FROGS AND ANCESTORS Textiles of the Meifu Li of Hainan ©

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Photographs by Vichai Chinalai

1
Meifu woman's jacket, mid-1900s.
Collection of Linda Gross

6
Meifu woman's weft, ikat tubeskirt with a wide band of colorful supplementary warp, turn-of-the-century. In this rare example, there are six strips sewn together to form the full length. This skirt either belonged to an unusually tall woman or was intended to be worn in the style of a skirt. The length is comparable to a number of Indonesian examples. Author's Collection

Li legend tells us that in ancient times frogs were people. It is not surprising because these archaic looking creatures are also very human-like. Frogs are revered by both the Han Chinese and many ethnic groups as symbols of longevity and fertility. They protect vital natural vegetation and crops, like rice, by eating locusts and other harmful insects. They themselves are sources of food and medicine and harbingers of life-giving rain. The Li have a saying: "If the frog sings, the rain will come."[1] Li people sing and dance in veneration of the frog and play metal gongs known as "frog gongs" during their ceremonies. With hands held high, the dancers give the impression of being frogs. In Li textiles and other art it is hard to tell which figures are the ancestors, dancing or otherwise, and which ones are frogs. In fact they are either or both. Like the ancestors, frogs are worshipped as gods.

The Li minority represents over a third of three million people from thirty-nine tribal groups living predominantly in the mountainous interior of Hainan, China. Hainan is a large tropical island, 34,000 square kilometers, located off the southern coast of Guangdong Province and separated from the mainland by the Qiongzhou Strait. The remainder and majority of the island's population of eight million are Han Chinese.[2]

The Li began weaving in prehistoric times. Over the centuries they developed a reputation throughout China for the quality and beauty of their textiles. Recently their textiles also have come to the attention of the world community. Hainan is lush, fertile and rich in natural resources, ideal for the cultivation of cotton, hemp and silk, the materials used by the Li. On narrow foot-braced back-tension looms similar to early looms from Indonesia and Vietnam, all of the sub-tribes continue to produce a splendid array of costume and other textiles with intriguing variation, but which nevertheless often

2
Meifu woman's warp ikat tubeskirt, turn-of-the-century.
Collection of Roger Hollander

appear to share the same roots as other Daic-speaking people.

The Daic of Southeast Asia are a linguistic group under the larger umbrella of the Austric language family. Archaeological evidence from around eight thousand years ago indicates a division of the Austric speakers into the Austro-Asiatic and the Austro-Tai who lived along the lower Yangtze River. The Austro-Tai further divided into three super-families: the Austronesian, Hmong-Mien and Daic. Although information about the early history of Daic speakers is sketchy, we do know that they also fell into three language groups: the Kam-Sui, Tai and Kadai. Gradually the Daic populations expanded along the coasts of southern China and into northern Vietnam and Hainan. Within the Kadai language family were various sub-branches and these included the Li.[3]

Toward the beginning of the first millennium BC, Daic speakers started to use irrigation in the cultivation of their rice and therefore were able to settle in small clusters and villages. A Bronze Age culture, referred to by the location of its origin in northern Vietnam, developed in Southeast Asia and spread to include the Daic groups in China.[4] Artifacts from the Dong Son period, especially human figures in bronze and large bronze kettle drums with human figures and boats atop their tympanums, are a primary source of information about the clothing of Daic people at that time. The men are dressed in loincloths, some minimal and others wide and ceremonial with patterns at the ends. The women are shown wearing decorated sashes and tubeskirts, plain or decorated headcloths and, infrequently, pull-over type blouses.[5] Many of these early styles of dress have carried over into the twentieth century.

Common ancestry of the Li and with other subgroups of the Daic Tai and Kadai in southern China, northern Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and some aboriginal Taiwanese groups appears to extend beyond linguistic origins to encompass similarities in religious customs, art, textiles and clothing. Co-existence with other minorities and with the Han Chinese, and the exposure of Hainan through trade and travel to foreign influence, perhaps especially to other island cultures like those of Indonesia and the Philippines, further affected Li customs and creations.

There are five Li sub-tribes. Each one – the Meifu, Ha, Run, Sai and Qi – shares with the others a similar culture and religion, but speaks its own dialect and has its own group identity. As would be expected, tribal and village affiliation is reflected in the manner of dress and the techniques employed for textile production. Textiles of the Meifu dialect speakers, one of the sub-tribes and the subject of this article, suggest their early Daic roots and later cross-cultural influences.

Meifu men usually wear black, minimally decorated and collarless Han-style cotton jackets and slit skirts that look like shorts and are reminiscent of loincloths. Meifu women prefer deep indigo-dyed, front-opening cotton jackets decorated with strips of brown or red cloth *(Figure 1)* (or in the most recent examples, with stitched trim), dark indigo and white striped cotton headcloths *(Figure 11)* and tubeskirts for everyday wear. Occasionally their long earlier tubeskirts might have been worn over the breasts as sarongs.

There are two main types of skirts. Later and more common skirts are either all in plain-woven bands with stripes of varying widths, or combine alternating stripes of plain cotton weave with one major band of supplementary weft: threads woven along and through the weft ground threads. Earlier and important ceremonial sarongs *(Figures 2, 3 and 4)* utilized the warp ikat method. Warp threads are run on a standing frame prior to weaving and tied off in a pattern with a dye-resistant fiber like palm or coconut leaves; then, in the case of the Meifu Li skirts, dipped into indigo dye as many times as necessary to achieve the desired intensity of color. The wrapped areas remain white, or sometimes after dyeing, the threads are unwrapped and dyed a light blue, creating a contrast of pattern through color. The warp threads then are transferred to the loom and woven with the weft. Both

3
Meifu woman's warp ikat tubeskirt, turn-of-the-century.
Unusual coloration –the absence of brown in plain-weave or warp float stripes in favor of beige – may indicate it is from a particular village or area. Author's Collection

4
Meifu woman's warp ikat sarong, turn-of-the-century. Surprisingly this is a second example of a six-section sarong. Author's Collection

were traditionally woven in five strips or panels that were then sewn together. The Meifu are the only Li to have made extensive use of warp ikat in the production of their clothing.

Textile experts believe warp ikat originated in antiquity and initiated one of the oldest weaving traditions.[7] There is disagreement among scholars, however, about its the point of origin, with some speculating its first use was in Indonesia, others pointing to India, and yet others arguing that early tribal cultures in south and southwest China and the northern areas of mainland Southeast were responsible for the development and spread of the technique.[8] If, as is put forth by Gittinger and Lefferts, the process of warp ikat in former times was more widespread among the Tai and other Daic linguistic groups than later when it gradually was replaced by other methods, then the study of the formerly secluded Li of Hainan becomes "especially important in relation to the antiquity of warp ikat weaving among Daic speaking peoples".

Warp ikat developed in two basic patterns: one is a series of simple narrow dashes, as can also be found in tubeskirts from northern Vietnam and Laos; and the other narrow to wide bands of geometric patterns and human or animal figures, often abstract, also found in textiles of the Tai of Thanh Hoa Province, Vietnam, in tribal groups in the Philippines, in parts of Malaysia and on many of the Indonesian islands. The overall layouts of skirts from the various regions are also often similar, as are the choices and themes of the various figures whether or not they appear through the warp ikat method.

Speaking about the weavers of Tarung on the island of Sumba and other tribal cultures living in isolated mountain areas or on remote islands throughout Indonesia, and referring to them as the "Ancient Peoples", Warming and Gaworski write that the "Dong Son culture was also the source of a highly ornamental style of decoration that combined with the indigenous symbolic art…. This combination of decorative and symbolic styles survives today among various groups, and can be seen especially well in the motifs of their warp ikat textiles." The same observation can be applied to the Li, and perhaps especially the Meifu Li because of the complex and meaningful motifs revealed through their use of warp ikat.

A more valuable version of a similarly-structured Meifu Li tubeskirt combines cotton supplementary weft in silk with the warp ikat, adding a band of color to the mainly indigo and white skirt body. *(Figures 5, 6 and 7)* The lines of supplementary weft are essentially geometric, but careful scrutiny may also reveal floral patterns and abstract ancestor figures. These skirts may attest to an individual's status and wealth because of their use of silk, more rare than cotton, and their greater complexity. Both types of skirts – those with and without the supplementary weave - made use of local dyestuffs, especially indigo, and also utilized narrow bands of simple warp floats to divide and visually frame some of the more important figures and symbols.

Besides functioning as articles of clothing, among tribal peoples textiles are believed to have power to protect against danger and evil and to promote magic, good luck, and blessings from the cosmic universe; although not every line, figure or pattern is remembered for its original meaning. When the meaning is lost but the design survives through generations, the images become part of tradition: their import endures, almost as if the group holds their significance in its collective unconscious. Li religion – a blending of animism and ancestor worship – continues to play a role in the choice of iconography on the Meifu women's dress, which in turn frequently holds a special place in the group's rituals, ceremonies and traditions. Neolithic geometric and floral patterns, anthropomorphic and animal figures arose from the past and from a strong belief in ancestors: they are not simply decorative, but imbue the cloth with spiritual value. The rituals demand the textiles - their presence and their meaning; and the textiles become significant participants in the rituals.

5
Meifu woman's warp ikat tubeskirt with a wide band of colorful supplementary weft, turn-of-the-century. Collection of Linda Gross

7
A very special example of a warp ikat skirt because the supplementary work extends throughout the textile, turn-of-the-century.

Written accounts refer to very early origins of tattooing among Li women. The Li believed that if a woman were not tattooed when she died, she would not be accepted by her ancestors and therefore would become a wandering ghost. However, very few of the current generations of Li women and girls have tattoos. It is reasonable to postulate that images on textiles have superseded the protective role of tattoos, serving an equally talismanic function in Li daily and religious life and thus also preserving the un-tattooed Li woman from a hideous afterlife.

Li ancestors must be remembered and revered, although their names are not uttered for fear of disturbing the most powerful of ghosts, the "ancestor ghost".[14] All of life's rites of passage – negative ones like disease, difficulties and failures; and positive celebrations related to prosperity, happiness and the cycle of life – incorporate a concern with dispelling malevolent ghosts and monsters and petitioning the benevolence and assistance of the ancestors. The village Daogong, or shaman, is responsible to divine the success of the rituals, and to prophesize. The decoration of divination tools and holy tablets often includes dancing ancestors and geometric patterns similar to those found on Li textiles.

There is a sacred fusion of frogs and ancestors in Li religion. They worship both, or worship them as one. The frog, called by the Chinese "the heavenly chicken" whose spawn falls from the sky with the morning dew,[15] is an emblem of fertility, abundance and longevity and the subject of stories and superstition. It is an archaic symbol that adorned the perimeters of the tympanums of the bronze drums from the Dong Son period. The frog was regarded as the soul of the drums, which among several ritualistic uses were beaten in a prayer for rain.

In other Meifu women's skirts that are mainly ikat and in those that also have supplementary weave, amid recurring latch-hooks, plain and filled triangles and diamond shapes, zig-zag lines,[16] trellis patterns, crosses, meanders, Taoist endless knots, tiny circles that might represent fish roe or rice, kicking and confronting horses or mules, and rhythmic, electronic-looking

8 and 8a
Details of two skirts with particularly frog-like groups of ancestral figures. Note the juxtaposition of large horizontal frogs with the smaller frog-like figures in between in Figure 8.

9
One end of a Meifu woman's early embroidered headcloth. Collection of Roger Hollander

10
An early example of a Meifu woman's headcloth with abstract Chinese characters. Using writing metaphorically, the gist of what it says is,"You don't want to let your hands be too idle, because otherwise when you have a pen in your hand you won't have anything to write."Collection of Linda Gross

patterns that resemble seismographic charts or lie detector tests gone wild, ancestor figures appear everywhere. They stand at the centers of the diamonds, have heads that are in the shapes of diamonds,[17] intrude into the mystic knots, show up in rectangles that look like shrines, stand singly or in rows with hands held up or by their sides. They contain parts of other patterns inside themselves and hide in an amalgamation of smaller designs. They seem simultaneously archaic and space age, and they often look like frogs. *(Figures 8 & 8a)*

There are three styles of Meifu women's headcloths noted in literature in recent times, beginning with Hans Stubel in 1939.[18] We believe they developed over time and therefore, with some overlap, reflect certain periods. The earliest pieces, dating, in our opinion, to the last half of the 19th century and possibly into the early part of the 20th, are long cotton cloths with plain-woven warp stripes running along both side borders and culminating at both ends in embroidered squares or rectangles of repetitive geometric designs, like diamonds and triangles, similar to those on the skirts. (*Figure 9)* Occasionally the center portion also contained a figure or an auspicious animal. These were used for ceremonies and festivals.

Beginning around the end of the 19th century, and going into the early 20th century, Meifu women began to produce idiosyncratic, finely embroidered and often colorful headcloths that are exceptional for their abstract Chinese characters. *(Figure 10)* When available, these are still reserved for ceremonial wear today. The characters, difficult to read even for the Chinese,[19] hold meaning individually and in groups. Read as sentences they often express proverbs about the proper comportment for a woman or what her best behavior should be for success.[20] It is probable that these headcloths were made and worn initially at a ritual for the passage of the Meifu girl into adulthood. The insertion of the Chinese writing shows the influence of the Han Chinese culture on the Li, but may also reflect the impact of large, secret and highly ceremonial embroidered panels full of Chinese and imperial creatures, symbols and writing that were created by the Li beginning in the late Ming period and sent as tribute to the Court in Peiking.[21] Headcloths for everyday use or of a later period are of the simple deep indigo and white striped plain-woven cotton rectangles mentioned earlier.

Among the five sub-tribes, the Meifu speakers have produced textiles that are distinctive to their group but also embody the rites and character of all the Li people. By the same token, all of the Li textiles are rooted in ancient times. They reveal the strong influence of the Dong Son culture and similarity in appearance, content, material, technique and function to textiles of other peoples of Daic origin throughout Asia.

1 Interview with Cai Yu Liang.
2 Xueping, *Traditional Culture of Li Ethnic Group,* p. 22.
3 Howard and Howard, *Textiles of the Daic Peoples of Vietnam,* p. 4.
4 Ibid.
5 Li men, well into the 20th century, continued to wear two types of loincloths: one small and triangular; the other wide and rectangular. (See Howard and Howard, Xueping and Stubel, *Die Li-Stamme der Insel Hainan.*
6 Genetic analysis shows the Li and several minority groups in Taiwan share common ancestors dating back 7000 years. (From the writings of Cai Yu Liang.)
7 Howard and Howard, p. 17, referring to Fraser-Lu and Maxwell.
8 Ibid, pp. 17 and 20.
9 *Textiles and the Tai Experience in Southeast Asia,* p. 35.
10 Howard and Howard, p. 20.
11 Ibid., p. 34.
12 *The World of Indonesian Textiles,* pp. 53 and 54.
13 Ibid., Chapter IX.
14 Xueping, Chapter VII.
15 C. A. S. Williams, *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism & Art Motives*, p. 401.
16 Schuster and Carpenter in *Patterns that Connect* relate repetitive zig-zag lines to genealogy (tree of life), a concept that is in keeping with the impact of the ancestors in Li religion and art.
17 A presentation that is ubiquitous in Tai textiles, sometimes with two diamond eyes or often with a dot or tiny diamond at center conceivably representing the third eye.
18 Stubel, Fig. 243.
19 The Li themselves do not have a written language.
20 Our thanks to Sophia Huang who struggled through the difficult writing on several of the headcloths with us and came up with cogent meanings and interpretations.
21 Chinalai and Chinalai, "Long Bei, Ceremonial Dragon Covers of the Li of Hainan," HALI, Issue 130, 2003.

11
The type of everyday headcloth worn by Meifu women, mid-20th century onward. Collection of Mary Jane Leland