

All photographs Chadi Chinalai

2

## HUA YAO WOMAN'S SKIRT

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**WRITING ABOUT TEXTILES** is of necessity an intellectual endeavour, but in actuality telling good from bad, or outstanding from good is anything but intellectual. Investigation should begin not in the brain but in the viscera, or perhaps via a weakness in the knees.

That is exactly what happened to me when we were living in Bahrain and my husband Vichai and I were buying Persian tribal rugs. After the thrill of acquiring our very first rug, we went out and spent much more money on books; then we sat and leafed through page after page of pictures until, with unbounded delight, we found something similar to the one we had just bought. The fact that ours was so threadbare you could practically see through it and that, even if it had been in perfect condition, all the criteria that might have made it a national

treasure – or even just acceptable – were missing... well, all of that thoroughly escaped us. We continued to buy haphazardly until one day one of the dealers unfurled a rug at our feet and way before my head could register anything about it, my knees went wobbly.

That was the turning point. Later I would discover that while carpets went to my knees, textiles – the exceptional ones – would register just below my diaphragm and, almost literally, take my breath away.

The difficulty in writing about Hua Yao skirts is that nearly all of them engage in a frontal attack on my solar plexus. There are a few, however, that win the campaign, and those are the ones that prompt me to try to give analytic voice to this not necessarily logical feeling.

The Hua Yao are one of some three hundred small sub-groups among the more than two and a half million Yao people in southwest China, northern Thailand, Laos and Vietnam. About 150 years ago, a relatively small population of Yao settled in Hunan Province. Although much has been written about them elsewhere, very little research has been done or interest shown in the Hua, or 'Flowery', Yao of Hunan.

The Hua Yao woman's wrap-around skirt is

**1** Hua Yao woman's skirt, centre section, Hunan Province, China, early/mid-20th century. White cotton cross-stitch

embroidery on natural indigo-dyed plainwoven cotton ground. 0.74 x 0.96m (2'5" x 3'2"). Author's collection

specific to the sub-tribe. It has two almost square natural indigo-dyed cotton panels joined vertically to create a rectangle which is embroidered in cross-stitch with white cotton yarn. A cotton waistband completes the top and almost invariably there is a strip of red commercial cotton cloth applied at the hem. Pieces of cotton cloth, pulled into triangles by gathering the cloth at top into pleats, border the central portion on either side and are also embroidered, but in varying stitches and in either cotton or silk.

It appears that in the older, early 20th century, skirts the side panels were in blue and white but that with the passage of time they became more bright and colourful. It is also possible that the palette varied with the age of the woman, as is often the case among tribal groups: the younger the woman, the more polychromatic the clothing. Unfortunately the focus of these skirts as marketable items to collectors is on their centres and too often, therefore, the side





panels have been removed in order to make the skirts' transportation from sometimes remote and difficult-to-access areas more convenient, thus hindering a more in-depth study.

Yet it is truly the imagery of these central panels that is the most fascinating feature of these skirts. Here one finds much of the Yao universe, from cosmic to everyday. And, oddly, it is by viewing the embroidered patterns in photographs that one makes a startling discovery: when the images are shrunk down to thumbnails, the details instead of being isolated, as is usually the case, merge into larger overall patterns often in the figural form. Whether these are archaic beings that appear to have regressed from some future space age, or humans or deities from Yao mythology or ancestry, is open to speculation, but similar figures appear in other Asian textiles as well: in older Cambodian silk ikat *pidan* (altar hangings), in Laotian meditation cloths, in Li ceremonial textiles from Hainan....

This sum-of-the-parts aspect seems to occur with instinctive deliberation mainly when the iconography takes form as inverted confronting animal, figural, floral, vegetal, geometric or entity designs. For example, the tail of a horse becomes the beak of a bird, two cartwheels become the eyes of a giant figure, or a pair of eyes widen into a grinning mouth. In many of the older, early to mid-20th century Hua Yao skirts, the bodies, heads and tails of snakes, dragons or tiger-striped dogs (almost certainly a reference to Pan Hu, or King Pan, the 'father' of the Yao people) meet in mirror image to transform into an entirely new humanoid creature, representational, mythological or spiritual. Examining the white and indigo patterns both in the positive and negative enhances this vision 2.

## 2 Details of Hua Yao woman's skirts.

Top: In the full skirt the focus is on two confronting snakes. By focusing on the negative space surrounding the snakes' bodies and the joining of the snakes' heads above, one sees the head, arms, torso and legs of the humanoid figure; below is a miniature body and below that and incorporated into it, the frontal

view of a face – snake or human?

Below: In the full skirt the focus is on two confronting dragons, but by focusing on the mostly negative outline around the dragons' bodies and the two small snakes with heads meeting above, one immediately sees the figure at the centre, and another smaller figure below.

Author's collection

Another facet of the earlier patterns is reminiscent of *matrioshka*, the Russian wooden dolls that come apart to reveal more dolls within in ever-decreasing sizes. Here the embroidered animals have smaller animals inside their bodies and sometimes standing on their backs or beneath their bellies 1, or one finds smaller beings between the legs of larger mystical figures. These 'foetal' creatures relate to the legendary history of the Yao people and to the lifecycle. In some of the later skirts, seeds, embryos and even spermatozoa (or are they symbolic tadpoles?), good luck symbols and occasional Chinese characters (one reads 'happiness' or possibly 'happy event' with an implication of pregnancy 3) extend the theme of fertility, and consequently abundance and prosperity.

As the decades of the 20th century passed, the Hua Yao, like all tribal people, became more connected to the outside world and subjected to its economic pressures and time constraints. The convenience of purchasing commercial fabric, and even ready-made clothing, has resulted in not only a loss of skill but a loss of some, or even much, of the iconographic magic that was passed down from generation to generation.

Skirts that appear to be from around the mid part of the century often retain the image of the snake in varying presentations and numbers, still in confronting format but in greater simplicity than before. In the last half of the century the design changed even more: one frequently finds a large central tree flanked by two domestic animals such as chickens or horses 3. The representations are more relevant to everyday life, while at the same time less relevant to the Yao religion and its complicated world of spirits, Taoist gods and ancestors. The skirts have lost a certain complexity but gained a different kind of folk art charm. Cross-stitch embroidery is not difficult, so while later skirts may show only a slight loss of technical refinement, the effect of less time and attention given to embroidery is mostly one of quantity not quality of the stitch-work.

How does all of this play out in terms of distinguishing the stand-out pieces? It's only an opinion of course, but the skirts that organise complex detail into multi-dimensional layers in such a manner as to produce bold design and optical illusion, are the ones that demonstrate – besides admirable skill and experience – a certain creative genius. At their best the older Hua Yao skirts, have more elaborate detail, more depth and more symbolism, all in visual and geometric balance. In both small and large sections they are full of life 1.

In the end, though, when it's really a question of comparing good to better or better to even better, no amount of intellectual analysis can substitute for shaking knees, a rapid heartbeat or the feeling of a good hard whack in the gut.

3 Hua Yao woman's skirt, centre section, Hunan Province, China, mid-late 20th century. White cotton cross-stitch embroidery

on natural indigo-dyed plainwoven cotton ground. 0.61 x 1.05m (2'0" x 3'5½"). Author's collection.

