

ASIAN TEXTILES

MAGAZINE OF THE OXFORD ASIAN TEXTILE GROUP

NUMBER 57

FEBRUARY 2014



Inside: re-creating Aboriginal Taiwanese textiles;
examining talismanic clothing; report on the AGM; reviews
and events.

Contents

AGM report	3
OATG events programme	4
Recovering the lost woven treasures of Taiwan's indigenous peoples	5
Talismanic clothing, an Islamic tradition	12
Return to Lamalera	18
Textile mystery	20
Reviews	21
Other Asian textiles events	28

Front cover: a Paiwan woman's mourning wrapping cloth (collection of Chinese Textiles and Clothing, Culture Centre, Fu Jen Catholic University)

Back cover: Saisiyat tribal attire (collection of the Zhao-Her Taiwanese Aborigines Museum)

Editorial

This issue of *Asian Textiles* represents a milestone in the magazine's history, as it is the first to be printed in full colour throughout. I hope readers will agree that this is a great improvement. (The website continues to offer colour pdfs of this and all previous issues, see the enclosed slip for details.)

To celebrate this exciting development, what better than some photographs of Tsai Yushan's re-creations of aboriginal Taiwanese textiles? The rich colours and patterns of both these and the ancient originals light up the pages and make one marvel at Yushan's skill and patience.

Anyone who has seen the intricate and dazzling talismanic shirts made for Ottoman sultans in the 16th century will be interested to read about their modern successors. Paris-based researchers Alain Epelboin and Constant Hamès mounted an exhibition in 2013, showing a large number of talismanic items from modern Senegal, and their article describes some of the garments that were shown in that exhibition.

We start with a summary of the AGM. We later have a short piece by Sue Richardson about a recent visit to Indonesia, then the follow-up to the last issue's 'mystery object'. Our review section includes book reviews by Pamela Cross, and Agnes Upshall's report on her visit to the South Asian Decorative Arts and Crafts Collection in Norwich, plus an account of OATG's 'show and tell' event, which took place in January to great acclaim.

The Editor

Recovering the lost woven treasures of Taiwan's indigenous people

Tsai Yushan, Associate Professor in the Department of Textiles at Fu Jen Catholic University, Taiwan, describes her work in deciphering and recreating the woven fabrics of the aboriginal people of Taiwan.

Would you like to know how the aboriginal Taiwanese wove their beautiful fabrics? By decoding their methods today, we can preserve their precious lost arts and skills. In addition, through innovations in interpretation, we can present a new face of these arts for the eyes of the world to see.

Today's indigenous peoples seldom use the back-strap loom to weave their fabrics. The appearance of their old fabrics typically bears the good qualities of simplicity, strength, rusticity and order. The patterns in their fabrics are based on stripes and diamond shapes, and the form and colour of their clothing still follow their traditions. Only the splendid costumes of the hereditary aristocratic hierarchy of the Paiwan and Rukai tribes have more luxurious decorations. These two groups use more colours and motifs, as well as different techniques.

The ramie fabrics woven by Taiwan's aboriginal people are thick. Their weaving structures are based on plain weave, twill weave, and fancy weaves combining the two. They mix different weaves, using unique brocade techniques to create the distinctive and classic fabrics of each tribe.

In earlier times, the aboriginal tribes of Taiwan



Top: Atayal men in the Wu Lai area (Taipei county). Below: The Atayal women (Nantao county) used a back-strap loom for weaving.

Both photos date from the period of Japanese colonialism, and are taken from *Heartbeats from the Taiwan Indigenous Loom* (SMC Publishing Inc).



Analysing an old Pingpu tribal flag at Taiwan National Museum (2013).

depended on demonstration and oral teaching for instruction in their weaving skills, and lacked any written or graphical record. After 1895, during the 50-year period of Japanese colonialism, they were forbidden to do any weaving. With the impact of modernisation after Taiwan's recovery, as well as the gradual disappearance of the older women who possessed weaving skills, the aboriginal tribes faced the serious problem of almost completely losing their traditional skills.

The Council of Indigenous Peoples of the Executive Yuan sponsored the Department of Textiles and Clothing at Fu Jen Catholic University for a 'Teacher Training Programme for the Aboriginal Traditional Crafts of Dyeing and Weaving', for two years from 1999 to 2001. This programme successfully trained fifteen aboriginal students to act

as 'seed teachers' to train others to revitalise their arts and crafts. One technical course on shuttle weaving in the programme uses a method involving technical notation, based on my analysis of the traditional old fabric structure, to teach students to reproduce Atayal traditional fabric using a dobby loom.

After this training programme concluded, I continued to research other tribes' traditional fabrics.

During these years I chose especially representative attire and exquisite fragments from each tribe for analysis – the Atayal, Truku, Sediq, Amis, Pingpu, Tao (Yami), Puyuma, Tsou, Saisiyat, Thao, Bunun, Rukai, Paiwan. Besides my school's collections, I used all available resources for my creative reproductions of the old aboriginal textiles: various museums and



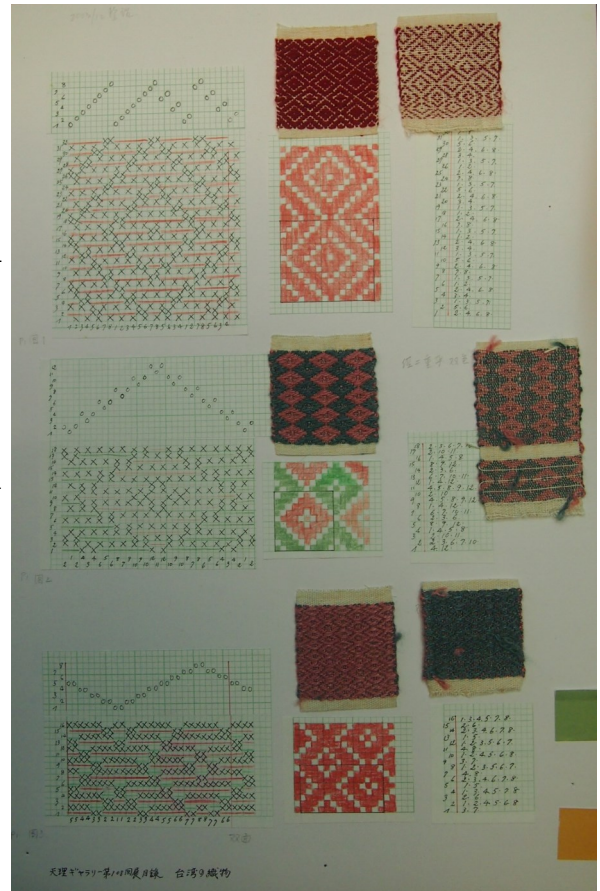
Pingpu garment (collection of Taiwan National Museum).



Old Pingpu skirt (collection of the Museum of Anthropology, Taiwan National University).

private collections, collection catalogues with photographs, and contemporary photographs of the old pieces, etc. From 2009 to 2012, I participated in a research study group on Taiwanese aboriginal clothing and culture organised by the Kobe Design University of Japan, to record the current state of the tribes' old cloth and modern weaving.

Over the years, there have been many published papers and collection catalogues concerning the clothing and culture of Taiwan's aboriginal peoples, but technical research information on the tribes' classical fabric is difficult to find. Over a period of fifteen years of research, I have decoded the structure and skills behind each of the tribes' classical weaving techniques. In this way, I can also compare the similarities and differences in the operation of the traditional back-strap loom and the general functionality of the dobby (heddle) loom, as a basis for the transformation of their skills. This study will be important for identifying differences in lost weaving techniques, in order to keep a record of the traditional and common methods of loom operation. In the process of researching test swatches, I accidentally found some new techniques for doing the weaving, and also successfully resolved a few difficult problems with the reproduction of rare and highly valuable brocades. The biggest difficulty I encountered for reproduction was the different systems of the looms: the back-strap loom is constructed with separate rods, so the aboriginal weaver can change the weave and pattern as she wants during the weaving process by picking up the warp threads with a



Research testing samples with diamond pattern.



Creative transformation work with Paiwan patterns (2012).

rod, but we cannot do that with the dobby loom, because all of the warp threads are fixed in a closed shaft harness. This limits some weaves, so it may create a serious problem for reproducing different patterns. With the accumulation of testing experience, I finally overcame this difficulty. The dobby loom allows for increasing efficiency and convenience of weaving work.

When I work in the cold archive room of the museum, I have to wear white gloves and use powerful magnifying lenses to carefully follow the needle for a detailed view of the fabric's structure and pattern. Previously, I encountered several kinds of rare weaves and some other very dense and thick old brocades. Even when I looked at these sophisticated weavings carefully with magnification, it was still difficult to distinguish the number of threads and I could not see the interweaving details clearly. When my analysis and woven test swatches are complete, I finally compare the newly made swatches with the original fabric to see if they are consistent, which is the key point in verifying whether the weaving and technique were successful. It's hard to get the same material (ramie) now, so I use the threads that I can obtain, such as linen, cotton and wool, and I refer to their original colours, but choose similar colours using my personal aesthetic feeling.



Woven reproduction of a Paiwan woman's mourning wrapper, 14 x 80 cm.

When I analyse aspects of embroidery works, the greatest difficulty I have met with, other than wear on the cloth which creates fuzziness in the pattern, is a mistake in the original embroidery pattern that will lead to a problem with the convergence of the pattern. Thus, when we reconstruct designs, we must make an effort to figure out the units of measurement of the complete design diagram and repetition of the pattern. Here I want to acknowledge my sister, Julie Tsai Xuanzhu, for her assistance with the embroidery work. Without her support, I would not have been able to finish all of these pieces of needlework.

From my research work, I have gained an in-depth understanding of the wisdom and creativity of Taiwan's aboriginal ancestors. I was sometimes astonished by their special weave structures, and wondered how they could produce such beautiful fabrics with a simple back-strap loom. Like those of other ancient peoples, the weaving and embroidery techniques of Taiwan's aboriginals are among the unique and unmatched treasures of the world, and are worthy of our attention and appreciation.

In 1997 an Atayal student brought me some old fabric and asked me how to reproduce it. Since then I have worked on the patterns of over 130 weavings and embroideries. I have



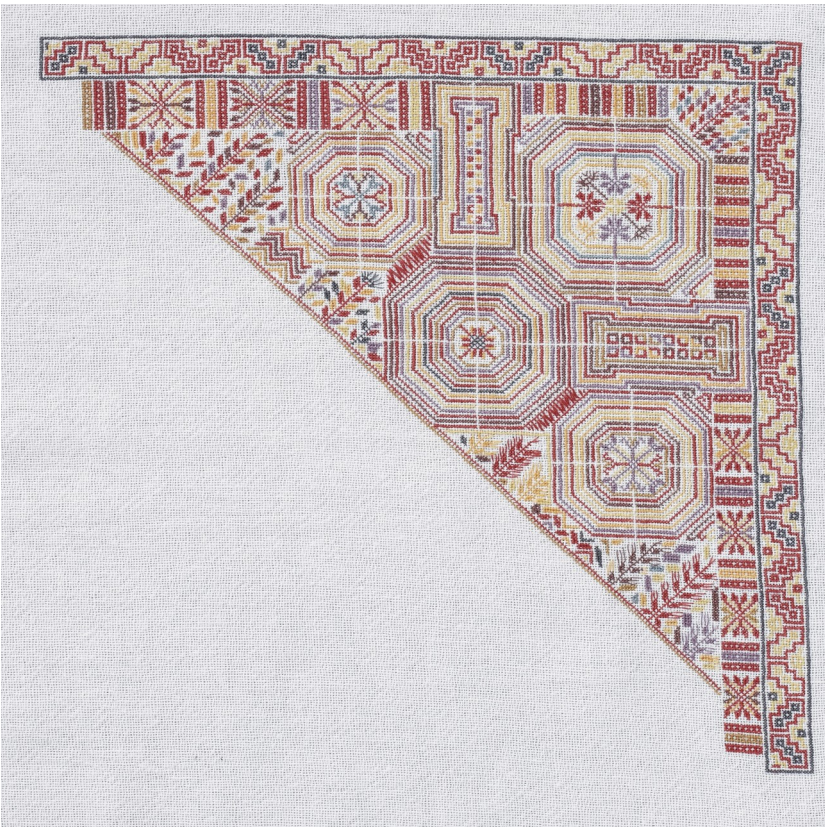
Above: Paiwan sample in progress. Below: the author weaving a Pingpu tribal pattern on a dobby loom.





Tsou and Puyuma patterns woven by the author.

worked on textiles from each tribe and have also derived innovations and interpretations for the items that I have reproduced. Analysing works is always an interesting game and challenge to me, and it's nice hearing people say that these research documents are a good way of preserving Taiwan's lost native woven treasures, treasures that are also part of the world's heritage.



A brief history of Taiwan

According to an official estimate in 2009, the indigenous population stood at approximately 500,000, or 2.18% of the total population on Taiwan. The ancestors of Taiwanese aborigines spoke Austronesian languages. Some of these people later migrated from Taiwan to the islands of Southeast Asia and thence throughout the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

In the seventeenth century, Taiwan was occupied by the

An embroidery reproducing a man's chest covering from the Tsou tribe, 36 x 36 cm.

Spanish and Dutch, followed by an influx of Han Chinese from southeastern mainland China. In 1662, Zheng Cheng-Kong, a loyalist of the Ming Dynasty which lost control of mainland China in 1664, defeated the Dutch, but his forces were defeated by the Qing Dynasty in 1683. After that, parts of Taiwan became increasingly integrated into the Qing Dynasty before it ceded Taiwan to the Empire of Japan in 1895. In 1945, following the end of the Second World War, the Republic of China (ROC) became the governing polity on Taiwan.

About the author

Tsai Yushan is currently an Associate Professor of Department of Textiles and Clothing at Fu Jen Catholic University in Taiwan, where she has worked since 1993. She is the sole author of four books, the latest of which, *Recovering Lost Woven Treasures: Translation and Transformation*, was published in 2012. In 1992 she received the prestigious Bishu Award for International Textile Design, awarded by the Fashion Foundation of Tokyo, Japan. In 1997, she won first prize for a card-weaving work in Taichung County Cultural Centre's Textile Craft Competition. She graduated from the Chinese Cultural University in Taiwan with a BA in Fine Art, and in 1983 from l'École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs (ENSAD) in Paris with an MA in Design (with highest honours). After ENSAD, she studied for two years at l'Atelier Nationale d'Art Textile (ENSCI) in Paris, and worked as a textile designer at l'Atelier de Recherche Textile (ART) in Paris for 5 years, under the direction of Professor Geneviève Dupeux.



This recently completed woven reproduction based on a Pingpu tribal skirt took the author about 3 months altogether for weaving and testing; the two pieces still need to be completed by sewing. The traditional Pingpu garment used fibres from the stem of a plant (the yellow thread in the picture); as it is hard to find this plant now, the author used cotton threads for her reproduction, but recently found a new ecological plant fibre, which she is now testing.

See page 21 for a review of the author's book *Recovering Lost Woven Treasures: Translation and Transformation*.

Reviews

OATG website manager Pamela Cross reviews Tsai Yushan's book about her work on the textiles of the aboriginal Taiwanese people.

Recovering Lost Woven Treasures: Translation and Transformation, self-published in 2012 by Tsai Yushan, ISBN 978-957-41-9248-9.

The textile photos in the book are of a very fine quality: the sort of photos which make you touch the page to feel the textile as you can see each thread in it! I also appreciated the old sepia photos of the different aboriginal tribes from the collection of Shung Ye Museum of Formosan Aborigines which are used in the second, major, part of the book where Yushan's brief descriptions of the textiles of each of the 14 tribes are accompanied by photos of her research pieces of the woven or embroidered textiles of each tribe.

The first part of the book has essays in English, French, Chinese and Japanese. There is an outline of Yushan's textile background and her 'journey as a weaver'. I think the essence of the book is summed up by Yushan (page 28) when she says: 'Would you like to know how the aboriginal Taiwanese wove their beautiful fabrics? By decoding their methods today, we can preserve their precious lost arts and skills. In addition, through innovations in interpretation, we can present a new face of these arts for the eyes of the world to see.'

The last section of the book is a list of illustrations and sources of materials for analysis. This is laid out tribe by tribe and has thumbnails of, I assume, all the textiles that were in the 2012 exhibition of the same name – an amazing body of incredibly fine work researched and created by Yushan. Many of the pieces are shown enlarged in the preceding tribal descriptions in the book. Information on and photos from the exhibition can be found at: <http://www.tribaltextiles.info/communit...php?t=2305>.

The book is indeed 'My Journey as a Weaver', as stated on the back cover of the



book, with the focus on what Yushan refers to on page 36 as 'Stage 3: 1999–2011. Studied Taiwanese aboriginal textile-making skills and the patterns associated with different tribes.' It both presents the results of this research and stands as an amazing testimony to her very determined efforts and finely honed technical skills. I am in awe!

The book is available from the Shung Ye Museum of Formosan Aborigines <http://www.museum.org.tw> or message on line <http://www.tribaltextiles.info/community/viewtopic.php?f=5&t=2346> It retails at US\$30 with an additional air shipping cost of US\$10 to Europe/USA or US\$6 to Asia.

