

“Pieces that Form a More Complete Whole”: Potencies of Meaning in Lao Contemporary Dance

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the issue of meaning in the form of social commentary in the emerging Lao contemporary art scene. I do so by focusing on the case of contemporary dance, looking at the performance *kip* by Noutnapha Soydala. In the context of late socialist Southeast Asia, social commentary remains a delicate matter. Yet, Lao contemporary dancers insist on the importance of imbuing their work with meaning while also stressing meaning as multiple and perpetually becoming. Dialoguing between some of the references in *kip* and research on Laos I suggest that meaning is best described in terms of potencies: the references trigger recognition and engagement as much as they unsettle any pre-given meaning these may carry. This approach to meaning, I argue, is important for the further development of contemporary arts in Laos whilst occasionally it can also give rise to more closed readings of meaning.

KEYWORDS

Dance; Laos; meaning; performance; ethnography

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INTRODUCTION

“We have the movement, and the meaning. [About] the movement you have to be clear, if you are not clear it will be wrong”.¹

In the context of “authoritarianism and single-party rule” (Creak and Barney, 2018, p. 694), concern about Laos’ fast-paced development and associated rapid social, cultural and environmental change is mostly expressed privately.² Just as elsewhere in late socialist Southeast Asia (e.g., Geertman, 2016), this renders expressing social commentary through arts a delicate matter. However, a small yet emerging contemporary art scene in Laos appears to be doing precisely this through ‘unofficial’ contemporary art that is socially engaged (Koshcheeva, 2018).

In this article, I discuss the complexity of meaning in such socially engaged arts through the case of contemporary dance. The opening quote stems from a discussion with two of its key protagonists: the Lao contemporary dancer Noutnapha Soydala, co-founder of the Vientiane-based dance company *Fanglao*³, and Olé Khamchanla, a French dancer of Lao descent of the France-based dance company *Compagnie Kham*. The discussion took place over lunch in a Chinese eatery in downtown Paris following Noutnapha’s final rehearsal of the performance *kip*. The quote reflects that in the emerging Lao contemporary dance scene the technical aspects of dance matter as does meaning. The dancers seek creative forms in which meaning, and technique come to reinforce one another.

Getting the technicalities of dance right is important. In contrast, the meaning was emphasised as multiple, and neither fixed nor constant. Further, whereas the technique is performed and can be appraised objectively, meaning is something that is explored, produced, conveyed, and always established in relation and *in situ*. At the level of performance, meaning is generated through the interplay between the particularities of/in audiences and what dancers put into their work, their dance, and their gendered bodies, and amplified further through audio, visuals, and props – which all carry social references. As such, the formation of meaning in relation to dance is both an individual and a social process.

For Lao artists, place and mobilities matter. Being able to perform both domestically and internationally is key to their professional development as artists. Mobility also enables Lao artists to vary in the role of, and the meaning expressed through, their work (see also Rowe *et al.*, 2016, p. 80). Anna Koshcheeva explains:

To be recognised as artists domestically they [Lao artists] produce neotraditional works that are accepted into national exhibitions; to express themselves creatively and critically, they produce contemporary art [‘unofficial’ artwork] that occasionally finds its way to a biennale abroad (Koshcheeva 2018, p. 73).

Over recent years, the foreign-domestic divide described by Koshcheeva appears to be losing its crudeness. For example, a number of film festivals, art exhibitions, fashion shows and dance festivals have been organised on Laos’ soil (Ireson-Doolittle and Moreno-Black, 2015). Although subject to state censorship, these

¹ Noutnapha, Paris, 22 February 2019.

² In line with other academic work, the term ‘Laos’ is used as a shorthand for the official name Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Evans, 1999). The adjective Lao (i.e., Lao contemporary dance) is used to refer to people, things, and ideas in/from Laos. If referring to ethnic Lao specifically I have indicated so.

³ *Fanglao* (literal meaning: listen to her/him) was established in 2013.

events attract artists from abroad (including the Lao diaspora) and provide Lao national artists with a platform for going beyond the confines of the neotraditional genre that dominates the formal arts infrastructure in Laos (Rowe *et al.*, 2016; Koshcheeva, 2020). This blurring of the foreign-domestic divide is creating spaces of transgression in which artists engage, through the arts, with social issues that are otherwise only whispered about in private settings (Huijismans, 2020).

In the following section, I contextualise the emerging phenomenon of socially engaged arts by situating it in the political context of contemporary Laos. Thereafter I explain the performance ethnography that underpins this article and proceed with a brief discussion on theorising meaning in relation to Lao contemporary dance. Next, I present a content analysis of the dance performance under study (*kip*). I do so by putting into dialogue elements of *kip*, including its meaning of the Lao national currency, with research on Lao society. On this basis, I illuminate some of the potencies of meaning in *kip*. The performance ethnography further shows how Lao dancers foster a process of keeping open meaning, and its limits in relation to some parts of the audience. I conclude by reflecting on the importance of this approach to meaning for the further development of contemporary dance in Laos.

CONTEXTUALISING DANCE AND THE POLITICS OF MEANING IN CONTEMPORARY LAOS

Any discussion on the role of meaning in the arts needs to be situated in relation to the broader political context comprising contemporary Laos, including the space for freedom of expression. In addition, we also need to reflect on how contemporary dance as an artistic expression is appreciated in the Lao context, regardless of any specific meaning it may seek to convey.

After the victory of the revolutionary *Pathet Lao* and the proclamation of the Lao People's Democratic Republic in December 1975, the political structure in Laos has been that of a one-party state with the communist Lao People's Revolutionary Party in power. Following a brief period of high socialism between the mid-1970 and the mid-1980s, from the 1990s onwards economically Laos has gradually moved from a centrally planned economy to a form of market socialism. Referring to Laos as late-socialist, rather than post-socialist, serves to flag that despite the many changes on the economic front socialism continues to inform various other dimensions of Lao society, including its single-party political structure (Wilcox *et al.*, 2021; Frangville *et al.*, 2020).

Compared to the transformations on the economic front, the Lao state has sought to maintain firm control over forms of expression and organisation that may be of political significance. For example, in Laos national non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are not permitted. Only relatively recently, the Lao government allowed Lao nationals to set up so-called non-for-profit-associations. These associations are strictly monitored, regulated, and limited in number by quotas set per sector. State control over forms of expression is also evident in the media sector. Martin Stuart-Fox explains the relationship between party politics and media in Laos as follows:

The MIC [Ministry of Information and Culture] controls all media in Laos. There is no freedom of the press and no legal protection for Lao journalists who fail to reflect the party line. In fact, most Lao journalists are party members attached to the MIC (Stuart-Fox, 2008, p. 374).

Based on issues such as these, Freedom House continues to rate Laos as “not free” and has expressed concern about the “freedom of expression” in Laos. In its latest assessment, Freedom House (2022) reported for example that in Laos “self-

ensorship is extremely prevalent, as authorities use legal intimidation tactics against critics of the state”.

However, some forms of expression and practices that were strictly policed during the height of socialism are now promoted or turned a blind eye to by the very same party that previously discouraged or even sought to eradicate it.⁴ This includes amongst other things (Buddhist) religious practices and aspects linked to the Lao royalty (Evans, 1998) ranging from erecting statues of former kings, forms of speech (*e.g.*, the polite ‘*doi*’), as well as art forms (*e.g.*, puppet play and court dance) and even games such as *pétanque* (Zuckerman, 2021).

Given this politico-historical background, situating dance in the Lao context is far from a straightforward exercise. Noutnapha Soydala and many of her fellow contemporary dancers are accomplished in traditional dance, too, and occasionally perform it. Thereby, these dancers fit the government agenda promoting neo-traditional arts (Koshcheeva, 2020). In addition, the emergence of a contemporary dance scene is regarded positively from the perspective of Lao national development because it contributes to the development of a creative culture sector in Laos. However, contemporary dance is also easily criticised precisely because it comprises “dance practices that are considered ‘new’ or ‘innovative’ in the context in which they are presented” (Martin, 2019, p. 36). In her contemporary dance, Noutnapha is creatively engaging with Lao culture, furthering it, and reinterpreting it. This way, her dance work does much more than preserving Lao traditional culture: she transforms it, which can be problematic for cultural conservatism (compare: Gartner, 2021, pp. 815-6; Rowe *et al.*, 2016, p. 80).

Noutnapha’s contemporary dance fits the definition presented by Sophie Narbed who regards “contemporary dance as a broad, globally circulating, inherently transnational phenomenon that also produces and is produced through particular geographies of place” (Narbed 2016, p. 6). The transnational element is evident from the international networks she is part of and her regular performances on international stages. In the Lao context, this aspect can be read in two ways: either positively as promoting Lao culture abroad, or as a problematic foreign influence on Lao culture. Dancers like Noutnapha actively manage these political readings of their work by ensuring their work includes clear elements of Lao culture (especially when performing in Laos), by maintaining support from people within the political establishment, and by explaining their dance to authorities (see also an interview with the Lao hip hop dancer Anouza Phoutisane in Rowe *et al.*, 2016, p. 80).

Dance by Lao contemporary dancers like Noutnapha may be subject to critique on the basis of its form. However, dance as a form of expression appears less subject to (self)disciplining. In dance, the role of the spoken word is at best minimal and may be absent altogether. Any meaning that is conveyed through dance by dancers and choreographers comes through the movements, the choreography and the other elements that are brought in (props, music, light, *etc.*). Therefore, the messages and meaning conveyed through dance cannot be pinned down with the same degree of precision as is often true for the written or spoken word. Given this essential fluidity of meaning in dance it can be said that in the Lao context the freedom of expression

4 The 1975 Lao regime change meant that forms of art and expression associated with the previous regime were banned (*e.g.*, Rowe *et al.*, 2016, p. 195). During the height of Lao socialism, arts (and artists) had to be in the service of the socialist revolution, as was also the case elsewhere under revolutionary regimes of Southeast Asia such as in Cambodia (Shapiro-Phim, 2008, p. 308).

that dancers enjoy is in practice larger than is true for some other art forms.⁵ Yet, this scope for freedom of expression is predicated on the ambiguity of meaning in dance. These contextual and political realities explain part of the tension between Lao dancers' emphasis on expressing meaning through dance and their insistence on keeping open any such meanings.

METHODOLOGY: PERFORMANCE ETHNOGRAPHY

The methodology underpinning this paper is best described as an ethnography of performance. Given my lack of dance skills, my presence was much more legitimate as a member of the audience than on the dance floor or stage as other authors have advocated (*i.e.*, Skinner 2010, in: Narbed, 2016). Additionally, I would also argue that the social question of meaning is better researched through a performance ethnography than by becoming a fellow dancer because meaning is ultimately realised through the interplay between dancers and audiences. Further, the performances I attended became pivotal elements in the research especially because we engaged with the performances from very different perspectives (as dancers and as a member of the audience). Attending these different vantage points helped me understand the meaning dancers imbue their work with and how different audiences received this.

For this paper, I zoom in on one performance: The solo performance *kip* was choreographed and performed by the Lao contemporary dancer Noutnapha Soydala. Noutnapha has been developing *kip* since 2016 and over the years performed it in Laos as well as internationally (in Asia and Europe). I have enclosed a recording of *kip* performed as part of Noutnapha's artist-in-residence period at Trois C-L in Luxembourg (2018).⁶ It should be noted the version of *kip* that I focus on in this article (performed as part of her artist-in-residence period in 2019 at *la Cité internationale des arts*, Paris) is considerably more developed than the 2018 Luxembourg version as indicated, for example, by the duration of the performance (30 minutes in Paris, vs. 15 minutes in Luxembourg).

The advantage of focusing on just one performance is that it allows for describing and analysing the event in detail. Since Noutnapha is a key protagonist in the emerging contemporary dance scene in Laos, her work, and the role of meaning in it influences a larger generation of (aspiring) dancers in Laos, for example, through the contemporary dance classes she conducts in Vientiane and the various other dance projects she is involved in. The piece *kip* is representative of Noutnapha's repertoire in that it blends elements of Lao culture and society with more global ones. Therefore, analysing one specific piece in detail sheds light on the role of meaning in Lao contemporary dance more broadly. In this article, the voice of Olé Khamchanla is important too. Although France-based, he is a regular visitor to Laos and acts as a mentor and teacher for many (aspiring) Lao dancers, including Noutnapha.

Focusing on a performance on a foreign stage is purposeful. Compared to audiences attending contemporary dance performances in Laos, the crowd watching *kip* in Paris was more diverse - comprising Lao nationals (or people of Lao descent) living in France, fellow dancers (of various nationalities), those interested in contemporary dance, people with a connection with Laos and/or Noutnapha. In

⁵ See, for example, a recent official warning issued by the Luang Prabang (Laos) Department of Information, Culture and Tourism to a local songwriter whose songs featured "explicit lyrics" (Thanabouasy, 2022).

⁶ <https://vimeo.com/255248415>

Laos, contemporary dance audiences are largely comprised of non-Lao nationals working in the development or private sector complemented by some Lao nationals who usually have a connection with the performing dancers. Since contemporary art performances in Vientiane are few, a good part of the audience is there just because ‘something is happening’. In contrast, the Parisian audience was there because something *specific* was happening – people had a specific connection with contemporary dance, and/or Laos, and/or Noutnapha. As we will see below, the diversity of the audience, and their more specific interests in the artist, her origins, and/or her work affect the way meaning is understood. In addition, the Lao references written into the performance *kip* resonated differently with those parts of the audience sensitive to it than it would do on Lao soil. This illuminates the interplay between the place-based and transnational dimensions in contemporary dance (Narbed, 2016).

Interpreting the performance *kip* necessarily draws on material collected outside of the actual performance studied. This includes the rehearsal of the performance, informal discussions with Noutnapha before and following the performance (including follow-up visits to Noutnapha in southern France in March 2019 and Vientiane in December 2019), studying the artefacts related to the performance, including posters, website information as well as social media posts about the performance and dance in/from Laos more broadly.

Finally, any knowledge production is shaped by the positionality of the researcher. The background with which I have entered this project on dance in Laos includes my long-term interest in youth and social change in rural Laos in particular. The dance scene in Laos is very youthful but urban-based. Similar to the musical artists and film-makers who feature in Steve Arounsack’s (2018) *Getting Lao’d: The rise of modern Lao music and films* the dancers in the emerging Lao dance scene are young (few older than 30) who got into dance when the country started opening up to the outside world in the 1990s and more firmly in the 2000s (compare also with the modern art scene in Hanoi, Vietnam: Geertman, 2016).

In 2015, I started interviewing people from this emerging arts scene. This happened to include Noutnapha. Ever since, I have been impressed by how these young urban-based artists are redefining what it means to be Lao and modern, especially in comparison with my usual research work with youth in rural Laos who are often very hesitant and careful to express themselves (*e.g.*, Huijsmans and Piti, 2021). My interpretation of Noutnapha’s dance is best seen as a dialogue: I bring elements of Noutnapha’s dance in dialogue with research and literature on Lao society thereby exploring some of the potencies of meaning in *kip*.

THEORISING MEANING IN THE LAO CONTEMPORARY DANCE SCENE: BETWEEN DANCERS AND AUDIENCE

[...] to express the idea, the feeling [...] it’s kind of personal but it can also be political, to critique society, the role of money [...] (Olé, 22 February 2019 about expression in dance)

Talking with dancers involved in the Lao contemporary dance scene, it became clear that the issue of meaning was relevant in multiple ways. These discussions also illustrated the importance of dialogue in exploring the various potencies of meaning, rather than establishing one fixed meaning.

In the excerpt⁷ above, Olé distinguishes between the meaning dance may have for dancers individually and the societal messages that may be conveyed through dance. Olé was keen to point out that even if no broader societal messages were conveyed through dance, at an individual level dance could still be very meaningful. It is through dance that people get to know their bodies and acquire the confidence to express themselves through the body. Hence, for dancers themselves, there is deep meaning in dance in and of itself even if this does not translate into any meaning in a broader, social manner, or if that social meaning is not picked up by an audience.

Olé further emphasised that when commenting on societal issues through dance this does not mean taking a fixed position on such matters. Instead, for him, dance is a medium through which to explore social questions, rather than taking a position. As he puts it: “why should I choose between either black or white when on stage [...] what if I cannot choose?” It is through dance, Olé explains that “you can explore, change an idea or opinion about people or about something. You are right now, but tomorrow maybe you are wrong”. The fluidity of meaning and its perpetual becoming is what dancers explore further through their work. Audiences, in contrast, are more inclined to read societal messages fixedly because most view a performance only once and will be affected by some elements in the performance more than others.

Lao contemporary dance is an emerging art form, which, as a field is yet to be established (compare with the Lao pop scene in the early 2000s described by Arounsack, 2013, p. 61). In this sense, it shares similarities with the mixed martial arts gym studied by Kyle Greene (2016). The Lao contemporary dancers (and their audiences), too “have not been raised to occupy this site. In fact, no one has. The field is still being defined” (Green, 2016, p. 442). As a result, Lao contemporary dance is “open for meaning construction”; a process influenced by “different backgrounds and expectations” that come together in a performance (*ibid.*, 2016, p. 445). For some, meaning-making is informed by dance-related reference systems (including contemporary dance, traditional dance, and socialist ‘propaganda’ dance) for others it is informed by specific references that are woven into the performance (through movements, music, words, dress, props, *etc.*). Additionally, according to Noutnapha the importance given to meaning in dance may also vary between groups of people and places:

Mostly, if they [the audience] are dancers, they won't be interested about what's the meaning, especially Europe. Europe, they don't interest in meaning too much, but they will be interested in how we choose the movement technique, but in Asia many of them also interested in meaning, many people like the performance because it has meaning. (excerpt from the interview with Noutnapha and Olé before the performance, 22 February 2019)

Different from other art forms (*e.g.*, visual arts) in the performing arts the experience in the moment matters. A performance is never still, and in this flow, certain elements get registered and become meaningful while others may be missed. Especially for non-specialist audiences, these temporal dynamics of contemporary dance make it difficult to take in a performance in full at the moment. Noutnapha and Olé address this by closing the performance with a dialogue with the audience.

⁷ The excerpt is from the same conversation as the one that opened the article (over a late lunch with Olé and Noutnapha following the final rehearsal of the performance *kíp* in Paris).

This way they enable the audience to go back to and explore deeper certain elements in the performance while it also allows Noutnapha and Olé to elaborate further on their artistic work and its meaning.

The above shows that understanding the role of meaning in relation to Lao contemporary dance requires appreciating it both as a process and a product. A processual approach treats meaning as something that is perpetually explored and developed across performances and therefore is never fully finished. Alternatively, meaning can also be assigned in a fixed manner based on the performance as a product or an element therein. Whereas dancers lean to the former, audiences may arrive at the latter. It is these different realisations of meaning and the tension between these that I explore in the sections below.

KIP IN PARIS: A DESCRIPTION

On Friday 22 February 2019, as part of her artist-in-residence at *la Cité internationale des arts* in Paris, Noutnapha conducted her solo performance *kip*. It was free of charge and performed on a small stage at *la Cité*. The venue had a capacity of about 80 people and got filled partially. Looking back during a follow-up discussion about a month later in southern France, Noutnapha said she was satisfied even though the performance had been more basic than usual, for example, the stage had no facilities for a lighting plan which meant she could not work with shadow effects.

I arrive about 30 minutes before the scheduled start of the performance. An A-4 sized poster advertising *kip* is put up on the railing of a spiral staircase which leads to the basement of *la Cité* where the performing stage is located in a separate room. A few other guests are there already, as is Noutnapha. She wears a classical ethnic Lao dress comprising of a Lao *sinh* (long skirt) and a fitted blouse. Her hair is tied together in a bun and her make-up accentuates her eyes. Noutnapha chats with guests as they arrive. She seems to know most of them and is introduced to those she hasn't yet met. When the door to the performing space is opened Noutnapha stands at the doorpost, greeting each guest with a respectful *nop* (ໂນ).⁸

⁸ "A greeting or sign of respect with clasped hands and a slight lowering of the head" (Arounsack, 2013, p. 46).



Picture 1: Noutnapha at the start of the performance kip (photo by author, Paris 2019)

Olé takes the stage. He welcomes the audience and briefly introduces kip. Then the lights are dimmed. When they are back on, Noutnapha sits on a piano stool placed in the centre of an otherwise empty stage. She is dressed as how she had greeted her audience minutes previously with a champa flower in her hair, seemingly ready to perform a Lao traditional dance (Picture 1). While seated she counts in a fragile and soft voice from one through to ten in the Lao language, leaving long silences between her words:

ໜຶ່ງ	<i>One</i>
ສອງ	<i>Two</i>
ສາມ	<i>Three</i>
ສີ່	<i>Four</i>
ຫ້າ	<i>Five</i>
ຫົກ	<i>Six</i>
ເຈັດ	<i>Seven</i>
ແປດ	<i>Eight</i>
ເກົ້າ	<i>Nine</i>
ສິບ	<i>Ten</i>

Meanwhile, Noutnapha performs slow, graceful moves typical of women’s role in Lao traditional dance without making any eye contact with the audience. In this, hand gestures are key as is the positioning of the dancer’s feet. Next, Noutnapha speaks out the lyrics of the famous Lao song *Duang Champa* (also known as *Mueang Champa*), while continuing with moves from the Champa dance (Lao traditional dance).

Talking about the role of this song in *kip* in an interview in March 2019, Noutnapha said that hearing these words and sounds away from Laos amplifies feelings of Lao national belonging and nostalgia:

[...] everyone will miss Laos, whenever they hear this song [...] I read the story about the person who composed this song, his purpose was to make people miss Laos. Laos as something that you cannot be without. Hearing the song makes you feel homesick, makes you miss your parents, makes you miss things that you cannot be without [...]

In the last line, Noutnapha relates the abstract meaning of *kip* (“pieces that form a more complete whole”, discussed in more detail below) to the subject position of a Lao national abroad. Moreover, the champa flower featured in the song carries both personal and political meaning. Noutnapha explained: “it [champa flower] smells nice and it is beautiful...[and] I have performed the Champa dance since I was very young” (March 2019). Additionally, the champa flower (*plumeria*) is also the Lao national flower and for this reason has been actively promoted by the Lao government, for example, by planting frangipani trees that carry the champa flower. Noutnapha is aware of this, too, and reflects on this official promotion as follows: “because the flower belongs to Lao people, [planting was done] to remind Lao people about this”.

*The first lines of Duang Champa*⁹ Noutnapha voices out in a soft voice as if she is slowly and softly whispering the words to herself:

ໂອ້ດວງຈຳບາ	Oh, Champa flower
ເວລາທີ່ເຮົາຊົມດອກ	when [I] saw the flower
ນີ້ກເຫັນພັນຊ່ອງ	I can have many thoughts
ມອງເຫັນຫົວໃຈ	I can see your heart

⁹ The lyrics are those used in the performance, the English translation is based on Malivone (2014). For sake of clarity, I have chosen to present both the Lao lyrics used in the performance and the English translation. See here for a version of the Champa dance: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CxPtInNtfBE> (accessed 26 August 2021). The comments illustrate the meanings that the song and the dance carry in relation to Lao national belonging.

ເຮົານຶກຂຶ້ນໄປ

and I
could
enjoy

ໃນກິ່ນເຈົ້າຫອມ

your
sweet
fragrance

...

...

Gradually, Noutnapha's voice gains strength and her pace of speaking increases:

ໂອ້ດວງຈຳປາ

Oh,
Cham
pa
flowe
r

ເຈົ້າເປັນ ບຸບຜາຂອງເມືອງລາວ

you
are
the
flowe
r of
Laos

ງາມດັ່ງດວງດາວ

Beaut
iful as
a star

ຊາວລາວເພິ່ງໃຈ

Lao
peopl
e all
adore
you

ເກີດຢູ່ພາຍໃນ

You
born
in

ດິນແດນລ້ານຊ້າງ

the
Land
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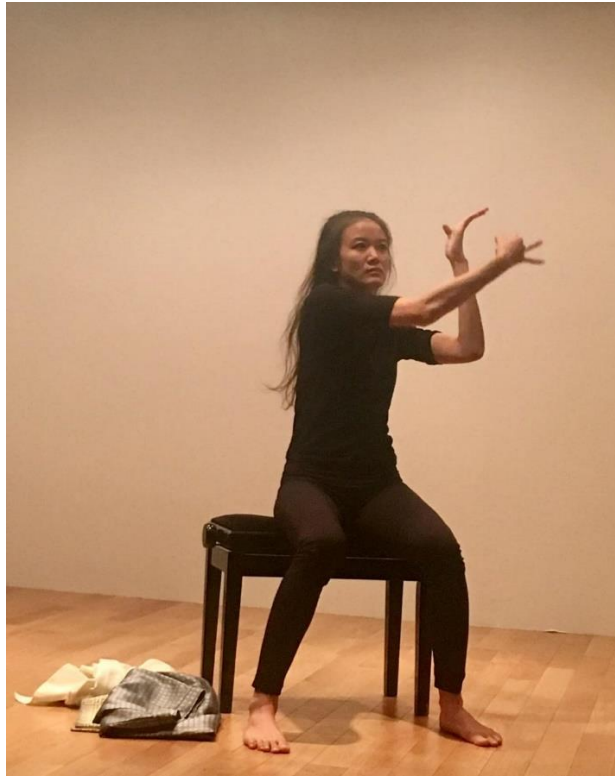
ເມື່ອໄດ້ພັດພາກ

When
ever I

	have to leave
ຫຼີໄປໄກຈາກ ບ້ານເກີດເມືອງນອນ	or flee far away from my home land
ຮຽມຈະເອົາເຈົ້າ	I will keep you
ຈະເອົາດອກຈຳບາ ເປັນເພື່ອນຮ່ວ ມເຫງົາ ເທົ່າສິ້ນຊີວາ	Cham pa flowe r to be my true friend as long as we live
ໂອ້ດວງຈຳບາ	Oh, Cham pa flowe r
ມາລາງາມຍິ່ງ ມື່ງເມືອງລາວເອີຍ	the beauti ful flowe r of Laos
...	...

Following the last line of *Duang Champa*, an audio recording starts playing loudly. We hear numbers spoken in a mix of Lao, French and English over an electronic sound. The numbers come in random order, small numbers (one, two) interspersed with very large numbers (million). The pace increases further, creating the effect that hearing the numbers becomes maddening. During the recording, Noutnapha shouts out numbers, too, in all three languages. Meanwhile, her dance has shifted in style. It is no longer a Lao traditional dance performed without making eye contact with the audience (which affirms dominant ideas about Lao women). But a modern dance with

her hair untied, dressed down to a unisex all-black outfit, and at some point, making very direct, seemingly confrontational, eye contact with the audience (see Picture 2). Here *kip* transgresses gender boundaries.



Picture 2: Noutnapha midway through the performance *kip* (photo by author, Paris 2019)

Noutnapha's modern dance constitutes of fast and rougher moves that are much less harmonious than the slowly flowing moves of Lao traditional dance. In this part of the performance, some of the moves suggest her body is being moved by an external force rather than it flowing with moves that appear to be in her body already.

Then, the numbers fade into the background. Soon after the audio (electronic sound) also fades out. Only Noutnapha's dance remains, which has shifted back to the more slowly flowing moves of Lao traditional dance leading up to a moment of stillness. At this point, *Duang Champa* makes a reappearance. Without audio support, Noutnapha sings in a soft and vulnerable voice, as if she is humming it to herself. Gradually her voice finds a melody and grows firmer. She closes the performance with these lines from *Duang Champa*:

ເມື່ອດົມກິ່ນເຈົ້າ

When I
sniff
your
smell

ບານພົບເພື່ອນເກົ່າທີ່ພາກຈາກ
ໄປ

[it is]
just like
I meet
an old
friend,
who

	had been lost
ເຈົ້າເປັນດອກໄມ້	You have been
ທັງາມວິໄລ ຕັ້ງແຕ່ໃດມາ	a beautiful flower since the beginning of time
ເຈົ້າດວງຈຳບາ	My dear Champ a flower
ມາລາຂວັນຮັກ ຂອງຮຽມນີ້ເອີຍ	my beloved flower

KIP IN PARIS: AN ANALYSIS

In Laos, the petals of a flower, which unfold and fade in harmony with each other, are called “kip” – pieces that form a more complete whole. The same is true for one of the hand movements that characterize traditional Lao dance, where the fingers evoke the shape of a petal.

In her solo piece, Noutnapha Soydala – a.k.a. Nout – (Laos) draws inspiration from this traditional dance form to express the extent of her personality and the course of her life.

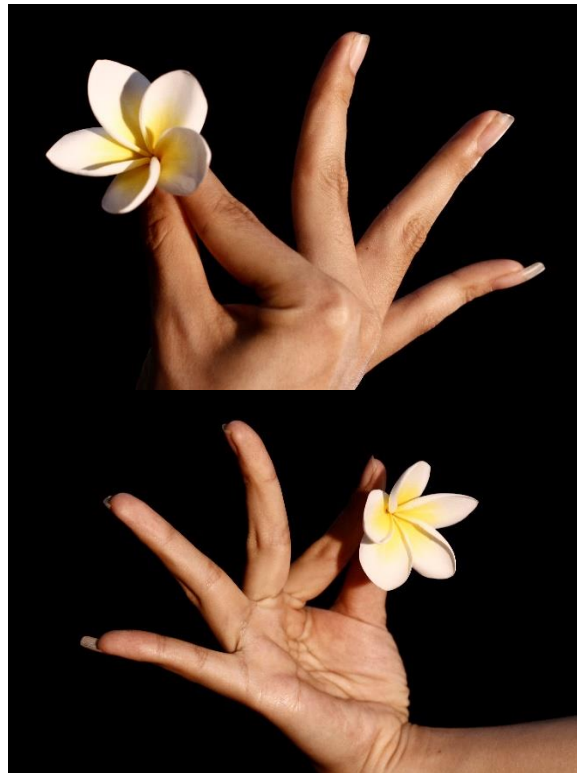
The excerpt above is taken from the announcement of *kip* as it appeared on the webpages of *la Cité internationale des arts*¹⁰. The description indicates that the meaning of the performance *kip* can be analysed at two, interacting, levels: first, as Noutnapha’s personal story and her development as a dancer, and second, as a reflection on Lao society more broadly. In *kip* these two strands of meaning are woven together intricately, rendering the performance potent with multiple meanings without being definite about any specific meaning.

Noutnapha’s narrative of becoming a dancer is reflected in the genres she combines in *kip*; trained in Lao traditional dance, accomplished in hip hop, and committed to contemporary dance. Underpinning this personal narrative are larger potencies of meaning, such as shifting gender norms (reflected in the different style of dress, eye contact, and the ways she moves her body), and the role of tradition and modernity

¹⁰ <https://www.citedesartsparis.net/en/Noutnapha-soydala--kip>, accessed 11 October 2019.

in Lao identity (the different genres of dance she combines, use of voice and electronic sound, mixture of languages, reference to money and traditional songs).

The diverse elements comprising *kip* and the way they are put together in the performance also speak to *kip* in the meaning of pieces that form a more complete whole, or in Noutnapha's words (interview March 2019): "something that cannot be missed in life" (because it would make life incomplete). This abstract meaning of *kip* is expressed through the three more literal meanings of the Lao word *kip* the performance engages with (in Lao all spelt as ກິບ). Two of these meanings are mentioned in the description above: *kip* in its meaning of the petal of a flower, and *kip* in the meaning of one of the hand gestures in Lao traditional dance (both are depicted in Picture 3). The third meaning of *kip* is left unaddressed in the written description of the performance and its promotional material. This is *kip* as the name of the Lao national currency. This is the most common usage of the word *kip* and the only meaning given in standard Lao-English dictionaries. Further, this third meaning does not presuppose a deep understanding of the Lao language, or Lao traditional dance (as is the case for the other meanings).



Picture 3: Hand gesture 'kip' and the champa flower (photo credits: Jessica Farinet)

The questions asked during the discussion following the performance indicated how the various potencies of meaning resonated differently with different parts of the audience. For example, a question asked in Lao, employing kinship terminology, by an audience member of Lao descent was about how and where *in Laos* Noutnapha had learnt to dance. Olé answered most of the questions. In this, he shifted the emphasis away from Noutnapha's personal story and Laos as a bounded place, to a focus on how the Lao contemporary dance scene is developing and the important role of international relations (foreign dancers visiting Laos, and Lao dancers going abroad). Other questions zoomed in on very specific elements in the performance, for example about the role of the spoken word in Noutnapha's work and why the *Duang Champa* song was featured twice in the performance. Olé and Noutnapha described *Duang Champa* as a thread running through the performance

connecting the various other references. However, the idea of keeping meaning open was not always successful. For example, Olé elaborated [in French] how with regards to the various elements in the performance (e.g., *duang champa* song, money, numbers) “people are somehow connected through these references”. He proceeded by emphasising that “it is a question when one hears the song of the flower [*la fleur champa*] whether all people experience and hear the same thing”. At that point, one of the Lao people in the audience intervened and stressed a more particular meaning: “*la fleur dok champa, ç’est la fleur ‘nationale’*” (the dok champa flower is the *national* flower; emphasis added).

THE ABSENT PRESENCE OF KIP IN ITS MEANING OF THE LAO NATIONAL CURRENCY

Kip in its reference to the petals of a flower and a hand gesture in Lao traditional dance refers to (natural) beauty, tradition, and authenticity. In the Lao context, money (or material wealth more broadly) is often seen as beautiful (High, 2014). Indeed, Noutnapha also considered *kip* in its meaning of money “pretty beautiful” because it can make life comfortable (March 2019). Nonetheless, the beauty of money is of a different kind than the beauty of a flower or a dance gesture because it references the economy, material wealth and modernity. Moreover, money may be pointed at to signify negative elements associated with modernity such as individual greed, but it also symbolises achievements of modernity seen as positive such as the realisation of the modern Lao nation (which *kip* as the national currency symbolises). These diverse potencies of the meaning of money render money highly ambiguous in late-socialist Laos (Huijsmans, 2019).

As said, reference to *kip* as the Lao national currency is absent from the official announcement of the performance. Further, there are no props used in the performance that directly refer to money. It was only when an audience member asked about the role of counting words, that Olé explained that this references money. He elaborated further:

Kip ç’est le nom du mouvement, et kip aussi, peut signifier la monnaie locale au Laos (Kip is the name of a movement, but kip can also signify the name of the local currency in Laos)

In contrast, in the sonic part of the performance references to money are manifold indeed. First, there is the slow counting from one to ten in the Lao language by Noutnapha at the beginning of the performance. Second, there is the audio recording of random numbers in three different languages that functions as a transitional moment in the performance. These two scenes can be thought of as speaking back to the abstract meaning of *kip* in contrasting ways. There is harmony between Noutnapha’s performance of movements of ethnic Lao traditional dance, dominant (Lao) ideas about gender it represents, her wearing Lao traditional dress, and her slow counting in the Lao language in an ordered manner from one to ten. Here it takes no effort to see how the various pieces put together may form a more complete whole. And if the counting here refers to money, it is a reference that fits the whole because the counting is slowly done, and modestly up to ten only. Here, each of the elements can be seen as *kip*, and together they constitute a coherent whole: representing traditional Lao society harmoniously.

Contrast this with the later scene in which Noutnapha’s movements are much faster and more eclectic, gender is done differently, and numbers are played through audio and occasionally voiced out by Noutnapha. English, French and Lao languages are randomly put together and there is no order anymore to the numbering. Very small, very large numbers and everything in between in no particular sequence.

Considering these elements as ‘various pieces’ leaves open the question of what, then, is the ‘whole’? If this is a reference to Lao society, as the *Duang Champa* song suggests, perhaps in its modern manifestation, what statement, then, is articulated here? At this point, the power of the performance is precisely that it leads one to think about how the various elements form a more complete whole. Thereby the performance *kip* is illustrative of the late-socialist condition in Laos in which people often find themselves making sense of seemingly contradictory messages and conflicting realities (Huijsmans and Piti, 2021).

CONCLUSIONS

In this article, I have discussed the issue of meaning in so-called ‘unofficial’ art (Koshcheeva, 2018, p. 73) that is socially engaged. In the context of late socialist Southeast Asia, social commentary remains a delicate matter (Geertman, 2016). Yet, Lao contemporary dancers insist on the importance of imbuing their work with meaning while also stressing meaning as multiple and perpetually becoming. As such, the various meanings in Lao contemporary dance can best be understood as potencies rather than clearly articulated commentaries that are fixed and given (compare with Nualart, 2018).

Some of the most striking potencies of meaning in *kip* I have illuminated by putting a thick description of the performance in dialogue with research and literature about Lao society. This has illustrated that the meaning of *kip* can be read in multiple ways, including as a personal narrative about Noutnapha’s becoming a dancer, as a reflection on the cultural and economic transformation of Laos, as well as an exploration of what it means to be Lao in an era of globalisation and the role of tradition and modernity in it.

References such as the *Duang Champa* song, the meanings of *kip*, the counting in different languages, the different ways in which gender is expressed, and the different dance genres, individually trigger recognition and engagement while the way these very elements are incorporated in *kip* also unsettles any pre-given meaning they may carry. In addition, *kip* proposes, rather than answers, the question of what it means that these diverse elements are put together. As such, meaning in *kip* is best described in terms of potencies: it triggers diverse reflections on meaning rather than conveying any fixed meaning. This approach to meaning is aided by the fact that Lao contemporary dance is an emerging field with few established norms or practices neither on part of the audience nor the dancers. The dialogue between dancers and the audience that closed the performances contributed further to entertaining the various potencies of meaning rather than defining the meaning of *kip*.

This approach to meaning is very different from the closed and essentialized approach to meaning that dominates the Lao state-controlled media and the Lao education system (Huijsmans and Piti, 2021; Huijsmans, 2018), and is of critical importance for the further development of the Lao contemporary art scene and creative practice more broadly. Yet, as the statement on *champa* as the Lao national flower indicated: however, much Lao artists may stress meaning as multiple and perpetually becoming, every so often this approach to meaning will also be confronted with more essentialized readings of their work.

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