

The Beauty of Taiwan's Pingpu Tribe's Classical Fabrics

Tsai Yushan

Fu Jen Catholic University, Human Ecology College, Department of Textiles & Clothing

ox9923@gmail.com, 035363@mal.fju.edu.tw

Abstract

Taiwan's indigenous ethnic groups all have their own distinctive clothing. The Pingpu Tribe live in Taiwan's northern, central, southern and northeastern coastal plains. Branches of the Pingpu Tribe are widely distributed across these areas. The number of styles and fabrics that have been handed down are many.

In the 17th century, Han Chinese immigrants settled in Taiwan and developed the land. The influences of their intermarriage and cultural exchanges, resulted in some of today's Taiwanese local Pingpu customs being combined with the Han Chinese culture of the Ming and Qing dynasty. Insofar as the Pingpu Tribe is concerned, when its patterned fabrics and clothing styles are compared with those of most other Taiwanese aborigines living in the deep mountains, they bear a kind of appearance that is mixed with the Han nationality. In fact, other than a portion of its fabrics that have been localized by the Han people, the Pingpu tribal group traditionally also has had its own characteristics and superior fabric weaving skills. In addition, besides the famous natural banana fiber fabric of the Gamalan Tribe, the rest of the Pingpu Tribe's fabric crafts have long been disregarded by society and are gradually dying out and being lost.

Since Typhoon Morakot in 2009 when the village of Hsiao Lin in Kaohsiung Country was buried, some scholars and Pingpu descendants have been trying to bring back their traditional cultural practices and language. This article utilizes my personal research and experience with the forgotten fabrics of the Pingpu Tribe, as a way to share with everyone their touching elegance.

Keywords: Aboriginal crafts, banana fiber fabric , fabric design, Pingpu Tribe, Taiwan,

1. Introduction

In earlier times, the aboriginal tribes of Taiwan depended on demonstration and oral teaching for the instruction of their weaving skills as they lacked written or graphic records. After 1895 and during the 50 years of Japanese colonialism, the tribes were forbidden from weaving and with the impact of modernization after Taiwan's recovery in 1945, and the gradual loss of the older women who possessed weaving skills, Taiwan now faces a serious problem of completely losing these traditional weaving skills.

The traditional costumes of an aboriginal tribe are a demonstration of not only self-esteem but also self-identity. Despite increases in freedom of choice and individualism, traditional costumes have been attires of choice for important ceremonial events and occasions. Taiwan's aboriginal people commonly dress in traditional costumes for rituals and festivals. The costumes they wear maybe innovative or re-designed, but traditional classical characteristics are retained.

Recent efforts by international and local scholars include fieldwork investigating the Pingpu's historical relics, and international conferences on Pingpu cultures. The Pingpu's involvement to highlight the importance and significance of the restoration of traditional historical relics reflects their eagerness to seek not only their own ethnic identity but also a niche in history.

2. Background to the research on Pingpu fabrics

Between 1999 and 2001, the Department of Textiles & Clothing of Fu Jen Catholic University was funded by the Council of Indigenous Peoples of the Executive Yuan of Taiwan to work on the "Project to Cultivate Seed Teachers in Traditional Dyeing and Weaving of the Aboriginal people in Taiwan". A total of 15 aboriginal seed teachers were developed. In the weaving program, the author documented and analyzed a couple of ancient Atayal textiles, and was successful in producing replicas. The revived skills developed by the author were taught to the seed teachers.

Between 2004 and 2008, the author was commissioned by the Craft Museum of the Taichung County to investigate the Museum's collection of treasures from Atayal, Bunun, Paiwan and Rukai. Together with professors from Kobe Design University, the author spent three years (2009~2012) conducting fieldwork in remote tribes across Taiwan to research traditional fabrics from 13 indigenous peoples. In 2013, the author worked between the National Taiwan University's Museum of Anthropology in the Department of Anthropology, National Taiwan Museum, and Japanese Folk Crafts Museum to explore the Pingpu Tribe's traditional

fabrics.

For more than a decade, reviving the beauty of the Pingpu Tribe's classical fabrics and researching the weaving skills of the aboriginal peoples in Taiwan, has been one of author's endeavors. By 2012, the author has been successful in producing more than a score of replicas of the Pingpu Tribe's weaving finery.



Two reproductions of Pingpu Tribe's vests woven by the author

3. Characteristics of the traditional fabrics of Taiwan's aboriginal peoples

The traditional loom used by aboriginal people is a backstrap machine consisting of separated rods and a back strap. Due to the lack of a reed to control warp density, the thickness of manually twisted yarn and strong beating during weaving, traditional fabrics tended to be thick and dense.

The common weaves used by the aboriginal people in Taiwan were plain, twill and fancy twills combining plain weave and twill. Double cloth and sateen weave common to industrial textiles were not used. The creative combination of structures in weaving resulted in featured patterns that resembled the human head, hair and eyes in the funeral cloth of Paiwan, the blue diamond check in Tao, and the chest covering in Tsou that showcased embroidery in weaving. Even though Taiwan's aboriginal people did not develop similar skills in ikat, printing, and silk tapestry, they have developed their own skills and creative art design in their own traditional costumes. These designs are worth researching and preserving.

While animal furs, tree barks, and seashells (for adornment) were used, the most common material used in Taiwan's aboriginal fabrics was ramie fiber. Ramie was abundantly grown and harvested for yarns. This ramie fiber craft was unchanged until the 17th Century when woolen and cotton yarns were introduced from the outside world. Different parts from various plants were sourced as dyes to add colors to the white ramie thread. For example, roots of shoulang yam, rubia and ginger were dyes for auburn, red and yellow colors; leaves of sponge gourd and woad for green and blue or indigo; and fruits of betel nuts, cap jasmines, and mulberries for auburn, yellow and purple..

The cut was minimal and style was simple. Clothes were rectangular in principle, a

commonly shared characteristic of folk costumes across the world, which maintains the completeness of the hard-earned cloth and the beauty of patterns and elaborate designs.

Red, white and black formed the backbone colors of the traditional aboriginal clothing in Taiwan though bright colors were sometimes added to bring them to life. As weaving is commonly the result of shuttling the weft threads through the shed of warp threads, the most common pattern is either straight or bias stripes. The combination of straight, bias stripes or both, results in various geometric shapes in patterns which are widely observed in the traditional fabrics from different aboriginal tribes in Taiwan. Round shape patterns are scarce.

Over all, the appearance of traditional fabrics of the aborigines in Taiwan typically bears the good qualities of simplicity, strength, rusticity, and order. The Pingpu tribe's traditional fabrics manifest characteristics that mesh with the other aboriginal peoples in Taiwan, but also exhibit an array of their own innovations.

4. Aboriginal fabrics in Taiwan: state of the art

The advancement in technology has made available an array of yarns in many colors as well as fibers ranging from various artificial fibers to mixed ones. These changes have had an impact on the present-day weaving in Taiwan's aboriginal peoples. Among the weaving practitioners that we investigated, Atayal females accounted for the largest group in number. Most of the Atayal weavers have shifted to imported or self-developed machines such as counterbalance looms, dobby looms or inkle looms; the traditional backstrap loom are still in wide use by Tau females in the offshore island of Orchid.

Differences in the structure and mechanism between dobby loom and the traditional backstrap loom means the ways and techniques of maneuvering them are quite different. Difficulties, therefore, emerge when we try to reproduce replicas of traditional fabrics. After years of experiments and endeavors, the author has figured out schemes to translate and reproduce seamless replicas of traditional fabrics on modern machines.

5. The Pingpu Tribes and the characteristics of their fabrics

The Pingpu Tribes, or Plain Aborigines in Taiwan include Ketagalan, Kavalan, Taokas, Pazeh, Papora, Babuza, Hoanya, and Siraya, and are all said to be skillful in embroidery and weaving.

The Pingpu Tribes, like many aborigines across the world, used the backstrap loom to weave. Despite minor variations, the backstrap loom shares the common architecture with a

strap tied to the back of the weaver on the one end, and a warp-beam in various forms (and materials) on the other end. For example, the warps are tensioned on a wooden box in Atayal, but on a bamboo stick beam in Kavalan where the tension is formed by the stretched feet while the weaver sits weaving on the floor.

The aboriginals in Taiwan did not have a writing tradition. It was not until the Dutch rule in the 17th century when detailed reliable documentation for some of the Pingpu Tribes began. The Dutch colonizers used their own language for documentation. Traditionally, the Pingpu males wore an open front (sleeveless) tunic during summer, which was made by sewing two ramie cloths together on the back and side seams. Such a tunic is similar to that of other aboriginals. Buckskin or woven blankets were worn and used to ward off the coldness in winter. It seemed that skirts and headscarves were not worn until the 17th century. Ever since then, the contact with Chinese immigrants led to a diversity in the aboriginal apparel.

Natural fibers from plants such as banana, ramie, alkali grass, jute, and tree barks were used for traditional Pingpu fabrics. Among them, the banana stem fiber and the *Flickingeria comate* stem as used in a Pazeh jacket were the most special of all. According to the author's investigation on the authentic traditional fabrics, ramie threads typically served as the warps; red woolen threads, blue thin ramie threads, and yellow skins of *Flickingeria comate* were preferred as supplementary wefts to create patterns. The Pingpu Tribes also exhibited their originality and creativities in 'picking up' techniques in some of their fabrics.

6. The Classics of Pingpu's fabric

What follows is a brief introduction of a couple of Pingpu masterpieces that showcase the characteristics of Pingpu fabrics.

I .Brocaded jacket



Collection of National Taiwan University's
Museum of Anthropology



Collection of Taiwan National Museum

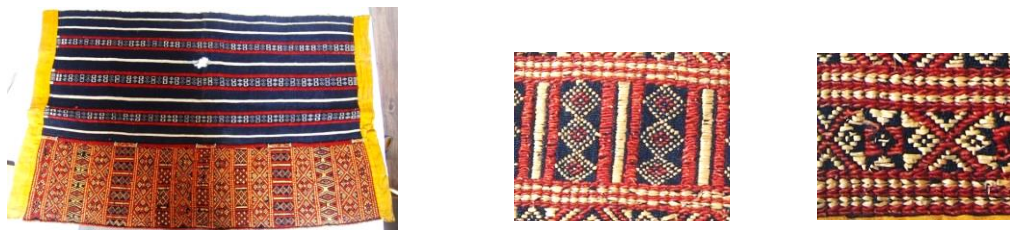
The brocaded jacket woven in *Flickingeria comate* stem used to be ceremonial attire. Even in the National Museum of Taiwan, such finery is among the rare and precious items in its fabric collection. Such fabrics are characterized by the richness in vibrant colors and vivid patterns that

are crafted by supplementary wefts. As an example, on the jacket in the National Taiwan University Museum of Anthropology there are twenty-one rows featuring six different patterns. Similar patterns are observed in the similar fabric collections of the three museums in Taiwan and Japan. Typically, patterns are symmetrical in their graphic design, e.g. the stacked diamonds, the asterisks composed of a cross, hexagon, and many other combinations (see below); the swastika (卐) stands out as a special example of an asymmetrical graphic design.



The brocaded jacket was rectangular in shape and was made by sewing together two pieces of cloth, which was a common garment among the Austronesians in the past. The attire was splendid and aristocratic to look at. As the woolen threads were loosely twisted and became breakable with time, almost all the fineries that we saw at the museums suffered from common damage with broken wefts, with the yellow *Flickingeria comate* skin braking off the most.

There is another Pingpu masterpiece kept in the National Taiwan University Museum (of Anthropology). It is a skirt and is made of two pieces, one of which used the *Flickingeria comate* skin weaving in graphic design. On the skirt are 17 rows of patterns created by interlacing 5 different basic patterns and their combinations. The other cloth of the skirt was blue and white, its red relief stripes was rare.



Collection of National Taiwan Museum



II .A bridal skirt

In this section, we will introduce a masterpiece from the National Taiwan Museum. The masterpiece is a 19th century bridal skirt rich in elaborate patterns, bead and copper decorations, and ornate with glass-bead fringes on the bottom. The skirt was part a wedding attire for a bride

and was a woven fabric with a thin cotton-cloth attachment, about half in the width of the fabric, sewn to the top of it. The skirt is dark blue and red in color. On the lower third and the bottom edge of the woven fabric is a decorative horizontal band, and fringes of glowing orange beads and copper bells. The patterns are diamonds, lines and combinations of both. Generally, plain weave is the most common in supplementary weft woven fabrics. The masterpiece skirt introduced here, however, was woven in a fancy plain weave.



Collection of National Taiwan Museum



Analyzing the wedding skirt at museum



Pingpu sample in progress

III. The patterned red vest

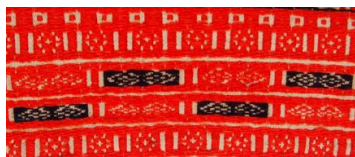


Collection of National Taiwan Museum

The patterned red vest introduced in this section is kept at the National Museum of Taiwan. It is about a century old, and is woven in innovative styles and filled with intricate patterns. The vest is made from two pieces of folded woven cloth, and completed by stitching down on both

sides from the armpits and the back side to form an open front vest.

The red attire is woven in ramie and woolen threads. It is unique in graphic design. The fabric looks to have been printed with vermilion seals all over it. The upper five sixths of the cloth were divided by straight lines in black and white into scores of rectangles, in which symmetrical patterns in vermilion red are arranged. The lower one sixth is dotted with horizontal lines and systematic patterns for a contrast and counterbalance to what sits above it. The fabric is woven in plain weave with supplementary wefts; floating black wefts can be seen from the back side of it.



Pattern of the lower part



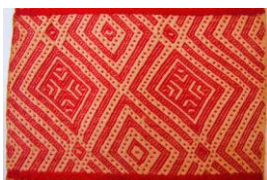
Back side

IV. Wearing Pennants



Collection of National Taiwan Museum

back side



Front side



Back side



The pennant was a trophy awarded to the winner of the traditional annual ritual of 'physical race', in Pingpu Tribes such as Pazeh and Papora. The pennant was about 125 cm by 43 cm in size, and was made to be worn by hanging down the front body of the winner. The pennant was a fabric cloth delineated into several sections by horizontal lines. There are two styles in patterns. The first one is composed of smaller, connected patterns. And the other is gigantic, with the basic grid size of more than a hundred thousand reaching a hundred and sixty thousand at its maximum. The gigantic patterns on the Pingpu pennant are the largest graphic design that the author has ever analyzed. It is definitely among the unique fabrics in the world's aboriginal fabrics. It is, however, far more unique in its craft. In traditional weaving, the patterns are based on plain weave, and are symmetrical in most if not all cases. The patterns on the Pingpu pennant were asymmetrical by crafting the weave to create biased line patterns in asymmetry. To draw a draft for such a graphic design is already a difficult task, not to mention the craft in rendering it into patterns on a fabric cloth.

7. Concluding remarks

The handcraft of the Pingpu's fabrics, unlike that of Atayal and other aboriginal people, has not received the attention it deserves. However, after the 2009 burial of the village of Hsiaolin in the landside caused by the typhoon Morakot, the danger of the extinction of its culture was painstakingly felt. Efforts to save and restore its culture are in desperate need. Most of the fabrics introduced in the present study are more than rare; some of them are the sole item in its category. Without careful preservation and study to restore them, they could become extinct and lost forever. With the emerging interests in research and the recent publications, the importance of traditional culture and craft of the Pingpu Tribes is being emphasized and recognized. The traditions and craft are not only the source of ethnic group identity, but they are also the bedrock that supports a lucrative cultural and creativity industry. To assure its success, we suggest that the government should play a more active role in assisting researchers to investigate the fine crafts such as weaving to build an archive in the fabric patterns, dyes, and weaving techniques so that a creative force of professional practitioners can be cultivated.

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