Long Bei

CEREMONIAL DRAGON COVERS OF THE LI OF HAINAN

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It is a long time since an Asian tribal textile with a pedigree as mysterious and ancient as *long bei* entered the literature. Woven and embroidered by the Li tribe of Hainan Island in southern China, at first sight these 'dragon covers' offer little clue to their minority origin, evoking in appearance the ceremonial hangings, rank badges, dais covers and carpets of the mainland Han Chinese. With few examples available for study and a dearth of written material, the authors confronted the challenge of piecing together a coherent understanding of the origin, production and use of these striking and historically important textiles.

Today Hainan is a tropical vacation spot with mild sunny weather and beautiful beaches. A large island of 34,000 square kilometres, it lies off the southern coast of Guangdong Province, separated from mainland China by the Qiongzhou Strait. Hainan is lush and fertile, providing a wealth of plant, animal and mineral resources and ideal conditions for cultivating a variety of crops, including rice, silk, hemp, ramie and cotton.

About five million of its approximately eight million people are Han Chinese, while the rest belong to 39 minority groups, including the Li. Two parallel mountain ranges at the island's centre, the Wuzhi and the Limu, are home to over 1.2 million Li,[1] believed to be the original natives of Hainan, who migrated there during the Neolithic Age from Guangdong and Guangxi.[2]

Historically known as Yazhou, Hainan has been part of China since 110 BC. For centuries it was considered a disease-infested outpost, and was used as a place of exile for undesirables. From the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD) onward there was a gradual influx of mainland Chinese, with a dramatic increase during the Five Dynasty Period (907-979) as the Han, whom the Li called '*Moi*' (guests), fled war and unrest in central China.[3]

The Li practice their own religion, a combination of animism and ancestor worship, and live according to their own traditions and culture. Ethnolinguistically they are related to the Daic-speaking people who originally lived around the lower Yangtze River, before some groups migrated south to settle in northern Vietnam and Hainan.[4] They also share common ancestors with tribal groups in Taiwan.[5] The Daic were divided into three linguistic groups: the Kam-Sui, Tai and Kadaii. The relationship between the Li in south China and Hainan and sub-groups of the Daic Tai and Kadai in southern China, northern Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, as well as some of the tribes in Taiwan, extends beyond linguistic origins to include similarities in religious customs, art, textiles and clothing.[6] However the dragon covers appear to be unique to the Hainan Li.

1. Left: Li *long bei* with *mang* dragons and flaming pearl, Hainan Island, south China, Qing period. Group 1, three panels, silk embroidery on cotton, 1.22 x 1.91m (4'0" x 6'3"). Above the pearl, the talismanic symbol of wisdom, is a gold coin, one of the 'Eight Precious Things'. Other symbols include bats (happiness), a vase of flowers (peace), fish (wealth and abundance), a sword (supernatural power) and constellations. The four pillars form the gate of the 'Western Paradise'. All textiles authors' collection, New York

2. Right: Li *long bei* with dragons, phoenixes and lions, Hainan Island, south China, Qing period. Group 1, three panels, silk embroidery on cotton, traces of gold metal thread couching, 1.30 x 2.11m (4'3" x 6'11"). Instead of the more usual pair, a single adult dragon spans the centre panel. The head and tail of a baby dragon emerge from the seas, as do the head and tail of one fish and the tail of another

3. Left: Li *long bei* with horned dragons and phoenixes, Hainan Island, south China, late Ming or early Qing Dynasty. Group 1, four panels, silk embroidery on cotton, 1.63 x 2.62m (5'4" x 8'7"). The slender bodies and extended legs of the dragons resemble those of the Sui Dynasty (581-618 AD). Between the pair of phoenixes is a small *yin-yang* symbol surrounded by the eight trigrams of divination. Thickly drawn clouds are typical of the Ming period. Archaic looking fish and lions appear in the lower area

4. Top right: Archaic blue dragon (detail), three-panel Group 1 *long bei*, Qing period. The drawing here is close in form to the Song-style dragons seen on a wool carpet in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (04.248.1; see Adolph Hackmack, *Chinese Carpets and Rugs*, Tientsin 1924, p.30, pl.XX, fig.49)

There are several Li sub-tribes. Each speaks a different dialect and has its own style of dress, but all costume is clearly rooted in Li culture and religion, and illustrates the great dyeing and weaving skill and creativity of the Li people.

Records show that the Li were spinning, dyeing and weaving cotton as early as the first century BC in the form of blankets or covers (*guangfubu* or *guangfubei*). For centuries they sent crops and textiles to local rulers and the Chinese Imperial Court as tribute, achieving in their weavings an enviable reputation for quality and skill that reached its zenith from the 10th to 13th centuries.[7] In the late 13th century Huang Daopo, a Han woman from Wunijing in Songjiang Prefecture (present-day Shanghai), learned cotton production and weaving techniques from Li women in Hainan and brought this knowledge back to southern China, thereby contributing even further to the fame of Li textiles on the mainland.[8]

Around the same period feudal oppression began to undermine the wealth and stability of the Li, forcing them to retreat to the mountainous Wuzhi area and provoking a geographic and economic separation between the Han in the coastal areas and the Li in the interior. Nevertheless the Imperial Court continued to demand fine quality Li weavings as part of the tribute they received from Hainan well into the Qing period.

Sources in Hainan very plausibly suggest that the palace in Beijing, appreciating the superb quality of Li cotton (known as 'silk' cotton) and the outstanding skill of the Li women, sent paintings of important royal and religious icons to Hainan as models for the Li to incorporate into their embroideries, which were then sent back to the court as tribute.[9]

This would explain why a tribal group living mostly in thatched-roof bamboo houses on remote mountainsides produced unusually large ceremonial hangings in the style of the court. It would also account for the tribal flavour of the dragon covers (*long* = dragon, *bei* = cover or blanket), with their narrow panels woven on backstrap looms, their colours reflecting local vegetation and dyestuffs, especially the use of indigo; and the style of the various creatures and symbols featured on the *long bei* which mirror various dynastic styles but retain a certain local character.

We do not know if the court continued to send drawn or painted prototypes to Hainan or, if once launched in the art of producing *long bei*, the Li began to draw examples on their own. Probably both scenarios are true. In the latter case it may have been Li men who had enough training and education to understand the symbols to execute artwork which they then passed on to the master embroiderers among the women.

Apparently the early creation of the dragon covers was a long and complicated process. Perhaps in the beginning the Li designated a special structure within the village for production of the *long bei*.[10] Later they probably embroidered in the privacy, and concealment, of their homes.

It is logical to assume that textiles

worthy of the Imperial Court were treasured by the Li themselves and that they would want to produce *long bei* to keep, even in violation of orders from the Palace. The danger involved would only have added to their mystique and value. Inevitably *long bei* acquired the allure of hidden treasure and their production became surrounded in ritual and secrecy, enhancing their role as powerful objects. One Li source grew up without ever seeing a dragon cover, but understood that they were "very special, very great".[11]

She was not the only person never to have seen a *long bei*. In his extensive 1937 study of Li people, Hans Stubel makes no mention of the dragon covers, nor do we find one among approximately a hundred additional pages of photographs.[12] Few families had them; few villages had more than one or two. *Long bei* were so treasured that people in the village might never tell outsiders they owned them, nor even mention that they existed.

Dragon covers ultimately found their way into Li religious and ceremonial life. Textiles were already spiritually important. Magnificent but unfamiliar ceremonial symbols on the *long bei* bore the aura and magic of the esoteric and the validation of the court. Familiar symbols already related to Li religion and culture. The clothing and accessories of all the Li sub-tribes contained potent symbols and animals and figures representing ancestors and gods, including a number of abstract versions of the dragon god.[13] The Li hung woven cloths during their ceremonies or used them as shrouds or coffin covers during funerals.[14] *Long bei* also could be suspended like banners or laid out as covers, so their use in funerals and other ceremonies would have evolved naturally.

As time went by *long bei* grew in importance. The Li began to believe

5. Left: Graceful crane (detail), three-panel Group 1 *long bei*, Qing period

6. Right: Li *long bei* with phoenixes and cranes, Hainan Island, south China, Qing period. Group 1, three panels, silk embroidery on cotton, coloured paper, 1.30 x 2.08m (4'3" x 6'10"). In this rare design the rectangular centre features male and female phoenixes instead of dragons, possibly indicating it was intended for a female head of household. Beside them are the Taoist symbols, the scholar's scroll and pilgrim's gourd. White cranes surrounded by lotuses are Buddhist symbols of happiness. The outer border shows flowers of the Four Seasons: plum blossoms, lotus flowers, chrysanthemums, peonies. The pheasants in the upper border are one of twelve emblems of the Emperor, symbolising literary refinement

that the use of a dragon cover at a funeral would ease the spirit of the deceased into heaven, thereby also protecting the living from an unsettled ghost. People in Hainan told us that the panels were only sewn together when the *long bei* was to be used as a shroud. This is likely to have occurred rarely, as only the very wealthy would have enough *long bei* in reserve to use one for burial. More likely the covers were re-used throughout a family's history to sanctify its ceremonies and aid symbolically in the transition after death.

Because of their iconography and special place of respect, the *long bei* were also suitable for other important rites: ancestor worship, petition for rain, the exorcism of ghosts, weddings, and to ring in the New Year.[15] Dragons, symbols of good luck, were, like the frog, also "linked with water, particularly life-giving rain for the farmer's crops."[16] Dragons are typically presented amid clouds, the source of rain. Most *long bei* also include phoenixes (**2**, **3** ,**6**, **11**), which are associated with procreation. Both dragons and phoenixes are Chinese symbols of power and status. Together they form a blessing of happiness, making dragon covers cherished additions to the sacredness of the Li wedding sacraments. *Long bei* with an indigo base were suitable for all occasions, whilst the type with a red ground was auspicious for weddings, elders' birthdays, house-raisings and other celebrations, but not for funerals.

One cannot claim that the features of the dragons on *long bei* correlate exactly with specific periods in Chinese art or history, but the way in which they are represented does give some indication as to age. For example, the four-clawed *mang*

7. Left: Pair of Li *long bei* panels with encircled crane and hare, Hainan Island, south China, Qing period. Group 2, silk embroidery on cotton, each panel 0.41 x 1.40m (1'4" x 4'7"). Above and below the roundels are lotus flowers

8. Right: Pheasant and flowers (detail), three-panel Group 1 *long bei*, Qing period. The paper backing shows through where the silk floss has worn away around the centre of the flowers

dragon, different from five-clawed imperial dragon and common in Chinese textiles and art throughout the Ming and Qing periods, is most prevalent in the Qing *long bei* we have seen (**1**, **2**, **10**).[17] *Douniu*, dragons with downward-curving ox-bow horns and bushy eyebrows (**3**),[18] rare in *long bei*, were popular during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644).

The *makara*, dragon-king of the sea, also occasionally seen in dragon covers, is a mythical hybrid of Indian origin called *yinglong* or *kuilong* in China. *Makara* have "elephant-trunk snouts, bulging eyes, pointed tongues, needle-sharp teeth, stylised bodies, and floral scroll tails".[19] Introduced to China during the Yuan Dynasty, they reached the peak of their popularity in the Ming and Qing periods.

Occasionally cranes appear on *long bei* (**5**, **6**, **7**), with or without dragons. The Chinese believe that the crane, *ho*, is the ancestor of all feathered tribes, the aerial cruiser of the divinities and an emblem of longevity. In ancient times, the Chinese placed a model of a crane upon the coffin during the funeral procession, believing it would deliver the spirit to the Western Heaven, the world of a happy afterlife.[20]

Although its symbols and themes are similar, each dragon cover is unique, a reflection of the individuality and purpose of the maker. We find, however, that all *long bei* broadly represent certain types, so for the sake of clarity we have divided them into three groups.

Group 1 consists of indigo-ground three- and four-panel *long bei*. People speak reverently about five-panel pieces, but neither we nor our informants have seen these.[21] Group 1 covers have thick tabby-woven cotton panels approximately 38-50cm (1'3"-1'8") wide by 1.83-2.08m (6'0"-6'10") in length. Most *long bei* fall within Group 1 and of these the vast majority consist of three panels. The central part of each panel has been dyed deep indigo, with both ends featuring combinations of alternating brown, light blue and white stripes and additional wide white and narrow indigo embroidered bands. The panels are worked in silk floss throughout in a combination of techniques, but mainly in a surface satin stitch.

Often there is a central bordered area spanning all the panels (**2**, **6**, **10**, **11**), and it is here that one typically finds the most detail and the main components: *qilin*, phoenixes, fish and of course dragons. This inner frame also creates an outer border which is usually filled with elaborate minor elements such as flowers, vases, birds, scholars' objects and other auspicious symbols like the *yin-yang* symbol or Chinese coins. Another rare variation has no central frame but instead the major symbolic creatures boldly span the entire central portion from left to right (**1**, **3**). Four-panel pieces (**3**), rarer still, were also produced either way. In both three- and four-panel textiles the figures within may span the width of each panel, so that in order to see the entire body of a creature the panels must be laid or hung next to each other; or the figures may be complete within each panel.

Occasionally a Group 1 embroidery does not include dragons: instead the particular cover may have as its dominant feature a large and meaningful combination of Chinese characters or phoenixes and cranes (**6**). However the overall presentation remains in keeping

with the structure, colouration, theme and function of Group 1 pieces.

Group 2 *long bei* consist of a single complete panel or pairs of separate panels (**7**). These are similar in structure, colour and iconography to Group 1 pieces, but the panels stand on their own. Single-panel pieces are usually the width of a Group 1 panel, but considerably longer, averaging 3.2m (10'6") and rising to a maximum of four metres (13'2"). Embroidered patterns are complete in themselves and this type of dragon cover was designed to be used singly. It appears few were made, which may suggest that long single pieces were more often used as shrouds and few survived. Short single pieces in pairs have been referred to as seat covers, but were possibly also used in conjunction with, or in lieu of, Group 1 *long bei*.

Group 3 comprises two and three-panel single-unit *long bei*, usually with red grounds. Two or three pieces of embroidered fine cotton fabric of around 45-50cm (1'6"-1'8") wide by 1.83-2.18m (6'0"-7'2") long, are sewn together along the length, lined or backed with an additional piece of woven cotton and sometimes framed with a narrow cotton border.[22] Han Chinese influence is very strong in this rare group, which typically features phoenixes or cranes with other birds and floral patterns. The few textiles of this type we have seen do not contain dragons, nor were they ever used as shrouds. More likely they were used for ritual gift-giving or as matrimonial bedcovers or hangings for weddings or other important rituals or festivals.

We estimate the oldest surviving *long bei* date to the late Ming or early Qing periods (17th century). However, based on verbal testimony given by the Li, Cai Yu Liang, a native of Hainan Island who has studied Li artefacts, believes that some *long bei* are even older, going as far back as the early Ming period.

9. Left: Panther or tiger-cat (detail), three-panel Group 1 *long bei*, Qing Dynasty. Possibly made for someone in military service, or a high-ranking official within the local Hainanese government, since the panther or tiger-cat is the emblem of a military officer, as in a rank badge illustrated by John Vollmer in *Ruling from the Dragon Throne, Costume of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911)*, Hong Kong 2002. This tiger is distinctive for its long flowing tail, wavy fur and thread-like hairs below the tail and under the belly

10. Right: Li *long bei* with *mang* dragons, *qilin* and phoenixes, Hainan Island, south China, Qing period. Group 1, three panels, silk embroidery on cotton, 1.32 x 2.01m (4'4" x 6'7"). The mythical *qilin* is beloved of Buddhists since it does not eat living beings and walks prudently in order to avoid harming any living creatures. The rich, dense and vibrant embroidery includes an elaborate floral theme with flowers, vases and birds encircling the central rectangle. This cover is in unusually good condition

The most recent examples appear to have been made during the early 1900s. Their colours are harsher, with bright pink, purple, magenta, orange and strong yellows, and the embroidery is looser with much less detail and clarity in the symbols than in the early examples shown here. In addition, later panels are narrower and as a set form an overall size less than that of the earlier pieces. After the first quarter of the 20th century, production of *long bei* appears to have ceased.

To date we have seen approximately sixty Li dragon covers. Most are damaged, others are incomplete. Still others have panels that are mismatched and do not form a true set. Even in complete, undamaged sets the panels are sometimes misaligned, whether through lack of skill or due to a desire to avoid perfection. It is rare to find an original, well-aligned, complete *long bei* in good condition, especially an early one.

One of the reasons few complete *long bei* survived is that sometimes whole sets or single panels were lent to close friends or family members for important events. This increased the chance of them being lost, damaged or unreturned. In some instances parents divided the individual panels of Group 1 dragon covers among their children with a similar outcome. If one of the children sold their panel, the set would be left incomplete forever.

Few people, however, even knew of the existence of dragon covers until 1966, and then only due to the depredation of the Red Guard during the Cultural Revolution. On Hainan

11. Left: Li *long bei* with dragons, phoenixes and lions, Hainan Island, South China, Qing period. Group 1, three panels, silk embroidery on cotton, 1.22 x 2.16m (4'0" x 7'1"). The central portion is similar to (11) but the outer border is unusual for the four pairs of lions with spiral-patterned fur. Guardian figures known for their bravery, power and intelligence, lions were important in both Buddhist and Taoist symbolism

12. Above right: Archaic fish cradled within the waves between the sea and the stars (detail), three panel *long bei*, Qing period

they stormed into Li houses, rooting out Chairman Mao's 'Four Olds': culture, customs, habits and thoughts. *Long bei* that were not well hidden came to light for the first time one moment and were seized and burned the next. Where panels of a cover had been divided between family members, one household might see its panels burned while elsewhere its mates survived.

Because *long bei* are so rare they continue to command higher and higher prices on the market. This has prompted the Li to restore damaged areas and sections of the older covers where the embroidery has worn thin. Recently the Li began to strip old panels of their tattered embroidery and either re-stitch the original design or create new patterns on the antique base. The workmanship is excellent but the introduction of new, atypical or anachronistic symbols or figures on some of the covers, should tip off the experienced buyer.

The place of *long bei* in Li culture, and in Han Chinese culture, is an important part of Chinese history and commerce. The Li, as one branch of ancient Daic people, link the language, trade, traditions, art, textiles and dress of people in many lands.

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NOTES

1 | Wang Xueping, *Traditional Culture of Li Ethnic Group*, China 2001, p.22.
2 | Du Ruofu & Vincent F. Yip, *Ethnic Groups in China*, Beijing n.d., p.295.
3 | Ibid.
4 | Michael C. Howard & Kim Be Howard, *Textiles of the Daic Peoples of Vietnam*, Bangkok 2002, p.4.
5 | In his writings, Cai Yu Liang notes that genetic analysis shows the Li and several minority groups in Taiwan share common ancestors, the Hemudu from Jojiang, going back some 7,000 years.
6 | Howard, op.cit., pp.4-11.
7 | Xueping, op.cit., pp.20-1.
8 | Yu Weichao, ed., *A Journey Into China's Antiquity*, Vols. 3 & 4, Beijing 1997.
9 | From conversations between the authors, Cai Yu Liang and Jing W. Wang.
10 | As stated by Cai Yu Liang in his unpublished writings on *long bei*.
11 | Interview with Liu Qi Ling.
12 | Hans Stubel, *Die Li-Stamme der Insel Hainan, Ein Beitrag zur Völkskunde Sudchinas*, Berlin 1937.
13 | Xueping, op.cit., pp.273-4, 280.
14 | Mattiebelle Gittinger, *Splendid Symbols, Textiles and Tradition in Indonesia*, Oxford 1985, pp.21-2. Daic people throughout Southeast Asia and South China used textiles in a similar manner.
15 | Claudia Brown, *Weaving China's Past*, Phoenix 2000, p.37. There appears to be a fine line between human, frog and ancestor figures or gods in Li iconography. The Li refer to the "frog god" in their ceremonies, art, objects and textiles, noting its significance as the harbinger of rain, the singer of storms, the symbol of fertility, growth and abundance and, because frogs eat locusts, the protector of crops. Besides heralding the harvest, the frog is itself an edible delicacy. It can be surmised that the human-appearing frog, the human form, and the ancestor-gods became intertwined in meaning and representation.
16 | Feng Zhao, *Treasures in Silk*, Hong Kong 1999, p.278.
17 | Hong Kong Museum of Art, *Heaven's Embroidered Cloths, One Thousand Years of Chinese Textiles*, Hong Kong 1995, p.53.
18 | Brown, op.cit., p.43.
19 | Ibid.
20 | C.A.S. Williams, *Chinese Symbolism and Art Motifs*, Japan 1989, p.101.
21 | This leads us to believe the five-panel pieces are actually the "ghost covers", described in Xueping, op.cit., p.296, as "...five pieces of brocade... usually two meters in length and 1.5 meter in width with human figure pattern...". Although the ghost pattern covers are listed under the heading "Dragon Quilt", it is our opinion they belong in an entirely different and separate category of textile. "Ghost covers" have no relation to the Han people or culture and reflect entirely the roots of Li worship and ritual.
22 | See, e.g., Xueping, op.cit, p.300.