

A Witness to Culture: Bounxou Daoheuang

A SIXTH-GENERATION WEAVER, Bounxou Chanthraphone Daoheuang (Boon-Sue Jan-Tra-Paun Dao-Heu-Ang) was born in 1947 in Savannakhet, a province in central Laos. Her mother and grandmother began teaching her to spin, dye, and weave when she was nine years old. She received formal training in the design motifs of her native region and also mastered the regional styles of northern and southern Laos. Bounxou later attended college in the city of Vientiane, Laos's capital. Upon graduating she returned to her hometown, where she was employed as an elementary schoolteacher for eight years.

During this same time, the repercussions of the Vietnam War were playing out in Laos. Bounxou fled her war-torn country in the mid-1970s and relocated to the Ubon Refugee Camp in Thailand. Much later, in an interview with the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in 2000, she recalled, "I couldn't take anything to Thailand, but only my life and my weaving skills." Fleeing Laos was very dangerous and Bounxou thought it was best to leave her daughter Laddavanh (Ladda) with an aunt. Two years after arriving at the camp, Ladda was able to join her.

With the help of Japanese volunteers, Bounxou organized a Lao weaving and language school at Ubon. She sold her work and that of other women to visiting dignitaries, enabling the artisans to buy medicine and food. "I was resolved to become a witness to my culture instead of the victim of a less stable, political one."

Bounxou became a mentor to hundreds of girls and women during

her years at the camp. Ladda recalls that no matter how difficult a challenge or situation was, her mother always came up with a solution "to give people hope and help them walk elegantly through difficult times."

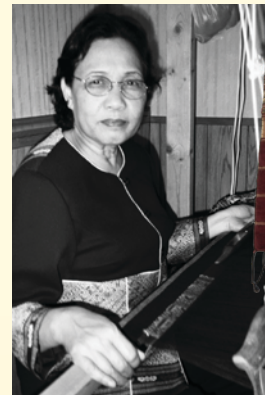
In 1982, Bounxou and her daughter were resettled to Minneapolis. Bounxou worked as a public schoolteacher and youth coordinator at the Centre for Asians and Pacific Islanders (now CAPI) and also taught weaving classes. She is well known in Minnesota's Lao community for her commitment to teaching youth about Lao culture.

In addition, Bounxou became known nationally for her mastery of traditional Lao weaving techniques, turning strands of silk, linen, cotton, and metallic thread into the traditional patterns and symbols of Lao culture. The sash in the photo is a fine example of the brocade technique, which employs two wefts—the threads or yarn that cross from side to side of fabric. One of these strands is a continuous supplementary weft; the other is a discontinuous supplementary weft called a "chok," used to pick up individual threads and colors of threads, creating the brocade's textured pattern.

Bounxou has been the recipient of several awards, including an NEA National Heritage Fellowship (2000) and an Enduring Vision Award from the Bush Foundation (2010), the latter given to "highly accomplished artists who also make a significant impact on their communities."

Today, Ladda is committed to preserving Lao culture with the same passion, dedication, and values that

Handwoven silk shawl in a traditional Lao pattern, 92 inches long by 13½ inches wide, acquired in 2001 for MNHS's permanent collections (MNHS COLLECTIONS)



Bounxou Chanthraphone Daoheuang
(COURTESY DAOHEUANG FAMILY)



her mother instilled in her. While Bounxou can no longer carry out the time-consuming and detailed work required of traditional Lao weaving, Ladda carries on her mother's legacy and life philosophy by providing weaving demonstrations and lectures at various locations in the Twin Cities.

Bounxou's work will be featured in the upcoming *Laomercia 50* exhibit in the Cargill Gallery at Minneapolis Central Library, August 6–September 27, 2024. The event will explore the five decades of the Lao diaspora and the cultural renaissance that has emerged among Lao communities throughout the world.

—*Sherri Gebert Fuller*

Note:

When MNHS acquired Bounxou's weaving in 2001, she used her married name, Chanthraphone, and it was recorded as such. She requested that her maiden (family) name, Daoheuang, be used for this article to honor her mother and grandmother.



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