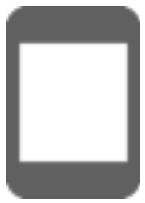


Media of the Diaspora: The Lao-American Miss Songkhan Pageant



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ABSTRACT

This article examines ethnic beauty pageants as diasporic media, through which immigrant and refugee communities explore new ways of belonging and negotiate spatial and temporal limitations. The Miss Songkhan beauty pageant, an integral part of the Lao New Year Celebration, influences how Laotian refugee communities re-imagine and re-define their communities. Based on ethnographic data collection in a Lao-American Buddhist temple in the late 1990s, this article how the pageant preserves and re-imagines pre-revolutionary Lao cultural traditions and symbols of the deposed Lao monarchy. Through the usage of specific Lao language terms, gender performance, and clothing, the pageant provides a platform through which the refugee community negotiates dramatic cultural changes and gender ideologies. The Miss Songkhan pageant evokes nostalgia for the imagined community of a lost homeland and for a feminine gender identity no longer performed by young Lao-American women.

Keywords: Refugee, media, diaspora, beauty pageant, Lao-American, gender performance, exile, cultural identity, Southeast Asian culture

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Media of diaspora, defined as media produced by and for migrants, acts as a cultural and linguistic bridge between the immigrant community and the new country. Diasporic media can be inward-facing, targeted toward the immigrant community and often reinforcing connections to the home country's language and culture, and outward-facing, targeted toward citizens of the new country, and often countering negative representations of the immigrant community (Negrine 2015).

A central question in media of diaspora is whether transnational mediated spaces project a traditional ideology of the homeland or reflect the dynamic changes of immigrant identities. Giorgiou posits that diasporic media contribute to the emergence of a hybrid imagined community (Anderson 1983; Giorgiou 2006). She suggests that media influences how diasporic communities are sustained, re-imagined, and re-defined, shaping new ways of belonging and negotiating spatial and temporal limitations. She writes that "diaspora is constructed through experience being here, there, and in-between" (Giorgiou 2006, 22).

This article explores the Miss Songkhan beauty pageant, which is held annually in Lao-American communities, as part of the *Boun Pi Mai* or Lao New Year festivities. I argue that the pageant functions as transnational mediated space through which the Laotian American refugee community preserves remnants of Laos prior to the revolution that resulted in a massive Laotian exodus, while providing the community a platform to negotiate dramatic cultural changes and gender ideologies. The Miss Songkhan pageant evokes nostalgia for the imagined community of a lost homeland and for a feminine gender identity no longer performed by young Lao-American women (Appadurai 1996).

BEAUTY PAGEANTS AS DIASPORIC MEDIA

Beauty pageants convey the values and concepts central to a group's identity, demonstrating how cultural meanings and gender identities are produced, consumed, and resisted (Cohen and Wilk 1996). As such, they convey important messages that can be both inward-facing, reinforcing or negotiating values within the community, and outward-facing, resisting and opposing values or depictions of the community. A growing body of research in multiple transnational communities examines beauty pageants as processes of cultural production "deeply linked to claims to cultural authenticity, race, gender, and identity" (King-O'Riain 2008, 76).

Lieu's research on Vietnamese-American beauty pageants demonstrates how diasporic pageants negotiate the space between Asianness and Asian Americanness, producing hybrid cultural and gender identities, which often downplay regional differences to maintain global diasporic connections. Lieu argues that Vietnamese-American pageants enable viewers to occupy multiple subject positions as members of the imagined nation and as Vietnamese refugees. She writes:

Part of the work of the beauty pageant is to perform some version of Asia, as well as Asian America. The simultaneous performance of Asia and Asian America constitutes the schizophrenic cultural split of succeeding generations: one is preserved, distilled, and distorted out of time; the other is always changing. (Lieu 2000, 129)

The Miss Cherry Blossom beauty pageant developed in 1953 by the Honolulu Japanese Junior Chamber of Commerce illustrates how the pageant reinforces connections to the culture of the

home country while rejecting identities imposed on Japanese American communities. In the wake of World War II, when Japanese Americans were interned in camps, the pageant provided the American public a positive and public image of the Japanese “nice girl,” a submissive, soft-spoken, feminine young woman; this image helped Japanese Americans to recast their image in the American public eye and to position the community as patriotic citizens (Yano 2006).

Yeh (2008) chronicles the rise of the Chinese-American beauty pageant in San Francisco’s Chinatown in the 1950s, which also functioned to recast Chinese immigrants in the eyes of the American public, presenting Chinese women who embodied Western femininity and a middle-class lifestyle. This pageant replaced a century-old image of the Chinese as unskilled laborers with that of a model minority within mainstream American society. The pageant parade, led by military marching bands carrying the US flag, prominently displayed patriotic values and pride in American citizenship. Concurrently, the traditional elements of the pageant connected immigrants to their nostalgia for their homeland.

METHODOLOGY

The data in this article are part of a larger ethnographic study of the Laotian refugee community between 1997 and 2000 in an urban, working class Lao-American community and in the Lao PDR. The study focused on gendered second language socialization and explored the dramatic gender identity shifts in Lao-American communities (Gordon 2004, 2009). Data presented in this article were collected primarily through practitioner research at a Laotian Buddhist Temple in the northeastern US. In order to protect the confidentiality of the temple and its members, I refer to it as the “Northeast Buddhist Temple.” The majority of participants in this study had come to the US in the third wave of Laotian migration in the mid-1980s, often after having been in Thai refugee camps for many years. Participants in this study were primarily *Lao Lum*, or Lowland Lao, the majority ethnic group, which comprises approximately 70% of Laotian citizens. The Lao PDR is comprised of multiple ethnicities, who speak many different languages and dialects (Pholsena 2006).

Because the temple acted as a cultural and religious center for the community, I spent many hours there each week, conducting interviews and participant observation. In addition, I volunteered as an English tutor for a Buddhist monk, who had recently immigrated from Laos, for a period of 8 months. The months before *Boun Pi Mai* were busy at the temple, and I observed weekly practice sessions for the Miss Songkhan pageant and the parade, of which the pageant was a central focus. I spent a year in the Lao PDR in 2000, during which I worked as an English teacher, visited the families of members of the Northeast Buddhist Temple, and observed the *Boun Pi Mai* celebration.

More recently, in preparation for this article, I reviewed Lao-American websites, including those hosted by Lao-American Buddhist temples, to ascertain whether the festival and pageant continue to be celebrated in the same manner and enjoy the same popularity. Many temples in the US, as well as other countries with large Laotian diasporic populations, prominently display pictures and videos of the pageant. For example, in 2019 the Little Laos on the Prairie website, developed by Lao-Americans to collect stories of the Laotian experience in the US, posted a list of 53 Lao New Year festivals planned in 22 states. Readers listed 15 additional festivals in the comments section. The webpage prominently displays a picture of Miss Songkhan in traditional clothing accompanied by two Buddhist monks in saffron robes (Little Laos on the Prairie 2019).

BACKGROUND OF LAOTIAN DIASPORA

Laotian refugees settled in the US as part of a massive influx of nearly one million Southeast Asians from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, who sought refuge after the Vietnam War ended in 1975. Because of its border with Vietnam, Laos became the target of a “secret war” conducted by the US to bomb Viet Cong supply routes. Between 1964 and 1973, the country was bombed continuously, destroying village life as Laotian people sought refuge in caves or in the jungle. At the end of the war in 1975 when the communist Pathet Lao took power, there was a massive exodus. By the end of the refugee exodus in the 1990s, approximately 305,000 Laotian citizens, over 10% of the population, had left the country (Stuart-Fox 1997).

Members of the Northeast Buddhist Temple expressed nostalgia for their home country, but were unanimous in their opposition to the Lao PDR government. While united in opposition to the communist Lao government, members differed on whether to interact with the Lao PDR. After the Lao PDR opened its doors to international tourism in 1989, some Laotian Americans visited their families, while others, especially men who had been in “re-education” camps, refused to travel there. Attitudes were similarly divided regarding the temple’s affiliation with the Lao Embassy in Washington, DC. When the Embassy hosted a *Boun Pi Mai* party and invited temple leaders to attend, the community was deeply split about accepting the invitation. Some felt that it was time to move beyond old political differences, while others could not tolerate the idea of being in the presence of Lao PDR government officials.

ORIGINS OF THE MISS SONGKHAN PAGEANT

The Miss Songkhan Pageant is an integral part of *Boun Pi Mai*, the most important festival of the Theravada Buddhist year in Laos. The celebration falls on the fifth month of the traditional Buddhist lunisolar calendar, which begins in December. Lao New Year usually takes place in April, the hottest time of the year in Laos, which precedes the start of the monsoon season. The celebration exemplifies the syncretism of Lao religious festivals, incorporating Buddhist, Brahmanist, and animist features (Stuart-Fox and Mixay 2010). A central theme of the holiday is cleansing of houses and villages in preparation for the New Year. In Buddhist temples, Buddha images are removed from their permanent station to an outdoor location, so that temple members can cleanse them with perfumed water. The scented water is collected and poured over the hands and feet of elders in a gesture of respect.

The Miss Songkhan beauty pageant is central to the festival and has its origins in animistic practices influenced by Brahmanism, which predate the introduction of Theravada Buddhism to Laos. The pageant recreates the myth of the divine King Kabinlaphom (Brahma), who was decapitated in battle. The king’s head was so powerful that if it touched the earth, it would cause destruction. Therefore, the king instructed his seven daughters to place his head in a cave at the foot of Mount Sumeru, a sacred location. Each year, his seven daughters paid homage by cleansing the decapitated head and leading a procession around Mount Sumeru.

The pageant reenacts this myth with a procession around the temple grounds. At the Northeast Buddhist Temple, Miss Songkhan holds a replica of Kabinlaphom’s severed head as she rides with her fellow contestants, representing her six sisters. Miss Songkhan rides on a float formed in the

shape of the animal of the year, based on the Lao zodiac. The float and the Miss Songkhan court lead a procession of monks and members of the temple, who are splashed with water for good luck in the New Year (Ratsabout 2013; Stuart-Fox and Mixay 2010; Trankell 1999).

In the Lao PDR, *Boun Pi Mai* is celebrated over four days and incorporates elements that are no longer practiced in the two celebrations I observed in the US. The US festivities I observed were held over a weekend, beginning with an evening party with a pageant and selection of the Miss Songkhan winner. The following day, a large festival was held at the Northeast Buddhist Temple, which included a *dak bat* (ritual alms giving) ceremony, the cleansing of the Buddha statues, and the procession led by Miss Songkhan and her court. Because April is often chilly in the Northeastern US, splashing with water was often replaced by throwing powder or smudging people with lipstick.

Many members of the Northeast Buddhist Temple spoke of the importance of preserving the Miss Songkhan Pageant as a traditional Lao practice to be shared with successive generations. Trankell's (1999) research into the relatively recent origins of the Miss Songkhan festival in the Lao PDR offers a more complex portrait of the Miss Songkhan pageant, which questions its authenticity as "traditionally Lao" and reveals the flexibility of the pageant to convey multiple cultural meanings. Prior to 1975, when the Pathet Lao assumed control of the government of the Lao PDR, the pageant had not been part of the *Boun Pi Mai* festivities. Instead, the *Pra Lak Pra Lam*, a royal dance based on the classic Ramayana, was performed. However, because of the association with royalty, the dance was deemed inappropriate by the communist Pathet Lao. To replace this traditional element, the Miss Songkhan pageant was instituted in Luang Prabang, the Lao province in which the Royal Palace was located. The event was localized to a Laotian context by linking it to the myth of King Kabinlaphom and his seven daughters.

The pageant fulfilled many important purposes for the new Pathet Lao government. The pageant's design, with seven young women representing Kabinlaphom's daughters, provided an opportunity for Lao ethnic minorities to be included, signaling the new government's vision of ethnic equality. While including ethnic minorities, the pageant underscores Lao Lum cultural practices in clothing, hairstyle, and incorporation of Buddhist practices not shared by all ethnic minority groups (Trankell 1999). Thus, the majority ethnic group is reconstructed as a new ethnic category, echoing a political elite that recalls the royal models overthrown by the Pathet Lao (Estrik 1999).

The pageant offered continuity of traditions in a period of radical social change, with Miss Songkhan in the role of princess, by taking on the ceremonial activity of cleansing the Buddha statues and other roles which had been performed by the royal family (Evans 1998). Trankell writes, "elements of traditional local culture are transformed into rituals staged by the modern nation-state, but with all the royal regalia more or less intact" (1999, 192). It is significant that among Lao communities in the diaspora, the pageant has been adopted as a central part of the *Boun Pi Mai* celebration, while traditional elements of greater longevity in Lao culture, including the traditional enacting of the Lao origin myth and the creation of sand stupas, were no longer part of the festivities in the diaspora.

THE MISS SONGKHAN PAGEANT AT THE NORTHEAST BUDDHIST TEMPLE

At the Northeast Buddhist Temple, the Miss Songkhan pageant was the focus of the *Boun Pi Mai* party. While temple events were usually attended by Laotian Americans who had come to the US as adults, this party was well attended by younger Laotian Americans born in the US. Women who conducted the practices for the pageant agreed that contestants should be in their later teen years, beautiful, slim, and tall. They were dressed in the Lao silk *sinh* (long wrap-around skirt) and *pa biang* (matching sash worn across the body). The *sinh* and *pa biang* were elegant and intricate with an ornate border embroidered with gold threads. Often the silk was hand-loomed and had been imported from the Lao PDR. Hair was worn in a *kaw phom* (high chignon bun) worn on the top of the head, often decorated with golden ribbons. Trankell (1999) notes that the *kaw phom* is said to be a sign of Lao lineage and of religious and moral standing.

The group of contestants entered together, with each one smiling with an erect posture and using small, careful steps. After the Miss Songkhan court was assembled in front of the audience, each was announced in English by a temple leader who stated her name and contestant number. At this introduction, each came forward, greeted the audience with a *nop* (a slight bow with hands together in front of the chest in prayer position), and introduced herself in Lao, stating her name and the area of the city in which she lived. After each contestant had introduced herself, each was called forward again and asked (in English) how she would feel if she were crowned Miss Songkhan. While most of the contestants answered in English, the few who responded in Lao received great applause from the audience. Later the contestants would dance the *lam vong*, a Lao dance in which the hands move fluidly in front of the chest.

The event was the culmination of many months of practice. In particular, a committee of Lao women who had been born in Laos held weekly practices for the Miss Songkhan contestants for two months prior to the event. They prepared the contestants in Lao traditional dance and movement, and in the proper Lao language to be used during the event.

NOSTALGIA FOR A LOST LAND

The clothing and Lao language use within the pageant evoke memories of a past Laos, prior to the revolution which caused the Laotian exodus. The clothing described above departed markedly from the teen girls' usual attire. This was brought to my attention when I attended a practice session, where all contestants wore the *sinh* and *pa biang*, with the exception of a young woman dressed in the urban chic style of the moment – a tight black tank top and jeans. A member of the Women's Committee explained to me that she had won last year, so didn't care about dressing for the practice. She pointed out that she would, however, wear a proper *sinh* and *pa biang* for the pageant.

The pattern and type of cloth of the *sinh* is an important marker of ethnicity in the Lao PDR and among Laotians in the diaspora. The *sinhs* worn in the pageant signified majority *Lao Lum* ethnicity and the Lao style of the royal court, recalling the royalty of the lost Lao homeland. About the nostalgia woven through clothing choice, Van Esterik (1999) writes:

In Lao PDR, claims to royal authority can result in being sentenced to a 'seminar' for reeducation. People with royal connections must not bemoan the loss of a way of life, or take a nostalgic posture in the new Lao PDR. However, re-

settled Lao refugees can and do reinvent royal style rituals and textiles in their countries of resettlement, particularly in North America. (49)

The Lao language used in the pageant also harkened back to a pre-revolution Laos. Each contestant was instructed to refer to herself as *kanoi* when introducing herself. This pronoun choice was unusual, and I had never learned it in my formal Lao language training nor heard it used within the Lao-American community. The Lao pronominal system indicates status and relationship to the speaker. Among familiars, kinship pronouns are commonly used, based on relative age and status difference from the speaker. For example, a younger woman would address a woman a few years older than she as *euay*, older sister, and refer to herself as *nong*, younger sister. Among those of different status, occupational terms were used as pronouns (e.g. *naiku*, teacher). When I spoke with informants in the Lao PDR about this usage, they found the use of *kanoi* overly formal and submissive.

Kanoi literally means “little slave” (Enfield 1999). Evans notes that the first syllable derives from *Kha*, a term for non-ethnic Lao. The meaning has “changed over the past century from one which denoted inferior status based on a system of hierarchy, to a pejorative one, as the nationalist state based on a concept of equal citizenship came into being” (Evans 1999, 24). The use of *kanoi* emulates a highly formal language style which evoked the Lao monarchy prior to the revolution. In 1975, language policies developed by Phoumi Vongvichit, a leading political figure of the Pathet Lao, were implemented. He sought to preserve the language as uniquely Lao and free of foreign (especially Thai) influences as well as the colonial American and French forces. He also sought to formalize orthography to facilitate the greatest access to literacy for the Lao population (Enfield 1999).

Vongvichit forbid the use of the pronoun *kanoi* which was regarded by the new regime as symbolic of an overly hierarchical pre-revolutionary society. In its place he introduced the use of *sahaaj*, comrade, as a standard leveling term of address in accordance with global socialist practice. Enfield notes that changes these linguistic changes were “brought in at ground level through the education system, and in the frenzy of public ‘seminars’ held in schools, temples, and other public places in the early years of the Lao PDR” (Enfield 1999, 274). Most of the members of the Northeast Buddhist Temple had left the Lao PDR in the 1980s and had been subjected to these linguistic policies.

Their rejection of these linguistic reforms demonstrates another way in which the pageant invokes the imagined community of Laos prior to the revolution. The re-creation of a beauty pageant which evoked a royal past was highly significant for the Lao-American community, the majority of whom struggled financially in low-wage, non-unionized jobs in factories and meat processing plants (Gordon 2004, 2009).

PERFORMANCE OF GENDERED IDENTITY

The pageant contestants performed a gendered identity strikingly different from what I had observed in my many previous interactions with them. This became apparent to me during a Miss Songkhan practice at the temple, when a monk walked past a line of contestants and the group knelt down at once and bowed their heads. I had never witnessed this behavior by second generation teenagers, many of whom regularly violated Lao traditional practices at the temple. Children and teenagers commonly wore shoes into the main temple room and sat with their feet pointed toward elders or monks. Because the feet are considered the lowest and most unclean part of the body in traditional

Lao culture, this conduct is considered disrespectful, especially in the temple setting. In general, first generation Lao-American parents and community members treated these indiscretions lightly and did not expect youth to adhere to traditional Lao conduct. The performance of femininity in the Miss Songkhan pageant departed markedly from expectations of teen behavior, demonstrating an older, traditional, and more submissive female role, no longer performed among second generation Lao-American women nor younger women in the Lao PDR.

This section highlights gendered expectations in the Miss Songkhan pageant and contrasts them with comments from an interview with a Lao woman who grew up in the Lao PDR post-revolution, whom I call Nitnoi. Her comments offer insight into the gendered expectations of Lao women in the diaspora and those who remained in the Lao PDR. Committed to revolutionary ideals, Nitnoi was deeply influenced by Soviet-style readings about women's equality, which were present in Lao curriculum after the revolution, as most literature and curricular materials came from Soviet Union. Nitnoi described this new gender ideology saying, "We have to learn a very, very strong, Western, I have to say, Western women's attitude." She spoke of a directive for women to be *jaw ton eng*—literally to be oneself, but figuratively to "be more determined, stronger" (interview 1998).

Nitnoi described a new relationship with monks after the revolution. In post-revolutionary Laos, monks were no longer permitted to be completely supported by their congregation and were required to supplement their alms by farming or social service (Evans 1997). Nitnoi stated that this change translated into greater equality between women and monks in post-revolution Laos. She noted that women's behavior toward monks was dependent on age, with women who reached adulthood prior to the revolution demonstrating a more traditional, submissive behavior. She stated that while older women "would (uses whisper voice) sit down (mimes lowering body and bowing head) and talk. And for me, I would stand up and I would talk (louder voice and laughing)" (interview 1998). Nitnoi's behavior represents a disruption of Lao women's traditional demeanor in front of a monk and her physical actions of standing next to a monk demonstrate her assuming a status equal to the monk.

By contrast, the Miss Songkhan candidates received instruction which emphasized women's traditional roles in the temple. The candidates were expected to perform many Buddhist rituals during the Lao New Year festivities, including the washing of the Buddha statues with scented water and the *tak bat* (ritual almsgiving ceremony). Practice sessions ensured that the young women followed traditional behavior in these rituals, including the prohibition against women touching the Buddha statue or the *dak bat* bowl. While these rules were communicated to other women, there was additional pressure for the contestants to perform them appropriately because they were the focus of the New Year festivities.

Nitnoi talked specifically of the proscription against women touching the offering bowl during *dak bat*. She resented this tradition, saying that it treats women as if they are impure. She intentionally challenged the gender ideology inherent in this practice when attending temple services in the Lao PDR, by making a point of touching the alms bowl when giving offerings. She described the reaction to her behavior as divided along age lines; older people often complained and corrected her behavior, while younger women, unless raised in a strict Buddhist family, often followed her lead. Nitnoi's comments highlight a gender ideology that existed in the Lao PDR in the late 1990s, which emphasizes women's empowerment and greater equality.

At the same period of the late 1990s, the Lao-American community was negotiating a gendered landscape which was radically different from their homeland. While Laotian women experience greater independence and enhanced opportunities for enacting their gender identities through access to education and wage labor, Laotian men often experience a narrowing of opportunities, as they lost traditional sources of power, such as land ownership, high status positions as soldiers, and the ability to be the sole economic supporter of the family (Gordon 2004, 2009).

CONCLUSION

The Miss Songkhan pageant reenacts gendered behaviors and ideologies that are no longer available to the community in the US or in the Lao PDR. As Lieu (2000), wrote of Vietnamese-American beauty pageants, the gendered performance enacted “is preserved, distilled, and distorted out of time” (129). The Miss Songkhan Pageant invokes an historical memory of Laos before the political revolution that resulted in a massive Laotian exodus, connecting to a pre-revolutionary past and to a language and gendered identity untouched by the reforms dictated by the revolution.

A number of researchers (Lieu 2000, Schackt 2005, Stoeltje 1996, and Yano 2006) have argued that ritualistic beauty pageants tend to reproduce the conservative, gendered expectations of the homeland. As Yeh writes of the Chinese-American beauty pageant in 1950s Chinatown, the pageant and the gendered ideologies embedded within it evoke nostalgia for lost homeland in which “The female body ... became a site from which a ‘lost’ China was recovered” (2008, 69).

The Miss Songkhan Pageant also recovers a lost Lao monarchy as the young women adopt historical symbols of royalty. Appadurai writes of the ways in which migration and media impel the work of imagination for what no longer exists:

Whenever aristocratic lifestyles are threatened, patina acquires a double meaning, indexing both the special status of its owner and the owner's special relationship to a way of life that is no longer available. The latter is what makes patina a truly scarce resource, for it always indicates the fact that a way of living is now gone forever. (Appadurai 1996, 76)

The Miss Songkhan Pageant, as performed in the Northeast Buddhist Temple, represents an inward-facing form of diasporic media, which focuses on communication within the Lao-American community. Through its use of language, gender performance, and symbols of Lao monarchy, the event recreates, for a short period of time, a way of life that is now gone forever.

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