

Good Design: Mekong Design Selection
~Travel to Lao P.D.R.~

Ms. Kana Nakanishi

I was dispatched to Vientiane, Lao P.D.R. during March 8 to 14, 2015 for a collaboration opportunity with Magic Lao Carpets Handicrafts. My design proposal for the *Mekong Design Selection* was approved last year, when there was an open competition for collaboration between the awarded companies and Japanese designers.

Magic Lao Carpets Handicrafts (Magic Lao) is a company that produces silk carpets with beautiful traditional designs and is located in the capital city of Vientiane. The owners are a Laotian wife and a husband originally from Turkmenistan. Together, the couple manages a large staff, each with the task of specialty such as hand spinning, dyeing, carpet weaving, and others.

The hand spinning is done in a spacious area. They employ many disabled skilled workers. Many of the carpet weavers are young women, and it can take up to several women to line up and weave the carpet depending on the size. It is hard to follow the way the women weave the carpets because of the speed of their skills. They look at the design patterns to weave the carpets, however, if the patterns are repeated, the skilled women often have the patterns memorized and woven from memory. Once it is woven, they cut with scissors to even out the height of the carpet threads, and repeat the same steps.

The dye process is also being done in the same work space. At Magic Lao, it is primarily dyed using natural vegetable dyes. There are a large variety of natural dyes, including lac dyes which is rarely found or used in Japan. The natural vegetable dyes have a very calm feel, but also a sense of high quality and luxury.

Magic Lao makes silk woven products, wool woven carpets and much more. Many of their clients are from Europe, and are a company that continuously innovate new designs and production. During my visit, they were weaving wool from New Zealand and silk together.

On the first day of my visit, I was able to visit the workshop, and see how the carpets are being woven. They also showed a vast line of their products. I was able to personally present my design proposal, and both parties agreed to proceed with the collaboration project.

My design proposal is to create a brand of fashion accessories using the carpet weaving techniques. Silk carpets are woven in an extraordinary manner where each thread is woven one by one. If the width of the carpet is 3m, even with 3 weavers, only 1cm can be woven in a day's

work. If they were to work every day, it would take a year to weave a whole carpet. Since weaving a carpet takes extraordinary time and labor, this is why carpets are expensive. However, my idea is to incorporate the traditional weaving techniques by making fashion items that can be bought by a wider range of consumers in a more attainable price range.

Furthermore, my proposal will not only consist of weaving carpets, but also add different materials to be woven and components that could be taken apart or added. By the second day, they were able to make a mockup sample. We were able to depending on the thickness of the carpets; determine a rough estimate of how long the crafts will take to produce and how efficient it can be made by different techniques.

In addition, I have proposed the weaving of the carpets to be curved, which is somewhat rarer compared to square or rectangular carpets. They were able to swiftly make a small sample during my visit. For the patterns, I was able to expand my imagination with the help of books and products that presents traditional Lao techniques and designs. Since silk carpets are very tightly-woven, not only do geometric patterns look attractive, but also patterns that look like pictures. For the future pattern designs, I will incorporate the infinite variety of hues that can be brought by the use of natural vegetable dyes.

Until my next visit, both parties agreed to certain tasks and preparations needed to be made. Magic Lao Carpets Handicrafts are eager to innovate and accept challenges in creating new products. I look forward to the process of collaborating with Magic Lao Carpets Handicrafts and will work to exhibit the final product in fall.

For the original report in Japanese with pictures, please view this link:

http://www.asean.or.jp/ja/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Lao-P.D.R.-Report_Ms.-Nakanishi1.pdf