

The Five Ancient Yao Embroidery Designs

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Abstract

This article aims to present 1) the five ancient Yao embroidery designs and 2) the significance of the designs as well as the historical background and the way of life of the Yao people which are reflected in these five designs.

The five ancient embroidery designs are: Hou Kouang Country, Hunter's Blind, Gibbon, Thorn of the Full-Blown Flower, and Finishing Touch. These beautiful designs of the Yao people express their unique artistic genius and identity and also reflect their historical background as a people who inhabited central China and their way of life as a people living close to nature engaged in farming and hunting. All Yao girls must begin learning these designs at an early age. Yao women may create their own designs as they wish through adaptation and improvisation on the basis of the ancient designs.

บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้มีจุดมุ่งหมายเพื่อนำเสนอ (1) รูปแบบของลายปักผ้าพื้นฐานโบราณ 5 ลายของชาวเย้า (2) ความหมายของลวดลาย ภูมิหลังทางประวัติศาสตร์ ตลอดจนวิถีชีวิตของชาวเย้าที่สะท้อนให้เห็นจากลวดลายเหล่านี้

ลายปักผ้าโบราณ 5 ลาย ได้แก่ ลายเมืองหัวกวง ลายที่ซ่อนตัวของนักล่า ลายชะนี ลายหนามดอกไม้ และลายสำเร็จ ลายปักผ้าเหล่านี้มีความสวยงาม วิจิตรบรรจง แสดงให้เห็นถึงความมีศิลปะและภูมิปัญญาที่เป็นเอกลักษณ์ของชาวเย้า และสะท้อนให้เห็นถึงภูมิหลังทางประวัติศาสตร์ของชาวเย้าว่าเคยตั้งถิ่นฐานอยู่ในประเทศจีน ดำรงชีวิตอยู่ท่ามกลางธรรมชาติ ไม่ว่าจะเป็นการทำการเกษตรหรือการล่าสัตว์ ผู้หญิงชาวเย้าทุกคนจะต้องเรียนรู้วิธีการปักผ้าตามแบบลายปักผ้าพื้นฐานโบราณทั้ง 5 ลายนี้ตั้งแต่ในวัยเด็ก ทั้งนี้ผู้หญิงชาวเย้าจะสร้างสรรค์ลายปักผ้าในลักษณะอื่นๆ ตามที่ต้องการต่อไป โดยการประยุกต์จากลายปักผ้าพื้นฐานโบราณเหล่านี้ต่อไป

Introduction

Thailand is an ethnically heterogeneous nation. The ethnic groups of Thailand can be divided into three categories: (1) Thais (2) Other groups including the Chinese and minorities in the south (3) The Hill Tribes of the north.

The hill tribes who live in the northwest extension of Thailand are bordered by Myanmar on the west and Laos on the east. The mountain slopes are occupied by a variety of these people who have converged on this area from the north, northeast, west and northwest, and now eke out a precarious livelihood there. Many of these groups live near the border, and there are often other communities across the border in Laos and Myanmar, spreading as far north as China.

These hill tribes have been classified into four major groups according to their linguistic roots. (LeBar et al., 1964)

1. Tai-Kadai which is sub-divided into two linguistic branches:

1.1 Tai, the speakers of this branch are Shan, Lao, Thai and Black Tai.

1.2 Kadai, the speakers of this branch are Li, Kelao Laqua and Lati.

2. Sino-Tibetan which is divided into four linguistic branches:

2.1 Sinitic, the speakers of this branch are Chinese.

2.2 Tibeto-Burman, the speakers of this branch are Burmese, Naga, Chin, Kachin, Lutzu, Nakhi, Minchia, Lolo, Lisu, Lahu, Akha and Garo.

2.3 Karen, the speakers of this branch are Karen.

2.4 Meo-Yao, the speakers of this branch are Meo and Yao.

3. Austroasiatic which is divided into three linguistic branches:

3.1 Mon-Khmer, the speakers of this branch are Mon, Khmer (Cambodians), Mountain Mon-Khmer (Wa, Palaung, Khmu, Lawa and Bahnar).

3.2 Viet-Muong, the speakers of this branch are Vietnamese and Muong.

3.3 Semang-Senoi, the speakers of this branch are Semang (Nigritos) and Senoi.

4. Malayo-Polynesian which is divided into two linguistic branches:

4.1 Cham, the speakers of this branch are Cham, Mountain Cham (Bih, Churu, Raglai and Jarai).

4.2 Malay, the speakers of this branch are Moken (Orang Laut), Malays and Jakun (Aboriginal Malays).

The Yao, who speak dialects of the Meo-Yao sub-division of the Sino-Tibetan family of languages, originating in China, and constitutes an ancient minority that may be as old as the Han Chinese. During the last millenium or so political and economic factors forced the Yao to migrate very slowly from the central part of China (possibly in the Yangtse Kiang area) to southern provinces in Yunnan, Guangxi, Guangdong, Guizhou, Hunan, and Jiangxi.

The pace of migration became faster as from there many kept moving even further south periodically into northern Vietnam, northern Laos, and northern Thailand over the last couple of hundred years. The Yao in Thailand migrated from Luang Nam Tha and Muang Sing provinces of Laos about 60 years ago, and are settled in significant numbers in the northern section of the country. The Yao are classified into several main sub-groups, which can be classified as speakers of four main languages. (Pourret, 2002: 11)

1. Mien, a Meo-Yao language of the Sino-Tibetan family.
2. Meo, a form of Hmong dialect from the Meo-Yao family.
3. Zhuang/Dong of the Tai-Kadai family.
4. Mandarin Chinese tinted with southern influences.

In Thailand, where only Mien Yao are found, they are simply called Yao, the word Mien being little known outside the sub-group itself. They are also often merely called highlanders in the vernacular.

The Pattern Designs

In Thailand it can be seen that different types of clothing worn by hill tribe people is an important factor in helping to distinguish the different tribal groups, especially those who have arrived recently, such as the Hmong, Lahu, Lisaw, Akha, and Yao. The Hmong and Yao

are classified in the same ethno-linguistic group, but the traditional clothing of these two groups is very different, as are those of the Lahu, Lisaw, and Akha, which are also roughly classified in the same group. These dresses have had their own process of historical development. From their patterns of change we can trace the people's origins and ways of migration, and at the same time we can investigate their cultural tradition. Besides, these hill tribes do not dress only to protect themselves from the vagaries of weather but the designs and fashions of their dress reflect their tastes and aspirations.

The Yao can be easily identified by their dress. The women make the traditional clothes for all family members and, within the centuries-old rules and customs, they make the best use of their skills to harmonize symbols and colours, shapes and design. In general, the end result is stunning. Among these people the primary material used for cloth is cotton. Traditionally Yao use indigo for dyeing the cloth. They also grow their own natural dyestuffs and do some natural dyeing, although today many of their natural dyes have been replaced by chemical dyes.

Yao women wear elegant dresses. The costume of a Yao woman consists of an enormous headdress, an ankle-length tunic with long lapels, a loose-fitting pair of trouser, and a waistband. However, there does not appear to be any difference of costume for the old and young Yao women. (Figure 1)



Figure 1 Yao women in their traditional dresses.

(Source: Saran Nakrob, 2004: 89)

One important feature of the Yao dress code is the specific Yao decoration expressed via various traditional methods and techniques. These include embroidery with coloured threads, applique' of different layers of coloured strips of cloth, the addition of coloured strands, red streamers and pompons, permanent silver accessories such as buttons, bells, and clasps, and silver jewellery.

Among these features embroidery plays a primordial role for all the Mien Yao. Embroidery is a unique manifestation of the Yao creativity, and a language, which uses a plethora of expressive symbols related to the Yao world honed with colours. Usually the Yao work with the five basic colours: red, white, yellow, green and blue. It is found on some religious garments, tunics, men's or children's jackets, trousers, turbans, belts, bibs, bodices, sashes, shoes, aprons, capes, babies' hats and carriers, bags, pouches, legging and horses' accessories. Yao women love embroidery, and are proficient in its practise. It is the favorite occupation of the Yao women. Women spend their free time embroidering their clothes. At an early age Yao girls are taught by their mothers the various techniques, and the meaning of the numerous symbols. (Figures 2-3) The Yao embroidery patterns are mostly triangles, rhombuses, symmetrically arranged and reproduced in sequences. The patterns are stripes, waves, squares, zig-zags, and herringbones. The fact that Yao have chosen not to use weaving as a decorative medium but rather embroidery gives them much greater freedom of expression. The standards that are set are always high. Mediocrity is never acceptable.



Figure 2 (Left) Women spend their free time embroidering their clothes.

Figure 3 (Right) Girls learn to embroider at an early age.

(Source: Lewis and Lewis, 1984: 138-139)

The ancient Yao clan books, which are written in Chinese, record the early history of the Yao, and in one of these book an account occurs in which the original five designs are mentioned and described. Unfortunately, many of these old clan books have been destroyed. The English renditions of the names of these five ancient designs (Figures 4-8) are *Hou Kouang Country*, *Hunter's Blind*, *Gibbon*, *Thorn of the Full-Blown Flower*, and *Finishing Touch*. (Butler, 1970: 12)

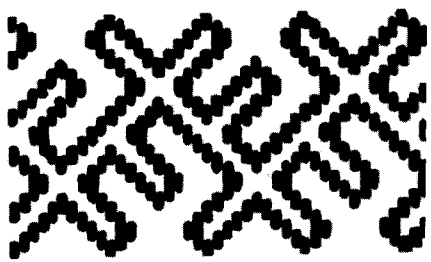


Figure 4 Hou Kouang Country.

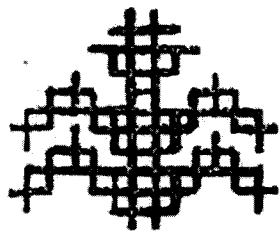


Figure 5 Hunter's Blind.



Figure 6 Gibbon.

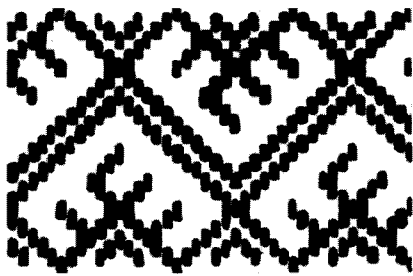


Figure 7 Thorn of the Full Blown Flower.

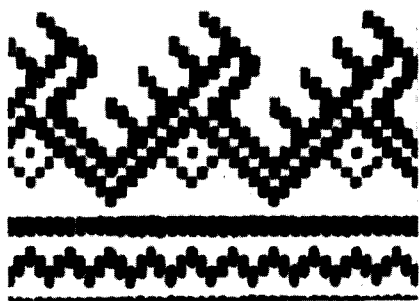


Figure 8 Finishing Touch.

Significance and Reflection of the Designs

From the five ancient embroidery designs of the Yao people, we can trace back to their historical background as well as the way of living.

The first design called **Hou Kouang Country** is the name of an ancient province in China which could presume the original place for inhabit of the Yao people and, from there some of the Yao tribes moved south sometime during the end of the 14th century due to the political as well as economic factors. The **Hunter's Blind**, the second design, is also called **Som** by Yao name which literally means "to block", but most Yao continue to describe it as a hunter's shelter or ambush, or the figure of a crouched hunter waiting for game. The design shows the way of living that the Yao have often been described as nomadic or semi-nomadic people, perpetually wandering from place to place and maintained their life by agriculture and hunting. The humorous design called **Gibbon** shows this animal's flying arms and legs. The Yao sometimes describe small children who get into everything as having hands and feet like a monkey. The **Thorn of the Full-Blown Flower** or **Wedge** is expressive of an apparent fascination with intricate and unusual juxtaposition of lines. This design has no known legendary background, but the composition is not only intricate but also entirely unified. The **Finishing touch** is called **Zovj-setq**. The word **Zovj-setq**, literally means "finishing design", is the name of a complete pattern in the Yao's woman costume (this design is sometimes called **Pumpkin Vine** which may relate it to the Yao practice of throwing a pumpkin against a mountain). Much of the original significance of these five old designs seems to have been obscured by time.

These patterns mostly comprise geometrical forms such as straight lines, parallels, further composing single and inscribed squares, waves, zig-zags, jags, herringbones, but very few curves and circles. The reduction of organic motifs into abstract geometric decorative designs is one of the most significant characteristics of Yao embroidery. These geometrical and abstract embroidery designs symbolize human beings, animals, birds, religious subjects, ideas, silver flowers, plants and trees as also various everyday objects. All the designs are first embroidered on a white or a green striped piece of cloth, and then sewn on to the

desired place. It is remarkable that considering the amount of labor as also time that is required for the preparation of these decorative motifs, and given the harsh and inhospitable conditions in which the Yao live, the Yao, particularly the women, are able to create such elaborate patterns.

Conclusion

The Yao, originating in China, is a Mongoloid people of the Sino-Tibetan family of language, have a talent for dress and are very particular as it demonstrates their cultural identity and ethnic affiliation to the outside world. With its many traditions, rules and particular details, Yao dress can immediately illustrate the wearer's kinship to a Yao branch, sub-branch or even sub-group and village. Although in today's world many Yao have had to adopt 'standard conventional clothing' and abandon several centuries of tradition, they still keep a set of traditional clothing for ceremonial or other special occasions, and a significant number still wear Yao clothes daily.

Since the earliest recorded days of Yao history, all the five designs: Hou Kouang Country, Hunter's Blind, Gibbon, Thorn of the Full-Blown Flower, and Finishing Touch have been embroidered at the bottom of Yao trousers. Originally, only these five designs decorated the costume. In later days, as more materials and more leisure allowed for experimentation, new designs were contrived and the front of the trousers was completely covered with embroidery although the original five designs kept their traditional location along the bottom. Even today young Yao girls can be seen with these five ancient designs embroidered on their trousers. (Figure 9) These are the first designs that they have to learn. Apart from the five standard patterns, the embroidery on the trousers is the creative expression of each individual. She may draw from a great repertoire of Yao designs, or she may innovate as she wishes. Many of the designs have been given names, but the same design may be given different names by different people. As far as can be ascertained, there is no mythical or religious significance to the patterns.



Figure 9 New designs were created on their trousers
(Source: Lewis and Lewis, 1984: 140)

Discussion and Suggestion

As is obvious the patterns of the tribal societies in Thailand are in a process of transformation as the development in technology and means of transport and communication are inexorably bringing even remote areas into contact with the modern urban world. The accessibility of these remote areas has rendered the preservation of their rich and unique heritage vulnerable as these developments are contributing towards the tribal people drifting away from their traditional moorings. The most immediate and obvious change can be seen in the clothing and ornaments worn by these peoples.

In response to the generally changing socio-economic scenario in Thailand, the life style of the Yao people is also rapidly modifying itself even as they are being assimilated into the mainstream of the Thai society. With the coming of the tourists, and consequently the establishment of hotels, guesthouses, the economic status of these people is changing. The articles of their traditional clothing, ornaments, designs etc. are now being occasionally made as tourist souvenirs. Some festivals like the Yao New Year celebrations which were earlier considered sacrosanct to only this tribe have now been thrown open to tourists. The materials for cloth are changing from natural fabrics to synthetic ones, and from the traditional pattern designs to the inclusion of contemporary motifs.

More contemporary designs are also gradually intruding themselves in the repertoire of the embroidery. The Yao people have started embroidering some designs that look suspiciously. Thus are the traditions created and sometimes degenerated. Essentially thus it can be seen that with economic prosperity and growing awareness of their changing social context these people are fast losing their uniqueness, and even more disturbing, their store of legends and folklore that has given them their specific identity.

It is interesting to see that it was only the older people who were at all interested in going over their traditional lore. The younger people, by and large, were not interested in this action, and it appeared as if they were no longer even prepared to carry what they perceived as the burden of their tradition.

It can be seen thus that this ingression of urbanization and introduction of sophisticated mechanism has worked in the tribal areas in two ways: both interlinked with one another (1) the tradition begins to transform and mutate itself even as it allows the process of innovation to set in and (2) engendering consequently, the danger of its diffusion and loss. The Yao have their marked individuality and these traditions are in an imminent danger of being irretrievably lost unless corrective and curative steps are not taken expeditiously.

Thus further studies about all traditional designs should be seriously explored and undertaken as soon as possible with strongly supporting from any organization or institute concerned.

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