

Written in Silk

MEIFU LI HEAD CLOTHS WITH WRITING

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On the island of Hainan, south of China’s Guangdong Province, Meifu Li head cloths are ascribed symbolic and talismanic powers by their wearers. A small group of these textiles are richly embroidered with Chinese or pseudo-Chinese characters, endowing them with special ritual significance.



Among tribal people, certain textiles are believed to possess the power to protect against evil and to invoke magic, good luck, and cosmic blessings. The precise meaning of their potent imagery may have been forgotten, but the designs themselves survive, seemingly part of the collective unconscious of the group. To this design pool new symbols and patterns may be added over the years, partly through contact with other cultures, thus fostering a unique amalgamation of old and new. Just such a process gave rise to a group of intriguing textiles embroidered with Chinese script by the Li people of Hainan.

Hainan is a large tropical island off the southern coast of China’s Guangdong Province. About five million Han Chinese live in the coastal areas and represent the majority of the island’s approximately eight million people. Among the 39 tribal groups that comprise the

remaining population, over a third of the people are Li. Five major Li sub-tribes – the Meifu, Ha, Run, Sai and Qi – live predominantly in small villages in the island’s mountainous interior.

Well known for their sewing, weaving and dyeing skills, all the Li sub-tribes employ a number of different decorative techniques to create textiles that are widely known for their quality and beauty. Li religion – a blend of animism and ancestor worship with touches of Daoism – plays a significant role in the choice of iconography on most Li textiles, including their dress.

One of the Li sub-tribes, the Meifu, produced a particular kind of ceremonial textile that is also highly idiosyncratic. It is a long rectangular indigo-dyed cotton woman’s head cloth, woven on a narrow foot-braced body-tension loom, with colourful geometric, floral, figural and archaic patterns finely embroidered,

mostly in silk with some cotton, at each end. Sometimes the head cloth includes legible – or approximate – embroidered Chinese characters, giving it a special place in Meifu rites of passage, rituals, ceremonies, festivals and tradition.

Two main styles of Meifu women’s head cloths have been documented.¹ Later pieces are simple plain-woven long cotton rectangles with alternating deep indigo and white stripes of equal or varying widths, which presumably were used for everyday wear. Earlier head cloths, of similar shape and length, have a solid background of indigo-dyed cotton with plain-woven thin warp stripes running along both sides. Each end terminates in an embroidered square or rectangle. Thus far, head cloths of the embroidered variety appear to date from the late 19th to early 20th century, although the tradition may go back further. There would almost certainly have been some overlap in the period during which each variety was created and used.

The embroidered head cloths, in turn, fall into two categories: those with Chinese characters and those without. We can only speculate on how some of the Meifu head cloths came to incorporate Chinese writing, but the most obvious assumption is that the Li were influenced by the proximity of the large Han population living on Hainan and the Chinese mainland. Han Chinese culture is rich in scholarship and symbolism and could have provided the Li with an iconography that was both foreign and familiar. The introduction of something from the ‘outside’ – Han Chinese characters

that express advice, blessings, wishes and natural beauty – would have made the head cloths exotic and special, enhanced their singularity and spiritual value, and elevated the status of the women who created and wore them, and therefore of their entire village. Chinese writing thus became one element in the Meifu style and tradition.

Another possibility is that the head cloths had a prototype in another kind of esoteric Han-based large ceremonial textile, the Li *long bei*, or dragon cover.² Dragon covers exemplified the mystery and glamour of the Han Chinese culture and its influence on the Li. Both types of textile have backgrounds of indigo-dyed cotton and both use silk embroidery to create meaningful patterns. Occasionally, the embroidered ends of the head cloths are so similar in format to the *long bei* that they look like miniature versions of them. These examples reflect the three-panel divisions of the majority of dragon covers and like them have a framed central portion surrounded by multiple borders (3).³

The characters, sometimes difficult or impossible to read,⁴ hold separate and collective meanings. Those that can be deciphered may name flowers, colours, heavenly bodies or occurrences in nature. As phrases they may contain proverbs or advice about the proper comportment for a young woman, or express, often in the form of poetry, the young girl’s personal goals, wishes and attributes, sometimes comparing them to those of a man.⁵

Even where the Chinese writing is clear and correct, it is questionable whether the Meifu people – including, sometimes, the makers themselves – were able to understand all the characters and layers of meaning. Nevertheless it was understood to be significant, and it is clear that even stylised unreadable squiggles, obviously designed to mimic real and meaningful Chinese characters, were believed to imbue the textiles with the power of the



auspicious written word or phrase.

There are certain recurrent themes. The characters often name a young woman’s laudable qualities, including her intelligence and beauty. They may list her accomplishments, for example her ability to do fine cross-stitch embroidery, paint and write poetry; or refer to or make favourable comparisons to those activities that were traditionally reserved for boys or men, such as travel, scholarship and exam-taking. Other subjects include proper

manners and comportment; goals and aspirations; one’s place in the family, the community and in relation to the ancestors; the significance of rituals, and the desirability of purity before marriage. In fact, much of the writing seems to relate to the status and marriageability of the young woman. Repeating characters include flowers in a variety of colours (usually yellow, red or white), auspicious plants, jade, heavenly bodies such as the moon, nature and (beautiful) scenery.



2. Meifu Li Head Cloth, Hainan, Guangdong Province, China, late 19th-early 20th century. 0.28 x 1.68m (0'11" x 5'6"). A rare example, perhaps a wedding gift from a close female member of the family. It contains observations about life, love and marriage, blessings and advice. The figures under the palm trees on each panel evoke the Li belief that standing under a palm tree brings the couple fertility, just as a palm tree produces many coconuts. Private collection

3. Meifu Li Head Cloth (detail), Hainan, Guangdong Province, China, late 19th-early 20th century. 0.27 x 1.60m. (0'11" x 5'3"). The characters do not form meaningful phrases, but imply the girl’s suitability for marriage. A pair of birds appears, representing conjugal bliss and life-long love. Chinalai Collection

1. Meifu Li Head Cloth (detail), Hainan, Guangdong Province, China, late 19th-early 20th century. Readable characters at the centre of the right-hand panel state that the girl is “confident and protective of herself and her body”, in other words, a virgin. The implication is that the young woman is capable of caring for a husband and children, making clothes and managing a household. Mike Glad Collection



4. Meifu Li Head Cloth (detail), Hainan, Guangdong Province, China, late 19th-early 20th century. 0.25 x 1.55m (0'10" x 5'1"). At the centre of each embroidered end a figure is flanked by two confronting peacocks, emblems of beauty and dignity. Auspicious plants and trees are named and their symbolic meanings described. Roger Hollander Collection



5. Meifu Li Head Cloth (detail), Hainan, Guangdong Province, China, late 19th-early 20th century. 0.27 x 1.68m (0'11" x 5'6"). Made by a highly skilled weaver, this cloth uses Chinese-style characters decoratively rather than meaningfully and cannot be deciphered. Chinalai Collection

Many of the characters describe or represent women. In Chinese literature, for example, a beautiful woman may be described as 'flower-like' and she herself as a flower reborn. A girl can be referred to as 'like a yellow flower' if she is a virgin.⁶ The skin of a lovely woman may be compared to jade;⁷ the moon is associated with the female principle (*yin*).⁸ In a departure from these standard themes, the written sign for the noun 'middle', which evolved from an arrow striking the centre of a target, may also enhance or emphasise the girl's favourable traits through its underlying meaning

as a verb: 'to strike in the middle' or 'hit the mark'.⁹

One may conclude that the girl herself, or on occasion her mother or another relative or close friend, created the head cloth to be worn initially during the young woman's rite of passage from girlhood into adulthood. One head cloth specifically makes mention of the girl as a bride, and of her groom: perhaps in this instance the occasion of the girl's coming of age and her marriage coincided. Another, almost certainly a wedding gift, refers to the girl as a 'flower blooming' and is full of marital advice and blessings (2). It

is reasonable to assume that the wedding was one of the ceremonies during which these exquisite textiles would have been worn.

Meifu head cloths with Chinese characters seem to fall into three main formats and to embody diverse writing styles from archaic to modern. The most intricate have long, wide and very fine embroidery at both ends in a variety of colours, often red-based (an auspicious colour in Han culture, regarded as life-giving and symbolic of wealth).¹⁰ They often have five characters towards the top and bottom and two or three along each side. Although most boxes with letters are contiguous, the rows of characters on the right and left sides may not always touch those along the top and bottom. Usually two or four characters occur at the centre. The borders and shapes surrounding the characters appear primarily geometric, but the patterns they form – often zigzags, crosses, triangles and diamonds – may also be ancient ancestor symbols that reflect Li culture and belief (1, 5, 6).¹¹

A second variation has smaller and narrower embroidered ends, with a continuous inner border of Chinese characters surrounding a middle rectangle. This central area may be void of writing, but generally contains two separated or contiguous Chinese characters. One also finds abstract, but more anthropomorphic representations of the ancestors, and sometimes emblematic animals, often birds, within geometric patterning similar to the style described above. (3, 4). The outer borders may also contain figures of animals or people. In colouration, head cloths of these formats seem to fall into two categories: one has mostly shades of gold, browns, tans and white with occasional touches of red; the other is more colourful and may include reds, pinks, purple, blue, gold and white.

A third layout is grid-like: the characters appear in rows – two or four – with five characters in each. The concentration here is mainly on the writing, although there may be many narrow borders above and below the boxed characters; and sometimes the side borders contain vertical rows of semi-abstract humanoid figures, probably

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representing the Li ancestry. The colours tend to be slightly more subdued than those in some of the other head cloths, featuring gold, browns, and tans, sometimes with touches of white or red.

It is curious that almost without exception the horizontal rows in all three embroidered head cloth formats contain five Chinese characters: it is still unclear whether this is for aesthetic or symbolic reasons. Five is a mystical number for the Chinese, with manifold meanings. The 'Five Moral Qualities': humanity, sense of duty, wisdom, reliability and ceremonial behaviour,¹² are all desirable traits for a young woman and prospective bride. All of the 'Five Gifts' of riches, long life, peace and quiet, virtue and life

without sickness,¹³ might be considered blessings for marriage and imply that the creator of the head cloth will bring beauty to the relationship and, through her fine character, much good fortune.

It is also noteworthy that within the range of Meifu dress only this one type of head cloth, with or without Chinese characters, is embroidered.¹⁴ The Meifu women use the ikat technique to decorate their skirts, sometimes embellishing those used for special occasions with a woven band of patterning in silk supplementary weft. Women's shirts and jackets are usually plain-woven; an occasional man's coat was made with cotton ikat, or in still earlier times the men wore simple triangular cotton loin cloths.

Also, aside from the dragon covers referred to earlier, it is only the embroidered head cloths with Chinese characters that appear to have been so profoundly influenced by the Han Chinese culture. Other Meifu textiles may be made with similar materials (native cotton, baste fibre, local or imported silk and the indigo plant for dyeing) and incorporate a limited number of figures, symbols and patterns from outside the Li community, but basically they embody the archaic roots of Li culture and religion and therefore a deeper tribal identity, making the embroidered head cloths with writing distinct within the array of Meifu Li textiles and, indeed, among the textiles of all the Li sub-tribes.

6. Meifu Li Head Cloth (detail), Hainan, Guangdong Province, China, late 19th-early 20th century. 0.30 x 1.75m (1'0" x 5'9"). The panel at the left shows a finer, more experienced hand suggesting the cloth was worked on by a mother and daughter. It contains poetic similes including: "The starting of the day is like a young woman blossoming". Roger Hollander Collection

NOTES

1 | The first published book on Li material was by Hans Stübel: *Die Li-Stämme der Insel Hainan, Ein Beitrag zur Volkskunde Südchinas*, Berlin 1937.
2 | See Lee J. & Vichai Chinalai, 'Long Bei, Ceremonial Dragon Covers of the Li of Hainan', *HALI* 130, 2003, pp. 86-92.
3 | To our knowledge, Mary Jane

Leland was the first person to make this connection.
4 | The Li do not have a written language. Sometimes the characters appear to have been either inaccurately copied or made up.
5 | Thanks to Sophia Huang who studied, translated and helped interpret the difficult writing styles on the head cloths.

6 | Wolfram Eberhard, *A Dictionary of Chinese Symbols*, London 1986, p.111.
7 | *Ibid.*, p.153.
8 | *Ibid.*, p.193.
9 | *Ibid.*, p.186.
10 | *Ibid.*, p.248.
11 | See Lee J. Chinalai, 'Frogs and Ancestors, Textiles of the Meifu Li of Hainan,' *The New York International Show*

Catalog of Tribal & Textile Arts, 2004, pp.11-20.
12 | Eberhard, op.cit., p.110.
13 | *Ibid.*
14 | Among the other Li sub-tribes the Ha Li also use an embroidered head cloth. Broadly similar in form, it has very different patterning, and no writing.