

## Review Essay: Writing Identities—or Weaving the Social Fabric?\*

***Writing with Thread: Traditional Textiles of Southwest Chinese Minorities.***  
Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Art Gallery, 2009. 430 pp.

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This is a beautifully produced exhibition catalog with a series of highly valuable essays by art historians, anthropologists, and others.<sup>1</sup> It raises the problem of if and how the woven decorative patterns in the stunning indigenous textiles from Southwestern China should be “read” and decoded, as texts—questions that deserve discussion.

First, the catalog is a richly illustrated record of the wide-ranging textile collections of the Evergrand Art Museum (in Taoyuan, Taiwan) and the private collector Huang Ying Feng, who also serves as the director of this museum. The present exhibit was curated as a selection of over 500 of the 10,000 items there, and was shown at the University of Hawai'i Art Gallery in 2008 and in 2009 at the Chazen Museum of Art in Madison, Wisconsin and the Museum of International Folk Art, in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

The textiles have been collected from about fifteen peoples in ethnically diverse southwestern mainland China, as well as from the Li on Hainan Island. The collection, for better or worse, highlights how, in recent decades, textiles like these have become desirable, expensive collectibles. The motivations behind this new appropriation, especially of older textiles, by outsiders who invest them with new and different interpretations and values (often as the exotic remains of extinct peoples) is not addressed in this volume, but such re-valuations probably explain why they become a collecting focus separated from other aspects of the social life of the people that created them.

No cross-border examples are included despite the fact that many of the peoples represented live on both sides of the rather recently installed national borders of China and Southeast Asian countries, and that their relation to modern nation-states such as China or Thailand is both fraught and complex (Scott 2009). The selected peoples (here called ethnic groups) are mostly described by the official names determined for them within the framework of China's ethnic politics: Miao (who relate to the Hmong in Laos and elsewhere), Tujia, Dong, Yao, Maonan, Zhuang, Shui, Buyi, Yi, Gelao, Hani (or Akha in Thailand), Dai (known as Shan or Tai across the region), Jingpo (Kachin in Burma), and Zang (i.e. Tibetans, but using the Chinese term). The China focus is to some extent the result of the personal interests of the Taiwanese collector Huang Ying Feng, who authored the catalog entries.

Huang briefly notes the apparent and intriguing continuity with patterns found on certain prehistoric artifacts recovered by archaeologists (pp. 123-125). While such issues are not pursued

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further in the essays, the catalog certainly finds its place in a long tradition of identifying cultural expressions in what is now southern China as simultaneously distinct from, but also closely interwoven with, the development of historical Chinese culture as a whole (Eberhard 1968), a complex problem in many ways still unresolved. The catalog occasionally alludes to it, for example, in the “intercultural commingling” between Miao, Tujia, and majority Han, in a Miao priests’ robe (p. 146) and Angela Sheng, art historian and co-curator, discusses the mechanisms of the borrowing of outsider’s salient symbols in her essay, “Reading Costumes as ‘Texts’ and Decoding Ethnic Visual Culture of Southwest China,” which frames the interpretation of the exhibition for us.

The catalog records a stunning array of hundreds of deeply impressive clothing items. These include full-body dresses and headgear in both woven textiles and worked metal, pants and leggings, skirts, socks and boots, aprons, hats, a great number of baby carriers, and some other unique items, such as an amazing silver bib (p. 394), and some bedcovers (pp. 284-291, 316). A small number of textile production tools are also included, such as a braiding stool and a spinning wheel (p. 247), a loom (p. 305), a back-strap loom (p. 419), and an embroidery kit (p. 34). Apart from the robes and outfits of Yao and Miao priests and Yi shamans, the only items not relating to everyday clothing and everyday life are pieces of Tibetan and Yi armor (pp. 362-367) and an Yi saddle. There are no shoulder bags, even though these are widespread in the region and have been discussed as panels advertising identity—and even “resistance”—in the modern era (cf. Formoso 2001).

The captions accompanying the images of the objects often stress the present tense, as if to indicate that many of these garments are “still” made and worn, and that the cultural traditions within which they were produced are not extinct, as many might expect (and as may be true of some genres and items). However, as beautiful as the garments are in these excellent photographs, one is inevitably left with a feeling that the textiles have been separated from their living context, as timeless objects from outside of history, as a condition for their display as art objects. This effect, of course, is apparent in many museums (for example the Shanghai Museum, one of the richest museums in China today that is also guided by the master concept of “art,” which features a section of isolated minority clothing items installed alongside more prominent sections of major Chinese art forms). Here, the effect is reinforced in how items are photographed, either in isolation or as they would be worn in real life, modeled by inert clothing mannequins that are either faceless or headless. This leaves viewers with the impression that the textiles are rescued items, no longer in active use and therefore preserved in museums. There are a few exceptions, with some images depicting contemporary people wearing similar clothes today, such as in the essay by the Yunnan anthropologist Deng Qiyao (cf. pp. 134, 400), but these photographs only seem to accentuate the chilling effect of the mannequins. This may be an inescapable modern predicament (cf. Sandberg 2003), but it could have been mitigated in this catalog by the inclusion of more contemporary and historical photography, indicating the use of these textiles in their living contexts.

To be sure, even an exhibition orchestrated in the mode of art display can and will resonate with living people. Since “art” rules in the hierarchy of values embodied in museum displays in the locations where this exhibit was shown, immigrants, for example, who are associated with the artifacts through their ancestors or through connections with living communities will delight in

how their heritage is defined and valued within the art framework reigning in their host country. Thus in Madison, the exhibit was accompanied by events celebrating “Wisconsin’s Hmong culture” (Hmong being the ethnonym used most frequently outside China, where the old Chinese ethnonym “Miao” is used officially for a broader range of linguistically related peoples).

The same laudable intention, of celebrating minority cultural expressions by elevating them within a dominant framework, is also present in the effort to identify textile patterns as texts that—through embroidering, weaving, and other textile creation and embellishment techniques—“record and transmit” encoded messages, such as ethnic identity and a person’s marriage status. These messages are supposedly then visually identified and decoded by the viewer (pp. 7-13) on the basis of his or her grasp of the relevant ethno-cultural codes. But no mention is made of the many critiques of such theories (cf. M’Closkey 1994; also the debates over Geertz’ [1973] notion of “culture as text,” or “ensembles” of text). The idea of textiles as cultural “texts” problematically privileges the linguistic and invokes the model of the written text as an essential orthodoxy separate from the dynamics of social life, from how culture works. Here, it paradoxically seems to dampen the intense allure of the decorative aspects of the textiles we admire here. It is of course amply true that clothing has been deployed in fascinating ways in southwestern China to signify ethnic identities, but I believe that rather than only providing encoded messages regarding such affiliations, these artistic elaborations also forge and celebrate particular social values formulated within the framework of the comprehensive value regimes that these people themselves have developed, and seek to live by. Since affiliations might be communicated with a simple system of semaphore flags, one is forced to ask: Why should the textiles have been made so beautifully?

Maurice Bloch rejected the many attempts to find and decode representations hidden in Madagascar’s famous Zafimaniry artistic wood carvings, because, he said, “they represent nothing” but rather celebrate the “lasting qualities” out of which both houses and Zafimaniry concepts of good social relations are built, and which do not have linguistic forms but belong with “what goes without saying” (1998:33). Beauty itself can be formulated as such a quality or value (Turner 2009) and its nonlinguistic meaning can only be fully “decoded” in terms of an analysis that addresses not only the decorations, but the social relations and values that they embody and promote—including aspects like gender roles and divisions of labor that need not be represented in the art, even if they can be. Bernard Formoso’s discussion (2000) of Yi women’s dress patterns in relation to the ordering of a rice-terrace style social landscape, is one example of such concerns brought into the world of Yunnan minority textiles. Stevan Harrell’s remarks in his essay in this volume on the meaning of “Black” as *heavy* and *important* for the black-clothed Yi (pp. 102-103), is another example, as is the moving essay by Zhang Xiao, scholar and daughter of a famous Guizhou Miao embroidery expert, on the relationship between *women’s self-esteem*, their needlework, and modernization.

The notion of dress as (an unchanging) textual code also risks obscuring the capacity for change and reformulation inherent in any viable social formation, as well as how such a formation clashes with a modernity imposed from outside, or how some of the encoding (using colors, and even patterns) relates to the demands of imperial as well as modern state classification and management (this is touched upon in Kate Lingley’s contribution, on premodern history as “written into” clothing). Formoso mentions the contemporary refashioning of minority clothes

that came about after the new Communist government reclassified the “barbarians” as “minority nationalities” in the 1950s (2000:92; cf. Fiskesjö 2006), encouraging their ethnic dress but also intervening more directly than before to orchestrate both its production and use (cf. Mueggler 2002) while simultaneously discouraging variety and local values among the Han Chinese whose unity and conformity was fostered in the same process.<sup>2</sup>

The absence of writing systems among these textile-artists (of course, with the important exceptions of the eminently literate Tai and the Yi, with their fascinating writing system) is lamented by several writers as a lack. As a substitute and remedy they point to the encoded textiles: the “other writing of people without a written language” (p. 43) in Deng Qiyao’s essay in the volume. Deng shows that many informants from previously non-literate peoples themselves have taken up the language of text and written history to annotate their own clothing patterns for outsiders, but in my view this shows their contemporary engagement with the powerful literate genres in the dominant Chinese culture (which themselves exist alongside nonlinguistic genres) in negotiating a space for themselves in their current situation. It has been suggested that in the past, some of these people actually abstained intentionally from writing (Scott 2009); in any case it seems that instead of extending the model of texts to include the art of these peoples, we should be asking new questions about how the current transcultural negotiations of the privileges associated with writing unfolds in relation to the value regimes that such societies built up previously. The detailed accounts and discussions in the rich essays in this volume on Miao and other traditions of clothing and adornment (including the stunning Miao silversmith arts) provide fascinating starting points for such research projects.

The catalog is expertly and lavishly produced (I could find only one typo, “Lv Xing” for Lü Xing [pp. 45, 426]). It includes a bibliography (pp. 422-429), an excellent selection from the large literature on textiles among minority peoples in the region, which is useful even if it does not include reference to the wider discussions of the social life of clothing (cf. Weiner and Schneider 1989) or to the large literature on nearby Southeast Asian textiles that connects directly with it. In addition to the items mentioned, those interested in textiles of southwestern China can also refer to catalogs such as the one edited by Masako Tanabe and Hiromi Sone (2004) and one on indigo dyeing published by the Taiwan National Museum of Prehistory (2006).

## **Notes**

1. This work includes a foreword by Tom Klobe and contributions by Angela Sheng, Deng Qiyao, Xi Keding, Li Qianbin, Zhang Xiao, Stevan Harrell, Kate Lingley, and Huang Ying Feng.
2. On the making of modern Han wardrobes see Finnane 2007; on regional and national Han clothing see Carrico, in press.

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