

Reading Threads: Clothing, Ethnicity, and Place in Southwest China

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Riding, Writing, and Reading

One day in 1991, I took a dusty, bumpy jeep ride between two multi-ethnic townships in the hilly border country between Sichuan and Yunnan. With me in the jeep was an official of the Nationalities Commission, the Chinese government agency in charge of minority affairs. Since we had just been visiting an area where four different ethnic groups lived together, he struck up a conversation about my own experience:

"Do you have different *minzu* (ethnic groups) in America?"

"Yes, we have Whites and Blacks and Hispanics and...."

"How do you tell them apart? Do they wear different clothes?"

I suddenly realized two things. First, the idea of race, which pervades the thought of immigrant societies like the United States, plays little or no role in concepts of ethnicity and ethnic groups in China. Second, despite millennia of cultural contact with each other, despite centuries of pressure to assimilate to successive versions of Chinese ideal culture, despite decades of pressure to become revolutionary or modern, people in the hill regions of Southwest China, like their ethnic relatives across the border in Burma, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam, associated ethnicity with clothing.

Writing with Thread presents stunning examples of ethnic clothing and textiles from the Miao-Yao, Tai, and Tibeto-Burman peoples of Guizhou, Hunan, Yunnan, and neighboring regions. And the objects in this exhibit illustrate in intricate detail how clothing and jewelry write the identity of those who make and wear them. Not only ethnic identity, but gender, age, and social status are written in the materials, colors, techniques, and patterns of almost every object in the exhibition. If the makers of these objects wrote with thread, this essay aims to tell visitors and readers a little bit about how to read the magnificent threads they are viewing.

People of Colors

Westerners are used to identifying people by conventional ideas about the color and shape of their faces. In Southwest China, there is no noticeable difference between the characteristic skin colors or facial features of different ethnic groups; variation within groups is at least as broad as variation between groups. As a result, the idea of races, or groups of people who look alike because of their common ancestry, is foreign to the ethnic relations of the Southwest. Occasionally someone will comment that people of one ethnic group or another might be shorter or darker or have curlier hair than another, but these are not the important distinctions; the important distinctions are linguistic and cultural. So terms like "White Miao" or "Black Yi" or "Red Lahu" do not refer to the

phenotypic characteristics of their bodies, but rather to the things they wear.

All over the mountainous regions of Southwest China and Southeast Asia, one way to designate people, both in their own languages and in languages of the nations that have confronted and partially absorbed these peoples--Chinese, Thai, Vietnamese, and Burmese--is to use a two-part ethnonym, or ethnic name, consisting of an adjective and a noun. The noun part, such as Miao or Yao or Yi or Lahu, usually refers to a broad, ethno-linguistic category. The Miao peoples, featured most prominently in *Writing with Thread*, are a good example. They belong to a broad category based on language--even though the languages of the Red, Black, Flowery, Green, and White Miao are not intelligible to each other, they belong to a common family and share a common origin, in the same way that Portuguese, Spanish, French, and Italian form the Romance language family.¹

For example, the Miao-speaking peoples of the Qingshui and Duliu rivers in today's Southeast Guizhou Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture have long been known in Chinese as the Hei Miao, or Black Miao. Qing dynasty ethnological compendia, sometimes known as "Miao Albums," refer to many types of Black Miao, and the painted portraits in these albums show the people wearing black or dark-colored clothing.² **Figure 1** Examples of the kinds of clothing, embroidered or appliquéd color on a black background, that undoubtedly gave rise to the name Black Miao, are found in Danjiang (186, 188, 192) and Taijiang (108)

counties .

Another group of Miao, known in the West by their name in their own language—Hmong—come from ancestral homelands in the border areas of Guizhou, Yunnan, and Sichuan. They have traditionally been known by a variety of color designations, perhaps reflecting their dispersal into small, remote mountain communities surrounded by larger and more settled populations of other ethnic groups. For example, in the upper watersheds of the Pan, Liuchang, and Sancha Rivers, we find groups labeled both as flowery Miao (410-414) and White Miao (420-23). Similarly, the small township of Hongbao in Yanbian County, Sichuan, the Hmong population of less than 2,000 people divide themselves into White Hmong (Hmong deao) and Blue Hmong (Hmong sea or Hmong zhua). They both have the tradition of migrating from Guizhou five generations ago, and speak only slightly different, mutually intelligible dialects. But they are also distinguished by their clothing, particularly the color of the women's skirts, white in the case of the White Hmong and darker, with a flowered stripe near the bottom, in the case of the Blue Hmong. (**figures 2 and 3**).

¹ Louisa Schein, *Minority Rules: The Miao and the Feminine in China's Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 1-4.

² David Deal and Laura Hostetler, trans., *The Art of Ethnography: A "Miao Album" of China* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2006), 34-35, 110-117.

Not only among the Miao, but also among the Tibeto-Burman peoples, groups are also designated by colors, but the color designations may or may not be related to their clothing. The Lahu of the China-Laos-Burma border area, for example are divided into groups known as Lahu Na (black Lahu), Lahu Shi (Yellow Lahu), Lahu Nyi (Red Lahu) and Lahu Sheleh. The Red Lahu clothing includes red as a prominent color,³ and Black Lahu similarly features black as a basic color (Lewis 1984: 180-81).⁴ But the rule breaks down with the Yellow Lahu, whose clothing is mostly black and red. In addition, some Lahu have a legend that the first ancestor of each "color" of Lahu was nursed by that color mother dog. This tells us that we need to be careful not to take these color designations for peoples too literally, even with regard to clothing.

Among the Yi peoples of Sichuan, Guizhou, and Yunnan, the relationship between color, identity, and clothing is more complicated. On the one hand, some color designations have little to do with clothing. In northeastern Yunnan and western Guizhou, the designation Nasu (the black ones) refers to a group of Yi who were the overlords of a series of feudal kingdoms between the 9th and the 20th centuries;⁵ they were often contrasted to other, subordinate groups who referred to themselves as white. In the Liangshan region of southwestern Sichuan (425-433), on the other hand, Black bones (Nuoho, called Black Yi in Chinese), and White bones (Quho, called White Yi in Chinese), refer to the aristocratic and commoner castes into which the society is divided--the term *nuo*, or "Black" also means "heavy," "important," or "serious". At the same time, the aristocratic caste is also associated with darker-colored clothing; in the Suondi local area, aristocratic women often dress entirely in black.⁶ In this case, it appears that historically the color of the clothing is derived from the color-name given to the people, rather than the other way around.

What is most important here is to realize that the association of people and colors in this region has little or nothing to do with the imagined color of the people themselves, but rather is part of a complex symbolic system that both reflects and is reflected in the styles and colors of people's clothing.

You Are What You Wear

Colors are not the only aspect of clothing that distinguishes people from one ethnic group or one location. As the objects in *Writing with Thread* display so abundantly, the material, cut, pattern, and needlework techniques differ greatly

³ Paul and Elaine Lewis, *Peoples of the Golden Triangle* (London and New York, Thames and Hudson, 1984), 176-77.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 180-81.

⁵ See Jacob Whitaker, *Yi Identity and Confucian Empire: Indigenous Local Elites, Cultural Brokerage, and the Colonization of the Lu-ho Tribal Polity of Yunnan, 1174-1745*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of California at Davis, 2008.

⁶ Stevan Harrell, Bamo Qubumo, and Ma Erzi, *Mountain Patterns: The Survival of Nuosu Culture in China* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2000), 27.

from one people and one place to another. In fact, distinguishing people through clothing can work along various dimensions at the same time. In a single locality with many ethnic groups, each ethnic group can be readily recognizable by its clothing styles and colors; within an ethnic group that inhabits a large region, it is possible to tell where people come from by the styles, colors, and techniques of their clothing and jewelry.

Many good examples of two ethnic groups with different clothing living in the same place come from the Southeast Guizhou Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture, where the Dong, a Tai-speaking people, occupy most of the lowlands, while Miao communities perch in more upland areas.⁷ In Congjiang county, the parti-colored jackets, belts and aprons and aprons of the Dong (289-297), woven on wooden floor looms (299) contrast unmistakably with the short, pleated skirts and long leggings of the Miao from the same county (278-283), made from cloth woven on backstrap looms. At the same time, as the multiple examples in *Writing with Thread* illustrate, within the broad Miao category, subgroups are readily distinguished not just by colors, but by an enormous variety of elaborations on clothing and jewelry. Perhaps the best known of these are the expressions of local identity found in silver jewelry and various headdresses, with the styles of the West Hunan "Red Miao," which appear to be highly influenced by Han Chinese or perhaps by Manchu court styles (see particularly 1 through 5) contrasting clearly with styles from Southeast Guizhou (143-145, 200, and 207 are good examples) which could be nothing but Miao.

In the Liangshan region in southwestern Sichuan, the situation is even more complicated. Some regions of Liangshan, including the eastern counties of Meigu (425-430), Butuo (433), and Zhaojue, are populated almost exclusively by the Nuosu, a sub-group of the Yi that has retained and developed its ethnic traditions of clothing and body ornamentation almost free of Han Chinese influence until the late 20th century. In fact, in much of the Nuosu heartland, there was no Chinese political influence until the People's Liberation Army occupied the area in the 1950s. In other areas, however, Nuosu live intermixed with Han Chinese or with Han and other minorities, and their clothing and jewelry styles both reflect outside influences and serve to distinguish them clearly from members of other ethnic groups with whom they have contact. As an example, we can contrast the clothing styles of Meigu, shown in a few examples in *Writing with Thread*, with those of neighboring Jinyang county. The Meigu area was politically totally independent of the late Ming and Qing empires, while part of Jinyang was under the rule of the Shama native chieftain, a leader of a local high-caste clan who was confirmed in office by the Qing emperors. The styles of Meigu (numbers 425, 430, **Figure 4**) show no Chinese influence, but those of the Shama domain (**Figure 5**) have obviously seen some influence from Qing court dress, while at the same time retaining such distinctively Nuosu characteristics as the men's pleated culotte pants (**Figure 6**).

In a very different part of Liangshan, Yanyuan County far to the west, Nuosu are not the original inhabitants, but migrated to the area within the last 250 years,

⁷ Tim Oakes, *Tourism and Modernity in China* (London: Routledge, 1998), 204.

and have become numerically dominant over the longer-resident Prmi people. Their women's clothing styles⁸ could not be more distinct—both wear pleated skirts, but the Nuosu skirt is striped horizontally while the Prmi version is a single color. The Prmi woman wears an apron; the Nuosu woman wears none, but may have a tasseled, appliquéd purse hanging from her belt. The Prmi woman wears a turban-style headdress, either black or colored; the Nuosu woman wears either a needleworked headcloth, if she is not yet a mother, or a large, square-framed black hat if she has borne children. A visitor to a market in Yanyuan could tell immediately whether he was dealing with a Nuosu or a Prmi woman, even though they might both be speaking either the Nuosu language or the local Han Chinese dialect (**Figures 7-9**).

You Wear Where You Live

Writing with Thread is organized by ethnic groups and major watersheds. This arrangement nicely illustrates the very complex relationship between clothing styles and area of residence. This kind of sartorial mapping is also well illustrated by the case of the Nuosu. Nuosu culture is remarkably uniform over the Liangshan area; the ethnic group is customarily divided into three dialect groups, but the dialects are all mutually intelligible, and differences in customs are minor. There are even great clans with tens of thousands of members who span the entire geographic domain. And some items are produced in almost the same range of patterns all over the area. For example, Nuosu warriors' armor, comes in two styles, the red "male" and black "female" style, though both were worn exclusively by men. The black warrior's armor from Meigu (426) is almost indistinguishable from similar armor from other areas. And this leather armor is part of a wider complex of lacquered leather- and woodwork (426, and the bowl in **Figure 11**) found in southwest China only among the Nuosu. Similarly, the conical ritual hat worn by the *bimo* priest, with its woven bamboo frame, felt cover, and pounded silver decorations (428), could as easily be from Butuo or Ganluo as from Meigu.

By contrast, other items of Nuosu clothing unmistakably identify the wearer as coming from a particular local area. The orange color and the "Italic N" shape on the man's jacket (number 425) could only come from Meigu or other parts of the surrounding Yynuo dialect region, and these motifs have carried over into contemporary, more elaborate forms seen in both men's and women's jackets (**Figure 4**). One need only look at equivalent jackets and vests from the Shynra region (**Figure 12**) or the Suondi area (**Figure 13**) to see how one can immediately identify the wearer as coming from a specific place. Men's traditional styles are equally distinctive; in fact, the Han Chinese names for the three dialect regions come from the cut of men's pants, ranging from the "big pant legs" (*da kujiao*) of the Yynuo through the "medium pant legs" (*zhong kujiao*) of the Shynra to the "small pant legs" (*xiao kujiao*) of the Suondi.⁹ Women's headdresses also vary greatly by region, each area has a distinctive style both for women who have not borne children and for those who are already mothers.

⁸ Nuosu and Prmi men in Yanyuan rarely wear native clothing anymore.

⁹ Harrell, Bamo, and Ma, *Mountain Patterns*, 24.

It is also noteworthy that the intricate and complex differences among ethnic groups and locations refer only to the Nuosu, a rather culturally uniform group that is classified as part of the larger Yi Nationality. Other Yi have other styles; many of them, such as the men's shirts from Masupo in southern Yunnan (nos. 505-508), bear little resemblance to any of the Nuosu pieces from Liangshan, and reflect between one and two thousand years' separate evolution of patterns and techniques.

Similar differences are also evident among widely-dispersed groups such as the Lisu. When I showed pictures of the Lisu of the isolated township of Aimen in Yanbian county (**Figure 17**) to someone who had worked with the Lisu in the Nujiang area where they are more concentrated, they did not recognize the wearers as Lisu; the people in Aimen originally came from the Lijiang area, between Nujiang and Yanbian (Li and Ma 1985: 64);¹⁰ their clothing also bears very little resemblance to any of the Lisu groups now living in modern Thailand.¹¹ The Lisu in Aimen now say that they have little contact with people from places so distant, and this probably accounts for the current variation in clothing styles.

The Importance of Technique

Not only colors and patterns, but techniques of clothing manufacture and decoration vary from ethnic group to ethnic group and from place to place. The Hmong are justly famous worldwide for their varied forms of needlecraft, including embroidery, cross-stitching, and appliqué, all of which are richly represented in *Writing with Thread*. But these techniques are used all over the area, by just about every people. Batik, on the other hand, has a much smaller distribution, and is hardly to be found among any of the Tibeto-Burman peoples, such as the Lisu, Lahu, or Yi (**but see number 505??**). The Hmong and other Miao peoples, however, employ batik on both skirts (389, 397, 403) and jackets (212), often sewing batik pieces onto a woven cloth background. In fact the Ge or Ge Jia people are classified by the Chinese government as a branch of the Miao, but many of them oppose this classification. And one of the distinctions that they point out between themselves and the surrounding Miao are the distinctiveness of their batik patterns (149, 156).¹² Tai-speaking peoples from Guizhou all the way to Vietnam and Thailand, including the Dong who are the lowland neighbors of the Miao in Southeast Guizhou, regularly use batik designs (288).

Sometimes within an ethnic group, different techniques are highly developed in

¹⁰ Li Yongxian and Ma Yuanxi, "Yanbian Xian Aimen Gongshe Lisu Zu Diaocha Baogao" (Report on an Investigation of the Lisu of Aimen Commune, Yanbian County) in *Dukou Shi Kaogu, Lishi, Minzu Yanjiu Xiliao Xuanbian* (Selection of Materials on the Archaeological, Historical, and Ethnological Research of Dukou Municipality) (Dukou, Dukou City Office of Artifact Management, 1987), 34.

¹¹ Lewis and Lewis, *Peoples of the Golden Triangle*, 241-65.

¹² Siu-woo Cheung, "Representation and Negotiation of Ge Identities in Southeast Guizhou," in *Negotiating Ethnicities in China and Taiwan*, ed. Melissa J. Brown (Berkeley: University of California Institute of East Asian Studies, 1996), 240-73.

different areas. Among the Nuosu, the Suondi area in Butuo and Puge counties has elaborated the art of rolled-edged appliqué to a level rarely seen elsewhere; the seamstress tacks down a pattern made of one color, such as yellow, and then sews a slightly smaller concentric pattern out of, say, red, on top of the yellow. She then rolls the edges of the yellow over the top of the edges of the red, creating a border of yellow around a core pattern of red (**Figure 15**). In the neighboring Yynuo area, by contrast, such a technique is rarely used, and patterns depend more than anything else on the art of couching, where threads are twisted into intricate designs and then sewn down on a contrasting background to create patterns (**Figure 16**). Finally, seamstresses in the Shynra area use a characteristic technique, not found elsewhere. They take tiny rectangles of cloth, crimp them into triangular shapes, and sew them together to create hourglass patterns about 3 mm. wide and 5 mm long. They then sew the top and bottom edges of the hourglass under an overlaying strip to match the overall background, thus creating a strip of background diamonds and single- or alternating- colored hourglasses following the yoke, the front panel, or the bottom hem of a jacket (**Figure 17**).

We can thus see a complex pattern of ethnic, territorial, and kin relations, embodied in another kind of patterns, those on the clothing themselves. At one level, deep ancestral patterns are at work when Miao have batik and Lisu or Lahu do not, though they live in the same areas. These techniques have been passed down for a long time, and seem to be borrowed less often than we might otherwise imagine, perhaps because peoples living in the same area actively use clothing to distinguish one ethnic group from another; borrowing would blur boundaries that people prefer to keep distinct. At another level, local variation is quite astounding, and serves to demonstrate two things. First, mothers teach their daughters to spin, weave, sew, and do needlework, and fathers teach their sons arts like smithery and lacquer-making. So techniques, and thus patterns, vary from family to family. Second, people generally marry their own kind. Other than the Mosuo and some groups of Lahu, most peoples of Southwest China are patrilineal and marry patrilocally, and women ordinarily do not travel great distances, marrying within their own ethnic and dialect groups. So techniques spread from family to family, but only among close relatives in a relatively small area.

Is It All Coming to an End?

Most of what is on display in *Writing with Thread* is a few generations old; in fact the curators made a decision not to include any recently manufactured articles. And indeed a visitor to the home areas of most of the peoples represented in the exhibition will no longer see people wearing traditional clothing as they go about their daily business. These things are not yet rarities; the local traditions of manufacture still persist in most of the towns and villages. But the modern world has brought changes.

Many art connoisseurs would no doubt regret most of these changes. Young women may be attracted to something other than village life (such as getting an education or finding a job), and not have time to spend the hours learning and

the even longer hours manufacturing clothing for themselves, their brothers, and their children. For everyday wear, practical, cheap clothing is available in the market. Attempts to commercialize ethnic clothing, for sale to tourists or others, run into the problem that few tourists are willing to pay prices that would adequately compensate the makers as they enter a cash economy--it simply takes too long to do good work. So work made for sale gets coarsened.

At the same time, modern trade goods have provided an additional outlet for the creativity of clothing manufacturers. Middle-aged women sit behind sewing machines in the market towns and county seats of the hill country of Southwest China, couching in colors of thread of a brilliance unattainable with natural dyes, using synthetic fabrics with a glorious sheen impossible in traditional times except in the most expensive silk; young people newly imbued with ethnic consciousness proudly wear beautifully-made clothing for holidays and celebrations, announcing their ethnicity and their place of origin.

Where does this leave the future of these textile and jewelry traditions? In the face of marketization and globalization, what will happen to intricate needlework, pleated skirts, and distinctive silver jewelry? My guess is that, in the next few decades, ethnic clothing will not disappear in Southwest China, but it will assume a much more specialized role as ethnic marker and special occasion clothing. Perhaps much of Southwest China will become a little bit like Norway, where everyone has an outfit for certain occasions, not everyone is very good at needlework, and specialists emerge who produce beautiful, if not entirely traditional, ethnic clothing for sale both to natives and to outsiders. Traditions will continue to evolve; there will be threads to be read in Southwest China for a long time.