lao woman as a 'good citizen, a good mother and a good wife to her husband' who does 'her duty towards society and the development of the nation' (Trankell 1993:19). More recently, Lao President Choummaly Sayasone described women of the union as symbolizing 'dynamism, thrift and pillars of the family who support their husbands and children' (Xayxana 2005b). As revolutionary ideals of equality fade, urban women are seen as the bearers of national culture with an emphasis on their role in protecting tradition through reproduction and 'appropriate' domestic practices. In a famous collection of short stories, Mother's Beloved (Outhine 1999), the mother is afforded an almost sacred respect by strangers and kin alike, a depiction that draws on the Buddhist image of nurturing mother but also relegates women's power to the domestic sphere (Keyes 1984:229). Despite being restricted from ordination within a newly resurgent hierarchical Buddhist cosmology and remaining reliant on their male patrons, new opportunities for economic power have emerged for women traders in the post-revolutionary period (Walker 1999:139). The new focus on 'traditional culture' may not always portray women as 'the weak and yielding sex, having noble and graceful manners' (Mayoury 1995:31). It also provides them with opportunities to assert economic and cultural influence in broader society.

Beauty and gender inequality

Ideas of beauty and desirability are shaped by gender inequalities. Expressions of male beauty are described as an attempt to cultivate elite social status, a rite of passage into modernity. Friedman, for example, describes sapeurs, disadvantaged African youth, who travel to Europe to emulate and challenge the established political elite with the 'elegance' they cultivate through the consumption of European commodities and fashions (Friedman 1994). Such travels are also imagined in the media, which produces images of local elites immersed in European style. In the new Lao media, young men who drink the national beer are portrayed as successful businessmen wearing the latest suits and interacting with European business partners. Their 'elegance' is a representation of their success as the recipients of international capital. They are also portrayed in new fashion magazines wearing European styles celebrating global Western festivals such as Christmas.

It is often argued that representations of female beauty contribute to a discourse of gender subordination. In the Thai context, Van Esterik argues that beauty represents a male double standard as it defines 'acceptable' social practices for women as mothers, daughters and wives while allowing the sexual exploitation of other women as prostitutes. Beauty, combined with 'traditional values' is a performative act that reproduces particular kinds of gendered selves that commoditize and oppress women (Van Esterik 1996:206, see also Mayoury 1995:5). Aesthetic beauty is a historical signifier of male power. The pre-colonial king had dozens of beautiful wives who not only served to produce offspring but were an estimation of the king's legitimacy. Possession of 'radiant beauty was evidence of legitimate power – both beauty of self and of mate' (Van Esterik 1996:205). The re-emergence of minor wives in Lao

society is an expression of a new desire for political and economic power among the post-revolutionary male elite (Evans 1995:xix). The new regime may have removed a single monarch who the revolutionaries condemned as a role model for colonial servitude and archaic polygamy, but in the post-revolutionary economy everyone wants to be king and the financial ability to attract or cultivate beauty is an estimation of this power.

I argue that to conceive of media representations of female beauty as entirely expressions of subjugation ignores the agency they afford women, just as to conceive of the mimicry of Western style among urbanites as neo-colonial subjugation ignores its role as an expression of their desire to participate equally in the global community (Ferguson 2006: 160-161). While Lao women are conceived of as 'the weak and yielding sex, having noble and graceful manners' (Mayoury 1995:31) beauty is also a measure of their own agency and is enhanced through maintaining propriety and not conceding to male desire. Women benefit from the regime of beauty turning expectations of their need for male support to their advantage and negotiating male desires. Zhang Zhen argues that the desire to modernize in China is providing a range of new, highly paid positions as fashion models, hostesses and celebrity figures exclusively to young women based on the value of their youth and beauty which have become the currency of modernity (Zhen 2000:97). In Vientiane the degree to which the regime of beauty empowers women is dependent upon access to participation in its media representations and associated social connections. For women who are already connected to wealthy, educated and politically powerful urban families, beauty and youth become part of a celebrity status. For rural migrants or poor urban families they are a much cheaper currency. The two are deeply intertwined, as

images of female sexuality and beauty in the media promote the commoditization of sexuality and the objectification of women as objects of male prestige and indications of their new urban wealth. Images of beauty may hold out the promise of emancipation from poverty but they also open women to exploitation in the flesh trade as prostitutes and minor wives, images that are completely ignored in all media in Laos. This is the result of a lack of debate about the role of women in society. This lack of debate means that whatever power women have in society at large, the representations of the new commercial media in Vientiane produce the idea that only the rich have agency.

The changing state of the media

The regime of beauty is a major influence on the new avenues of expression in the media for youth. Pop singers, movie stars, celebrity disc jockeys and a range of youth with 'public' profiles have emerged in the new commercial media. Others working behind the scenes including technicians, journalists and magazine producers have also achieved popularity. The attainment of these expressive public personalities is central to the quest to become an urban and globally connected person but is also bound up in interpersonal networks. The desire to become a celebrity does not pertain to being known by a 'national' audience, most of whom do not consume the media that emanates from Vientiane, but engage directly with Thai media. Instead, it pertains to being known as globally connected. Celebrity status is achieved in the small circles of friends who populate urban colleges and workplaces as an attempt to become cosmopolitan. As one popular female singer told me, "[urban] Lao teens all know each other. Pop stars perform for their friends." These networks of urban youth teaching each other how to

perform regional and international styles are constantly challenged by official attempts to monitor and regulate their performances and expressions. This article shows that being able to negotiate conflicting ideas of state and participation in the regional media is a core skill defining successful urbanites in Laos.

While it remains primarily the domain of the state and of men, control over the media is shifting from a cohort of old revolutionaries trained in propaganda in Vietnam and the former Soviet Union to a new more cosmopolitan group of media managers and producers. A growing number of the managers of the state-run media, now in their middle ages with influential positions in their ministerial Party secretariats, have spent years training in Western countries. They have joined the business elite to produce a series of English language newspapers, new business and entertainment magazines, pop music, radio and television shows which abandon revolutionary propaganda for a new kind of instruction on how to be modern, as consumers of international goods and services. In this new media images of the regime of leaders have been replaced with an advertising regime depicting images of a desirable, beautiful urban elite.

The new magazines that have emerged as a core part of this advertising media contain an uncritical celebration of culture. The Ministry of Information and Culture has joined the commercial media with its own bilingual Culture Monthly Magazine launched in 2004 by government journalists in Lao and English as an appeal to foreign audiences. The magazine seeks to enhance the government's promotion of a 'blend of traditional and modern culture' in order to safeguard values of 'patriotism and love for one's country' (Phanduangchit 2004). While it is rarely explained what 'culture' consists of it is seen as a technology of the state, where propagating the policies and regulations of the Party comes hand in hand with

promoting national heritage and patriotism. Culture is a form of social control that 'everyone has a role to play in building' (Bouabane 2004) and its preservation and expansion 'is the responsibility of all Lao people' (Phanduangchit 2004). While they were not considered worthy of a written article, the winners of a national beauty pageant in 2004 appeared on the front cover of the magazine and as decorative images in an article on the song Champa Meuang Lao about the national flower, the champa (white frangipani) (Reporter 2004). Here female beauty is central to an uncritical celebration of culture in the interests of official nationalism.

State media continues its project of 'instructing the masses' on appropriate civics while the semi-private commercial media is sometimes unashamedly elitist. A new glossy magazine produced by the Western-educated daughter of the director of the Lao Brewery Company, for example, devotes articles to the company, without disclosing its association. "I am not producing the magazine for the people, I am producing it for advertisers and businesspeople", she told a contributor. New commercial media is produced for fellow businesspeople and instructs a growing urban consumer base on how to be international. Images of Beerlao drinking businessmen making deals with European associates, Pepsi drinking teenage girl bands and smart, attractive mobile phone using urbanites adorn magazines, billboards and posters. These images are not completely free of state regulation. Editors follow the state media line and 'promote the Lao culture as a unique culture that combines the traditional and the modern' (Thonglith 2004). Silk weaving, sin-wearing girls and modern, mini-skirt-wearing fashion models adorn magazine covers as a part of the resulting mix of traditional and modern styles.

A new glossy magazine produced under the patronage of the son of a former Lao president and launched in 2003 became

affectionately known as ‘hiso magazine’ by media workers because of the ‘high society’ figures that adorned its pages and were exalted in its columns. In one edition the daughter of a senior government minister posed with a local pop star, and the son of a millionaire Lao family from the diaspora. The magazine, like most others, contains little social and cultural commentary. Another magazine sought to produce its own celebrities with a monthly column celebrating the trendy urban elite describing them as ‘men and women of style’. These stylish urbanites were predominantly Western-educated, from new wealthy business families, and a direct connection is made between their beauty and their success. One recent ‘woman of style’ was described as ‘strong, smart, successful and sexy… this talented woman has not only her beauty and grace but also the ability to manage different companies at the same time’ (Sayo Laos 2006:74-75). The celebrity is an image that an audience feels some intimate connection to either as something aspired to or detested. Literature on celebrity defines it as part of a capitalist system of false promise which ‘offers the reward of stardom to a random few in order to perpetuate the myth of potential universal success’ (Marshall 1997:9). In a tiny urban society where everyone knows everyone else, celebrity is a status that youth perform to their friends to show off their status as members of a modern global elite. Given this very specific urban audience, both consumption and production of such celebrity images is akin to looking in the mirror to see if one fits the part.

Plate 14: Urban fashion models display their 'elegance' at a Christmas party depicted in a new commerce and leisure magazine.

Plate 15: Girls in traditional Lao dress (left) on the cover of Sayo Laos, Volume 17, February 2007, and in modern dress on the cover of Update, Volume 6, Issue 2, 2007.

Plate 16: Sao patithin (calendar girls) in the Lao Brewery Company Calendar 2004 (left) and Lao Cement Company Calendar 2007.

While magazines often carry stories and images of female beauty, such images are epitomized by popular corporate calendars, which publish photographs of teenage beauties dressed in traditional garments. Teenagers in Vientiane compete to become cover girls and appear in the Lao Brewery Company, Lao Telecom, Lao Petroleum and Lao Cement calendars, to name a few. A website which has collected images of the models for the last four years exalts its male viewers to enjoy: '"beauty is in the eyes of the beholders" enjoy my Comrades!' It includes a progression of images from girls clad in traditional ethnic garments to more modern 'cultural dress' and Western make-up and hair styles (VientianeTimes.com 2007). The young women involved in these calendars are from respectable urban families, studying at local high schools and colleges. Over 120 girls applied for the Lao Cement company calendar for 2006, with just six finalists being published in the calendar (Reporter 2006b). Over 200 girls applied for the Lao Telecom calendar for just ten successful places (Souknilundon 2006b). The calendars

are hung on walls in shops and houses all over Laos. Getting on the cover of a magazine or a calendar increases a girl's desirability and connections, and perhaps even her chances of marrying into a wealthy family in Laos or abroad. Sao patithin, calendar girls, like the professional beauties in China are 'fashioned as the timeless object of male desire…simultaneously the trope and implement of modernization and globalization with [Lao] characteristics' (Zhen 2000:95). One of the most famous Beerlao calendar girls from an urban Lao-Vietnamese trading family in Vientiane has since married a wealthy Lao-American and moved to Texas to live with him. She posts pictures of her new mega-rich lifestyle on her profile in an online community in which increasing numbers of predominantly teenage Lao girls from Vientiane are becoming members.

Another 'calendar girl' that I interviewed in 2004 named Tik was a tall, slim and beautiful 19-year-old from Vientiane who studied at a local business college and worked as a mobile phone sales assistant at an inner city shop. She was enthusiastic about following the new representations of women in the media and saw mastering them as an advantage in her own quest to become more international. Tik was a model in the Lao Telecom calendar for 2004. Wearing traditional costume, she was superimposed standing in front of a national monument. Tik also has 'traditional yet modern' aspirations. "I want to become an ambassador in the future but I also want to be there to care for my parents when they get older", she told me. She sees qualities of politeness, cultural practices such as wearing the Lao skirt, the sin, and the care of her family as a part of her control over this quest. But along with this display of feminine culture and domesticity she also expresses a new public ambition. She says she knows such a high position is almost inconceivable for a woman to achieve in the male-dominated Foreign

Ministry. While studying hard she also spends time auditioning for beauty pageants in an attempt to become the advertising image for popular beauty product brand names. She is one of the thousands of girls who dream of becoming a new kind of international cultural ambassador for Lao women by winning such contests.

Performing beauty

The beauty queen is emerging as one of the most popular and controversial new media representations. The pageant is overtly public – a performance of ideals on a stage and associated struggles to accept, reject or alter these ideals. Its interaction with broadcast media makes it a key part of a 'global civic culture' (Cohen, Wilk & Stoeltje 1996:11). In 2006 alone, the daily English language Vientiane Times newspaper referred to national or international beauty pageants in no less than 100 issues. Beauty pageants also reflect the influence of Thai culture on Laos with some authors suggesting that Thailand has more beauty contests than any other country in the world (Reynolds 1994:75). In 2004, the transnational firm Unilever, which plays a major part in the import and distribution of Western products through Thailand to Laos, began the Miss Lux beauty contest. Named after the popular soap brand, the contest has continued annually awarding prizes for contestants for the healthiest hair and the fairest complexion. Another female beauty product range, Ponds, attracted hundreds of Vientiane girls to become 'the good complexion girl' and have 'the most beautiful face with good complexion and good character' (Saengaloun 2006b). The winner would go on Ponds advertising billboards around the country and girls who went to watch the final were offered 'free facial examinations' (Saengaloun 2006a). The Lao World Company, another importer of Thai and international

products, has also begun its own beauty pageant at its huge exhibition centre on the outskirts of town. Miss ITECC 2006 (International Trade, Exhibition and Convention Centre) received a cash prize as well as the opportunity to develop a modelling career and do further promotions for the company (Viengsavanh 2006a).

In contrast to print media, beauty is not just represented as an image in pageants and fashion shows but 'performed' and directly associated with 'character', 'career' and bodily malleability. In 2003 I participated in a fashion show held by a Lao-French company at a major new five-star hotel on the Mekong riverbank in Vientiane. It was held with the philanthropic intention of raising money for rural school children. A cast of professional models, pop stars and well-connected young urbanites performed on the catwalk in front of an audience of hundreds. The bodily disciplining involved in preparations for the show was particularly challenging. This entailed an internalisation of particular physical performances of 'elegance' that the more seasoned pop singers and models carried out with great ease, signalling their beauty to the audience with each hip movement and each turn of the head. The self-consciousness that such a performance induced was extreme and necessitated a distinction between private character and the emergence of a 'public' persona at ease with being 'watched'. The inclusion of Europeans, including the French niece of the designer producing the show, was seen as an addition to the cosmopolitan flavour of the evening and also reinforced ideas of global connectedness among the elite audience who attended the event.

A key signifier of beauty in such fashion shows and beauty contests is the 'whiteness' that they promote through the practice of 'whitefacing' by using cosmetics to achieve a fairer complexion. Goon and Craven argue that the reproduction of whiteness in

non-white societies is about 'poaching' and reclaiming the values of modernity set down by European colonial empires. Whiteness 'is a due claimed against the imperialists, as the price of colonial allegiance' (Goon & Craven 2003:11). It is unlikely that such politics have any meaning for the girls engaged in its cultivation. Indeed, this very self-conscious Western explanation completely ignores other popular meanings attributed to skin colour. For the Lao, skin complexion is indicative of class status; dark skin is seen as a product of labour under the hot sun and light skin a product of wealth and nobility. It is also something that can be achieved through the physical 'malleability' of the body that wealth and privilege afford in the form of skin creams, indoor lifestyles and gym memberships rather than being a product of genetic make-up or 'nature' (High 2004:7). It does matter, however, what image such performances of self produce. For the government, 'whitefacing' sits uneasily with its own promotion of authentic cultural nationalism precisely because it does question the authentic 'nature' of the nation-ethnicity category.

It was in response to the 'foreign' representations of beauty that commercial contests were promoting that the Ministry of Information and Culture produced its own contest. The government is attempting to discipline the cultivation of beauty, attaching it to representations of a unique cultural nationalism rather than as part of a global consumer culture coming through neighbouring Thailand. In July 2006 the Ministry of Information and Culture announced that it was searching for the 'perfect Lao girl', nang sao apone lao (Souknilundon 2006a), a phrase using the Lao word for jewellery, ornaments and decorations, apone, and translating roughly as 'miss Lao jewel'. As part of the search, 18 women from all 18 Lao provinces would be selected to compete for the title in a contest that the government said 'would not mimic other countries'

like previous beauty pageants. The Lao Women's Union was put in charge of the contest because it was deemed 'best placed to know what women are like [and] how they behave' (Souknilundon 2006a). Beauty contests are important contemporary expressions of nationalism around the world because they help 'showcase values, concepts and behaviour that exist at the centre of a group's sense of self, and exhibit values of gender morality and place' (Cohen, Wilk & Stoeltje 1996:2). The beauty pageant in the Lao case, allows the government to continue its aim of producing a 'traditional yet modern' national citizen whilst shifting away from a revolutionary propaganda media model to an advertising model than turns citizen into consumer.

Plate 17: Website: 'Miss Apone Lao 2007 who will it be?'

Miss Apone Lao was intended to promote official conceptions of the role of women in society. Local journalists interviewed members of the Xinxay Culture Club, one of the first youth groups in Laos established in 1994 by a well-connected government advisor, about the role of Miss Apone Lao models in society. Modelling was

considered a completely positive pursuit whose advantages were considered to be 'using time beneficially, conserving Lao traditions, helping to sell Lao clothing fashions and producing ambassadors for Lao culture' (Phoonsab 2006 my emphasis). Almost 300 girls applied for the Miss Apone Lao contest, and despite its attempted national scope, half of all applications came from Vientiane. The contestants were also selected from 'major educational institutes' (Viengsavanh 2006b) further delimiting 'the perfect Lao girl' as educated and urban. A number of the Miss Apone Lao contestants already had some modelling experience in business calendars or beauty pageants. Contestants from Vientiane were a mixed group from urban business and government families. Interviewed about their skills and background, they came up with strikingly similar answers about their aspirations which reflected the official discourse promoting the contest. A majority wanted to work in tourism to promote Laos to the world. A majority also wanted to promote the continued wearing of traditional Lao clothing among women and more generally to promote Lao culture to other countries (Viengsavanh 2006f, 2006g, 2006h). The official reason for the pageant was to extend the role of the women's union in creating Lao women who were the conservers of national culture. Left out of the interviews were more common dreams among young Lao women of engaging in beauty contests and modelling careers abroad and even of using their newfound desirability to marry into families in the diaspora.

While the Miss Apone Lao contest was an attempt to provide an alternative to the advertising-oriented Miss Lux competition, the sociology of both the contests was almost identical. Both involved tensions between differing ideas of achieved status, where the criteria of beauty was popularly considered to fit notions of global whiteness but officially considered to be something uniquely Lao.

There was also a tension concerning ideas of inherited status, where the informal criteria of beauty in the contest included being from a well-connected family. The pageants were also surrounded by controversy about the skills of the contestants. In an early Miss Lux pageant rumours circulated that the girls were taught the answers to the questions before the contest began. The organizers in 2006 were careful to explain that questions were to be drawn out of a box (Souknilundon 2006a). Thus while Miss Lux girls were about finding the most representative beauty for Lux soap and affiliated beauty products, Miss Apone Lao contestants were trained 'on everything about fine practices of Lao women' (Souknilundon 2006a) in support of the Lao Women's Union's role as the cultivator of good female citizens. Miss Apone Lao contestants were chosen on the basis of their 'good attitudes and characters' (Viengsavanh 2006c) although having 'the most beauty' remained a key determinant of the winner (Viengsavanh 2006e). It was never explained in the media what a bad character or attitude consisted of. In both cases the contests were surrounded with rumours about the cronyism involved in choosing the winner. Miss Aphone Lao 2006 was the daughter of a senior government official.

This was a contest between competing notions of urban citizenship in Laos, one connected to the state's moral citizen-building agenda, and one connected to the new consumer-building agenda. In both cases, the judges of the contests were not fellow youth with a shared interest in the transnational dimensions of the new youth culture in Laos. Instead they were business and political elders competing over the appropriateness of expressions of beauty. They were also concerned that such expressions of beauty remained under the control of the nation-state. Concern over the official regulation of representations of beauty in Laos was voiced through

calls for laws to be established before Lao women could participate in international beauty contests. In an official article, pageant organizers talked up the Lao pageant as a stepping stone for the entry of Lao girls into international pageants, although no time frame was given. Lao Women's Union representatives argued that the 'government must first incorporate the process into law and set up a policy' before Lao models are allowed to participate in international beauty pageants (Viengsavanh 2006d). No indication of what such a law would consist of was given. It is precisely the power that popularity affords celebrities independently of the state that inspires government controls.

Perhaps the contemporary media icon of beauty, Lao-Bulgarian pop star, turned Thai soap opera actress, Alexandra Bounxuai, has become the most successful and yet also controversial young celebrity since emerging from the new semi-private Lao media and entering the Thai media. Alexandra's performances in Lao media are couched in the language of 'helping society' and she has become a cultural ambassador performing at international conferences such as the ASEAN summit. Alexandra is the product of external Lao-Bulgarian Eurasian influences yet conserver of authentic Lao culture – but she only becomes a contested ambassador of modernity for the Lao when entering the Thai media.

A Thai television soap opera due to be aired on the eve of Valentine's Day 2007 in which Alexandra was cast as the romantic heroine was postponed after pressure from the Lao government. It accused the Thai producers of misrepresenting Lao culture. In the drama Alexandra was cast as Champa named after the flower, dok champa, a common association between female and natural floral beauty and also the national flower of Laos, the white frangipani. In the drama, Champa is a beautiful young lady whose mother had no

husband, and who is therefore an illegitimate child. Interpreting this as a subtle national insult the Lao government found the idea unacceptable because, said the foreign ministry, “it is against Lao culture to have a child outside of marriage”. Champa plays a tour guide who becomes romantically attached to a young Thai man, too quickly for the government. “It’s misleading that a Lao woman could be such an easy woman,” stated the ministry. Champa is also criticized for throwing the white frangipani into a dustbin after an argument with her Thai lover. “The national flower should not be thrown away in that manner,” stated the ministry (Sareeporn & Supalak 2007).

In the edited version Alexandra played the traditional culturally correct Lao girl who maintains her sexual propriety around men as an estimation of her beauty while in her own life Alexandra is a key representative of Lao modernity. The daughter of a Lao government official and a Bulgarian woman who met during her father’s education in the former Soviet state in the 1980s, Alexandra is a product of Laos’ Soviet past and her identity as a socially conscious pop star is a product of the contemporary desire among youth for international connections. She speaks four languages, is a skilled classical violinist, a singer, and is a former teacher’s assistant at an elite foreign-run college in Vientiane. The combination of this seemingly contradictory representation of Alexandra, the urban high society girl, with Champa, the traditional Lao girl, mirrors Jackson’s analysis of the ‘regime of images’ in the Thai public sphere that is not meant to represent ‘truth’ so much as the prestige of the image itself (Jackson 2004a:204). But when Alexandra performs in Thai media something else is also reproduced – an uncertainty about how to be Lao and modern and yet distinct from the Thai.

Alexandra was the latest focus in a string of cases where the government had shown extreme sensitivity over representations

of Laos in Thai and other foreign media. In 2004, students in southern Laos pummelled the billboard images of Alexandra with mud after she performed at the Pattaya music festival in Thailand (Souknilundon 2004b). Malicious rumours had spread through Laos that she had said she regretted being Lao and uncivilized during an interview on Thai television. The incident reflected more common uncertainties about what constitute correct representations of Lao womanhood in the Thai media. It also reflected regional reactions to dominant Thai media incursions of national boundaries. Alexandra has been caught up in the official nationalist rejection of the Thai precisely because her cosmopolitan representations of Laos sit uneasily with the narrow official nationalist representation. While she has become the most successful young representative of Laos, she is also representative of a profound uncertainty about what 'authentic Lao culture' actually consists of in an underlying social reality in which Lao and Thai are intertwined.

Alexandra Bounxouei, is the embodiment of a desire for beauty and global connections among young urbanites in Vientiane. She is the archetypal young urban celebrity to have emerged in the new business climate in Laos and make her name more globally. She is also at the centre of controversy and contestation over the authenticity of images of modern Laos emerging in the media. A child of racially mixed parentage, luk sot, Alexandra fits well into the regionally dominant Thai media's valorization of Eurasian celebrities as alternative expressions of modernity (Pattana 2005:37-38). But as a new cultural ambassador for Laos, Alexandra is also required to perform as a chaste, culturally conservative female nurturing tradition in accordance with official nationalist images. Images of hybridity in the national media, like the constructed colonial spaces from which modern states emerged, are bound up in controversy

over authentic representations of belonging. They are considered 'beautiful' because they embody the desire and prestige associated with participation in global culture. At the same time they have ambiguous cultural connections to the nation, imagined back in time as racially distinct and ancient.

Conclusion: Emerging from the shadows

In early 2002 the government allowed private investment in the media for the first time since 1975 as part of its moves toward a market economy. While social and political commentary is dominated by the state-run media and its official discourses of developmental nationalism and glorification of the Party leaders, a new commercial agenda is also being promoted. A range of new glossy magazines promote consumer lifestyles and advertise the products of local and foreign companies. A small music industry has emerged in which teenage singers and bands produce their own brand of hip hop, hardcore and pop music. Teen pop groups advertise Pepsi soft drinks for the 'new generation', annual business calendars showcase teen models and each monthly issue of the latest magazine presents a glamorous cover girl. Celebrities produced in this new atmosphere are also making their way into regional media in Thailand and Vietnam complicating the Lao government's desire to maintain a regime of images of 'traditional cultural Laos'. International media watchers consider the privatization of state-run media as a first step in moves toward a more liberal environment for the expression of issues related to social and cultural change (Reporters Without Borders 2007a). It is assumed that a more 'information liberal' Laos will be easily incorporated into the global market economy but this article questions the degree to which 'information liberal' implies new forms of 'free expression'. Incorporation into the market

economy fuels an obsession with international image and 'regimes of beauty' form a key part of this obsession.

In the international media informing this economy, Laos is currently placed in the global shadows, to use Ferguson's (2006:17) characterization of marginalized parts of the world. Laos is characterized as a contrived, external construction that 'thrives largely on foreign assistance' (Manilla Times 2006). It is stereotyped as a Cold War relic, a secretive communist regime. 'The leadership here is very remote, there's just no relationship between our countries, to speak of', said Admiral William Fallon in 2006, the first US military leader to visit Laos since the new regime took over in 1975. 'We have an ambassador and a small staff here. She works at it. But the folks here are pretty reclusive' (OngAth 2006). During the American intervention in the 1960s journalists jokingly called Laos 'The Land of a Million Irrelevants' a play on the historical Lao kingdom named 'The Land of a Million Elephants'. Today it is marketed to international tourists as 'a rarely visited backwater' full of untouched tradition and colourful ethnic customs (Dabby 2005). Laos is a global shadow because it is 'not simply a negative space, a space of absence [from the world economy]; it is a likeness'; its characterization as a marginal place is inseparable from the cosmopolitan centres of global capitalism and its peoples' attempts to become like them (Ferguson 2006:17).

The marginalizing images associated with their 'home' have produced desires for global representation among the new generation of urban Lao. Youth in the new commercial media are attempting to move out of the shadows but to do this they must overcome inequalities produced by official nationalist attempts to regulate their participation in regional media. In a regional media economy defined by differential access to the ability to produce representa-

tions of modernity, what seems like a desire to 'imitate' Western and East Asian cultural styles is actually a desire among young Lao to step out of the shadows and find their own public space in a world defined by such styles.

The new Lao commercial media has embraced the opportunity to produce images of 'beauty' as an appropriate international representation of Laos. Teenage feminine beauty is a dominant image in the annual calendars, magazines, fashion shows, advertising billboards and pop music that constitute this new media. The image of the 'beautiful Lao girl' metaphorically associated with the beauty of a flower has become an icon of 'tradition' eclipsing other representations of national culture. Yet it has done this at a time of heightened official concern over moral waywardness associated with social change and patriarchal nationalist appeals to the role of women as protectors of tradition. The regime of beauty also affords agency to young men and women. Urban youth are using the new corporate media as a launching pad to achieve their own regional metropolitan expressions of 'Laoness' in the media in Thailand and Vietnam that question the legitimacy of official cultural nationalism. Urban youth actively seek to obtain and master the value attached to beauty as a means of self-improvement and a tool with which to explore the world. In doing so, they come into conflict with the controls of the state. Their ability to produce images in regional media is influenced by a continuing authoritarian grip over debate within Laos about such representations. Both the state and popular representations of Laos prompt questions about what 'appropriate' Lao culture actually consists of and who its young ambassadors, the heroes and heroines prevalent in popular music and television drama, should be. Behind the beautiful image is a struggle over the authenticity of contemporary representations of Laos resulting

from the current indecision about how the public sphere should move away from its revolutionary origins as an apparatus for official nationalism.

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