



Through Woven Heritage The Textiles of Thailand

An Exhibition of
Cultural Fascination
and Beauty

THROUGH
WOVEN HERITAGE
THE TEXTILES
OF THAILAND

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AN EXHIBITION OF
CULTURAL FASCINATION
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THE SIAM SOCIETY UNDER ROYAL PATRONAGE
IN CONJUNCTION WITH
CASA ASIA
PRESENTS

THROUGH
WOVEN HERITAGE
THE TEXTILES
OF THAILAND

AN EXHIBITION OF
CULTURAL FASCINATION
AND BEAUTY

October - December 2009

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ISBN 978-974-235-098-7

Color Separation
Kanoksilp Thailand Co.,Ltd.

Printed in Thailand by
Eastern Printing Plc.

Cover: *Sin teen chok Khu Bua* (page 49)
(from the collection of Thanong Kuptasthien & Jakrapong Wanchana)

PREFACE

The Siam Society under Royal Patronage in conjunction with the CASA Asia in Barcelona under the direction of Mr. Jezúis Sanz is organising an exhibition of unique textiles from Thailand as part of the Thailand cultural event from October through December 2009. The purpose of the textile exhibition is to promote cultural understanding and appreciation of the artistic heritage between the people of Thailand and Spain who have a long history of close cultural relations.

The book "Through Woven Heritage: The Textiles of Thailand" is an attempt to summarise general knowledge on textile use and production in traditional cultures through various regions of the kingdom since ancient times. The intention of the book is to provide a profile of Thai textile art and assist a better understanding of the Thai people, along with the wish to preserve the gracious weaving heritage of Southeast Asia. The content provides historical background based on archaeological finds in the country and various materials and technical know-how employed in creating textile crafts. Each geographical region of Thailand and its ethnic composition nurture characteristic features of weaving in picturesque northern, northeastern, central and peninsular southern regions. Diffusion with the neighboring cultures of Burma, Laos, Cambodia, and Malaysia also enrich the textile traditions of the Thais. The textile culture includes the past practice of importing specific fabrics designed for aristocratic functions, court wear, and royal ceremonies from China and India.

To complement the exhibition highlights, details of each piece of textile on display will be provided, with vivid photography and concise descriptions. Owners and the history of their collections will also be introduced and honoured as further encouragement in the field of cultural preservation aiming at a higher level of global understanding.

A note of appreciation toward those responsible for making this cultural project and the exhibition in Barcelona possible must also be made. These are the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Thailand, the Tourism Authority of Thailand, H.E. Mr. Juan Manuel López Nadal, H.E. Mr. Ignacio Sagaz Temprano, Professor Vithi Phanichphant - lecturer for the exhibition and author of the catalogue, Mr. Sakchai Guy - photographer and designer for the catalogue and last but not least, the collectors who have loaned their wonderful textile pieces to make this exhibition a truly memorable event.

Athuek Asvanund
President

THE SIAM SOCIETY UNDER ROYAL PATRONAGE



HRH PRINCESS
BEJARATANA RAJASUDA
SIRISOPHABANNAVADI

COLLECTOR

was born on 24 November 1925, the only daughter of
HM King Vajiravudh (Rama VI), first patron of the Siam
Society under Royal Patronage.

Her special interests have been in connection to the welfare
of the general public and in the fields of public health as well
as to the welfare of soldiers and police on duty in the border
provinces of Thailand.

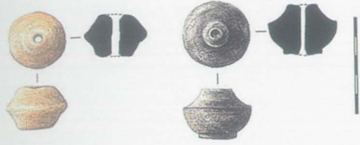
COMMITTEE
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Drawings of spindles (from *Ban Wang Hai : Excavations of Iron-age Cemetery in Northern Thailand* by Silkworm Books, 2003)



Traces of fabric on bronze bracelet from 3,000 year-old burial site in Ban Chiang, Udonthani province (from *Traditional Isan Textiles* by Fine Arts Department of Thailand)



Ethnic Karen girl weaving with backstrap loom, Mae Chaem, Chiang Mai province. (VP)

THE CULTURE of WEAVING

Out of the basic need for survival and existence, clothing and protective coverings of the man's body were invented since the dawn of humanity. Man learned to manipulate natural plants and animal fibres into woven cloths and textiles heralding the beginnings of civilization and technological development. Archeological finds in several locations in Thailand indicate the progress of early weaving cultures in the region. In the northwest province of Mae Hongson, there are traces of cord marks and textile imprints on pottery shards at cave burial sites, dating back 7,000-8,000 years during Thailand's prehistory. No cloth can last that long in natural conditions, but clay tools such as spindle whorls for making strings of fibre, or clay printing rolls of similar age remain at many burial places found in the Ban Chiang archeological site in the northeastern part of Thailand. Traces of textile attached to metal bracelets of the deceased during the Bronze Age are of great importance attesting to the early use of fabrics in Southeast Asia.

Around two thousand years ago, before the arrival of the Tai-Lao ethnic group in mainland Southeast Asia, the area was mostly populated by early Austro-Asiatic people who still can be found up to the present day, namely the Lawa, the Kha, and the Malays. Their techniques of weaving cotton textiles by

backstrap loom continue in many hill villages, indicating the ancestral linkage to the more sophisticated weaving of the later Tai-Lao speaking population. The primitive backstrap looms produce narrow bands of fabric which are sewn together forming a larger and wider cloth for wearing and draping. Narrow width weaving when sewn together produces fabrics of striped designs which subsequently influence the pattern of clothing designs, and garment cuts, characteristic of all Southeast Asia costumes and clothing.

The most popular materials for fabric in the region have been cotton and silk fibres, and occasionally wool and hemp are included. Natural white and brown cotton are native throughout Southeast Asia, producing strong fluffy fibres, though not as long as the Egyptian variety. Sericulture is supposed to have come from China due to the close proximity of the area to the Middle Kingdom. However the original cocoons used here are different from those raised in China. Wool and hemp have different texture and feel to the woven cotton and silk, especially in the hot and humid tropical weather, therefore, except in certain cool high mountainous areas, their usage is limited to packaging, making of bags or decorative trimmings.

opposite

Cotton weaving in traditional village in Thailand. (JW)

THE CULTURE of WEAVING

Cotton is a perishable plant cultivated by man since early human civilisation along with grains and vegetables. A single bush can produce cotton flowers which mature into a hundred or more fluffy cotton balls if favorable conditions prevail. The fibrous cotton balls are plugged, collected and further sun dried before any processing. In Thailand, usually the cotton fibre is separated from the seed by a simple wooden squeezer called *mai heed fai*, then fluffed up more by bow-string beating in a huge basket. The loose cotton fibre is made into pen-shaped rolls before being spun into tight long threads by hand spindle whorls or more developed wooden spinning wheels. Cotton threads are neatly arranged and wound into bundles ready for colour dyeing before setting up on wooden looms in preparation for weaving. Cotton threads come in various thicknesses: loosely woven thin threads produce a fine veil effect, whereas thick threads tightly woven, create stiff and knobby textiles, all have different functions and purposes. Cotton textiles are popular throughout the world for clothing: they are cool to wear, do not irritate the skin, soak up perspiration easily, and can be maintained by simple washing. The most important asset of cotton is that every household or village can simply grow and produce cotton yarn, even though the fibre may not last as long as animal fibres, cotton is definitely more practical and more widely used by most societies.

Silk is an insect-derived fibre from the larvae of moths or butterfly-like insects. Moth eggs hatch into hungry worms feeding on green leaves, namely from the mulberry and related plants. Once matured, the silkworm stops eating and turns to salivating which creates a fibrous cocoon around its body in which it hibernates. In the natural process after the insect ends its hibernation, it transforms itself into a moth or butterfly and breaks way from its cocoon to mate and procreate its species. Man stops the process by killing the insect during its hibernation and collects the cocoon protein fibres, spinning them into fine silk yarn, ready to be dyed and woven, creating wondrous shiny silken fabric of great beauty.

It has been known that sericulture started in China long ago, confirmed by scholastic evidences that silk yarns were produced and used at least over the past 7,000 years. The Qin and Han dynasty courts enjoyed the luxurious use of silk and gained immense wealth from silk exportation. The knowledge of silk fabric production eventually spread to other Asian lands, and to the rest of the world, including territories that were to become Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, and Myanmar. Each area has followed the basic silk making processes of the Chinese, but has modified the dyeing and weaving techniques to their own tastes and limitations.



Cotton with natural dye from Ban Rai Pai Ngarn, Chom Thong district, Chiang Mai province. (VP)



Silk cocoons in a silk farm in Chaiyaphum province. (Sompong Pengchan)



Chinese / Thai silk *chong kaben* for men, Fakta district, Uttaradit province. (VP)

THE CULTURE of WEAVING



Cotton during indigo dyeing process. (VP)



Ethnic Tai Lue woman weaving indigo dyed cotton tube skirt with back-strap loom. (VP)

Both cotton and silk require dyes to create colours and excitement in textile making. Natural cotton only comes in soft white and tan whereas pure white fibre requires bleaching. Similarly, natural silk appears as soft yellow in Southeast Asia, so weavers will have to learn to manipulate the techniques with bleaching and dyeing to achieve the colours of the yarns they prefer. Locally available mineral ores and the tropical vegetations of the land provide a wide range of colour choices for the dyeing process. Natural dyes tend to have mute and subtle shades of colour with cotton fibres, but turn brighter and more vibrant in silk threads. Leaves, branches, barks, seeds, pods, roots, insect excreta, mineral ores and even mud are sometimes sources for dye colour. Southeast Asia has been known as the major source of natural colour dyes supplying China, Japan, India, and the western world for many centuries, only to be replaced by industrial chemicals for reasons of convenience and lower cost.

Simple textile producing tools such as backstrap body tension looms probably served the early weaving culture. Bronze drum sculptures showing groups of people spinning and weaving with backstrap looms as a symbol of prosperity belong to the Dian culture of southwest China during the 1st – 3rd century BC. This simple way of weaving still persists in villages of the ethnic Lua and Karen tribes in present day northern Thailand. A woman weaver sits on the floor, stretching both legs forward towards

a house post, using a wooden support to keep her balance. Warp yarn is wound firmly to the house post or beam at the foot end and the other end of the yarn is attached to the waist back-strap creating tension for the warp when both legs are stretched out. Narrow width heddle controls warp yarn in front of the weaver and weft yarn is shuttled back and forth during weaving. Development of more sophisticated wooden looms occurred in the past two thousand years, namely the bench seating peddle frame loom, equipped with a wider heddle in frame which became the typical ethnic Tai-Lao tools of the weaver.

Weaving is a process by which warp and weft yarns of any materials are brought together systematically, intertwined, and locked creating sheets of fabric which can be cut, sewn, and manipulated into clothing and other uses. Fabric can be dyed to different colours either before or after weaving. Dyeing can be of plain colours or of designed patterns using natural materials at the beginning and later more convenient synthetic chemicals. Printing motifs on plain textiles also have developed since early times as simple decorations, along with embroidering and sewing other materials onto the fabric. Fancy techniques in weaving can also produce endless patterns and brocade effects decorating textiles. In Thailand many techniques in weaving are found, the basics of which are as followed:

THE CULTURE of WEAVING

PLAIN WEAVE

Sheet fabric is created by simple crisscrossing of warp and weft yarn similar to basket weaving. With the help of the heddle in hand looms, tight or loose weaves can be created. Both warp and weft yarns can be of the same or different colours to create stripes, chequered board, and endless visual patterns. Plain weave cotton fabrics, coarse or fine, are popular with lay-people, whether for clothing, bedding, wrapping, or even ceremonial use. Fine thin cotton is often used as lining for expensive and elaborate brocade textiles for ceremonial purposes. At the same time, lustrous plain weave silks are of formal appearance and have found their way into contemporary fashion.



Plain weave cotton *pha khao ma*.
(JW)

MAT MI IKAT

Ikat is a process of ‘wrapping to create pattern’ on the yarns before dyeing and weaving. The strings used for wrapping the yarns have to resist the dye and thus a pattern is placed in the yarns. For multi-colours, a process of over-dyeing is done until the yarns are ready for weaving. In warp ikat, the warp yarns are on a warp stretcher to the exact length of one warp. In weft ikat, the weft yarns are measured on a weft stretcher, but more than one piece of textile can be woven on the warp prepared for the weft ikat. Thus longer lengths of the same design can be woven in repeated patterns.

It is likely that warp ikat, is older than weft ikat, but the history is far from conclusive. In peninsular and island Southeast Asia, the change to weft ikat seems to coincide with the introduction of the silk trade from China and India into the region by the 6th century A.D. The weaving of silk in weft ikat was easier than in warp ikat and the demand for this luxury item brought about a change in techniques, including the introduction of the frame loom. In mainland Southeast Asia, the origins of silk are more likely to be indigenous but somehow the beginnings of weft ikat are not clear. Here frame looms have been in existence for a long time, together with the weaving combs and weft ikat equipment. Warp ikat is only found in very simple designs among some of the Tai group of Laos and Thailand while hilltribe groups still practise the technique using backstrap looms. Compound ikat, of which the technique of combining warp and weft ikat on the



Tying the silk yarn prior to dyeing
in weft *ikat* process. (JW)

THE CULTURE of WEAVING

same piece, is found in simplistic forms among the Khmer Sung of northeast Thailand, the Red Tai of northeast Laos, the Minangkabau of west Sumatra, Indonesia; but the best known areas for compound ikat of excellent quality are Gujarat, India and Tenganan in Bali.

Warp ikat is best suited to the use of cotton or other plant fibres, therefore the colours used in these textiles revolve around those suitable for natural dyes on cotton. The most popular colours are indigo and mengkudu red (*morinda cirtifolia*) which are used on white or natural cotton yarn, tied to resist the dye in the ikat technique. Popular dyes for silk weft ikats are yellow (turmeric), a dilute form of indigo to make green, and a deep crimson red made from the lac insect secretion. Orange, green and purple are created by the over-dye process. Cotton made in weft ikat are mainly indigo and white.

KHIT CONTINUOUS SUPPLEMENTARY WEFT

Continuous supplementary weft is the process of placing a supplementary yarn into the web of plain weaving in order to create a pattern that floats on the surface of the weave. When the supplementary yarn threads are metallic, such as gold or silver, the term 'brocade' is used. The supplementary yarns are placed into the weaving by the assistance of special heddles that raise the warp to a certain pattern allowing the supplementary yarns to be placed alternately to the plain weave yarns. Prior to the invention of these special heddles, shed sticks were placed in the warp to indicate the pattern for the supplementary yarns, thus restricting the repeat of the pattern to only one time. The use of heddles allowed for endless reproduction of a design.

Supplementary warp was the predominant decorative form in most areas prior to the period of Indian influence, but there is sufficient evidence to suggest that supplementary weft existed as an indigenous technique long before. However, the widespread shift from warp to weft decoration occurred in the early part of the first millennium A.D. and coincided with the Indian influence in Southeast Asia. The later introduction of silver and gold yarn brought about a significant change in textiles woven for aristocracy. In rural areas silk was placed in cotton fabrics as a luxury supplementary weft decoration, bringing with it the palette of brighter colours that are associated with silk.



Ethnic Tai Lua woman weaving wrap ikat. (VP)



THE CULTURE of WEAVING



Teen Chok weaving in Haad Siew Village, Sukhothai province. (VP)

CHOK DISCONTINUOUS SUPPLEMENTARY WEFT

The process of the discontinuous supplementary weft is one whereby the supplementary yarns are placed in the web of the plain weave by means of picking out each warp yarn by hand, and passing the supplementary weft yarn through them in small or specific areas only. Many colours can be placed into the design across the width of the fabric in this method, which is sometimes called “embroidery on the loom”. In some areas it is done with the back of the fabric facing upwards which allows for very neat finishing, while in other areas the fabric is woven with the right face up. Usually silk is used as the supplementary yarn on either a cotton or silk base.

Placing a gold or silver yarn into the weave in a discontinuous weft pattern was first introduced with Persian and Indian fabrics that were traded to the courts of Southeast Asia. Popular designs include medallions or stripes of gold or silver on luxurious silk fabrics. In provincial areas, yellow silk was often used to simulate gold colour.

The process of discontinuous supplementary weft is a slow and difficult one, the weaving of intricate designs once considered an important skill for Asian woman. Of all the techniques, this is one that is fast disappearing. The process can be speeded up with the help of heddles, but the final placing of the yarns still needs to be done by hand. Areas of Laos and Thailand still have weavers skilled in this technique. Needlework embroidery is often found to have replaced the woven technique, as the process does not require a loom and is more convenient. The Red Tai and Tai Lue groups in Laos still weave many ancient patterns in this *chok* technique. It is also found in the Tai Yuan and Phuan weaving in Thailand.

opposite
Sin Teen Chok
Lady's tube skirt for formal
function, ethnic Tai Yuan, Khu Bua
district, Ratchaburi province. (SG)
(from the collection of
Thanong Kuptasthien
& Jakrapong Wanchana)

THE CULTURE of WEAVING

LUANG OR KOH TAPESTRY WEAVE

In the tapestry weave textile weft yarns are not woven all the way across the width of the fabric, instead, they are placed in the warp by hand in specific areas of colour to create a pattern. The decorative colour patterns appear similar to those of the discontinuous supplementary weaving but structurally are quite different. The weft threads are not taken from selvage to selvage, but isolated as colour patches of the pattern design. Each colour yarn behaves like ordinary weft thread in plain weave, but hooked and dovetailed with the next colour yarn around the warp threads to ensure a strong bond in the fabric. The technique creates diagonal lines to the warp yarns making wave-like designs bringing about the name in the Thai language *lai nam lye* or 'water flow ripple'.

This tapestry weave is found popular among Tai Lue ethnic textiles especially in the main body of their *pha sin*. Standard warp threads are of black colour and the interlocking weft yarns are of bright colour. Usually each colourful weft yarn is placed on an individual spindle to avoid confusion with the colour threads. The weaver must pay more attention and be patient with this time consuming process to achieve beautiful works of textile art. Very elaborate tapestry weaves similar to this manner are also found popular in the court textiles of Burma since ancient times, known as *luntaya acheik*, or 'silk of a hundred spindles'.



Ethnic Tai Lue woman threading cotton at tapestry weave. (VP)

opposite

Pha sin with pattern of *Luang or Koh* tapestry weaves, Lady's tube skirt for formal function, ethnic Tai Lao, Nampad Fakta district, Uttaradit province. (SG) (from the collection of Thanong Kuptasthien & Jakrapong Wanchana)



DEFINITION of TAI, SIAM and THAI

Mainland Southeast Asia has such a kaleidoscopic ethnic mix of various groups of linguistic backgrounds that can be roughly divided, for easy understanding, into four main ones which are the Austro-Asiatic and Malay, the Tibeto-Burman, the Sino-Tai Lao, and Dai-Viet. The Austro-Asiatic linguistic group has been here many thousands of years, long before the arrival of the others, mixing and forming the ancestry of the Southeast Asian population, often referred to as the Mon-Khmer speaking group. Their Indianised civilisation peaked during the 9th-10th centuries when Angkor and Pagan became the foundations for later kingdoms and states up to the present day.

The Sino-Tai Lao speaking groups (sometimes referred to as Tai-Kadai) migrated into the area from southwest China during the 10th-13th centuries, adopted and modified the former culture and systems to suit their own style with varying degrees of intensity and gradation. The closer to the sea, the more Indianised and globalised they became. The Tais and the Laos inhabiting the hinterland have managed to retain their traditional culture much more, especially in the field of textile art. These original people are referred to as 'Tai' with suffixes dictated by their costumes or the regions of their homeland such as Tai Lue in southwest China, Tai Dam, Tai Daeng in north Vietnam, Tai Phuan in Laos, Tai Yuan in northern Thailand, Shan Tai in Myanmar and eastern India.

The Tais, of the enormous rice growing lowland in the Chao Praya river basin, formed and developed an important state in the 13th century known as 'Siam' with Sukhothai and Ayuthaya as successive centres, dominating the area which is approximately the equivalent of present day central Thailand. Located strategically on old global trade routes, the courts of Ayuthaya and Bangkok enjoyed the sophisticated textiles designed and produced in India and China known as 'Siamese Court Textiles'. At the same time traditional Tai and Lao weaving continued for local consumption in the provinces.

In the 1930s the country of Siam, then including the original Lanna kingdom in the north, Lao state of Isan, and Patthani state in the south embraced many different ethnic groups within its realm, changed the name to 'Thailand'. Hence everyone living or born inside its borders became 'Thai' or citizens of Thailand.

Therefore, the word 'Tai' refers to any person of the Tai-Lao speaking group in Southeast Asia, whether in China, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Myanmar, or even in peninsular Malaysia. 'Siam' was a former Tai state dominating a large area consisting of ethnic Tai-Lao speaking, which later became Thailand. 'Thai' is a contemporary term for the modern multi-ethnic kingdom of Thailand, or of a citizen of Thailand.



Ethnic Tai Lue woman in traditional daily costume, Baan Tha Fah Nuea, Chiang Muan district, Phayao province. (VP)

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ISBN 974235098-1



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