

# Textiles Asia

---

JOURNAL



---

January 2011, Volume 2, Issue 3

# Indigo Shamanic Textiles of Northern Laos and Vietnam: Some Examples from the Tilleke & Gibbins Textile Collection

Dr. Linda McIntosh

The intricately patterned textiles originating from northeast Laos and northwest Vietnam initially attracted interest from the international textile world in the late 1980s – early 1990s. Prior to this period, for several reasons, few people had the opportunity to view these woven masterpieces. First, their provenance, or the origin of production of the indigo-based weavings, was centered in the battle zone of the Second Indochina War, such as the area around the communist Pathet Lao headquarters of Vieng Xai in Hua Phan Province, Laos. After the communist takeovers in the 1970s, Vietnam and Laos

were shut off to the rest of the world due to embargoes and government policies. However, in the 1980s government policies relaxed and embargoes lifted. For example, in the late 1980s Laos opened its borders for trade. Many people belonging to various Tai ethnicities originally residing in northeast Laos migrated to Laos's capital of Vientiane bringing their textile heirlooms along with them. The textiles began to appear on the market. Many reasons compelled the families to sell their possessions, including the need for cash and the decline of the rituals involving the textiles.



NE Laos. Length 78 x Width 44 cm (fragment). A wide range of colored supplementary threads accentuate small details of diverse motifs. Stars, seeds, flowers, and other vegetation compose the bodies of various winged and clawed creatures. Spirit motifs intermingle with the protective elements. Serpent deities are in the form of undulating lines, forming the perimeters of lanterns and grave house gables.





NW Vietnam. 1890-1920.

Length 239 x Width 55 cm.

The iconography of this weaving emphasizes the *sang hong* imaginary creature, *hong* bird, spirit figures, and vegetation. Other animals join the menagerie, and the *ngeuak* serpent deity is in the form of a boat or floating vessel. The choice of colors for the supplementary patterning suggests a provenance of NW Vietnam.

One type of textile that became available during this period is an indigo-based cloth covered with supplementary weft patterning. Weavers apply both continuous and discontinuous supplementary weft techniques, but discontinuous supplementary weft is favored to form elaborate and complex patterns. The motifs symbolize real and mythical animals, vegetation and flora, objects found in the man-made environment, stars and other illuminating objects, and human figures that symbolize various spirits. The textiles are accessories used by traditional healing specialists or shamans and are called *Phaa Phii Mon* or *Phaa Mau Phii*. A shaman or *mau* is asked to perform a ritual to improve a sick person's condition when other methods fail. Even today many households continue to rely on traditional or herbal medicine to heal illnesses since modern medicine is not readily available to those living in remote areas and those without the funds to pay for such care. Sometimes the sick person who has been treated with modern medicine but remains ill then asks a shaman for aid.

The imagery on the textiles assists the shaman by allowing his or her spirit to travel to the supernatural realm to communicate with various spirits that are causing the illness or have the power to defeat the malicious spirits causing the poor condition. The Tai supernatural world consists of different levels including the ancestor world and heaven where the gods reside. For example, one type of spirit, *mon*,





NE Laos and NW Vietnam. 1890-1920.  
Length 194 x Width 43 cm (Detail).  
The supplementary patterning almost completely covers this shamanic textile. Multi-colored lanterns dominate the decoration at both ends. The imaginary beasts adorning similar textiles also appear on this example. Mating *ngeuak*, pregnant *sang hong*, juvenile *sang hong*, *hong*, and other creatures flank the lanterns in order to lead the way to heaven or the ancestor world.

lives in a specific realm. The real and imaginary creatures provide protection for the spirits as they travel between the natural and supernatural realms; luminary sources light the pathway, and vegetation provides sustenance. The motifs of flowers, leaves, and seeds also represent a fertile land. Agrarian life is strenuous, and households often do not have an adequate supply of food. Droughts and floods also wreak havoc on the annual rice yield, decreasing the food supply. Thus it is not surprising to think of heaven or the ancestor world as free of hunger and famine. The Tai believe that the heavenly realms are abundant with food without the threat of natural disasters.

During a ceremony, a shaman decides how the

woven accessories will be used. The shaman may wear them as sashes, shawls, and head cloths. Weavings are displayed on and around the spirits' altar, and weavings are often part of the offerings to the spirits. Shamans also receive textiles as symbols of gratitude from the healed and their family members. If the shaman is female, she may weave these types of textiles too. If the shaman is male, his wife may produce them. *Phaa Mau Phii* often become soiled or damaged in the rituals from spilt food, alcohol, candle wax, etc. Thus, they often are replaced with new ones, or the damaged sections are removed and the remnants continue to serve a function in future ceremonies.

These textiles also play a role in annual spirit appeasement ceremonies. The shaman performs a ceremony to pay respect to the spirit he or she calls up in the ceremony. The people that the shaman has healed must attend or at least make an offering to the spirits. Participants are expected to wear intricately woven textiles during the rituals.

All of the ceremonies require the sacrifice of animals to offer to the spirits. Different types of rituals require different types of animals to be sacrificed. These include chickens, ducks, pigs, cows and buffalo. On rare occasions, a goat is slaughtered. Copious amounts of alcohol also play a part in the activities. Afterwards, the participants and other members of the community can enjoy a feast. One has to remember that food, especially meat, is not always abundant in agrarian societies. Without ac-



NE Laos. 1890-1920.  
Length 225 x Width 50 cm (Detail).  
Trees of life are depicted in the top half of this shamanic textile. In this detail from the lower section of the weaving they come in the form of fan-like, leafy offerings carried on the backs of mating beasts.



cess to electricity and the convenience of refrigeration, households are reluctant to slaughter their livestock, small or large. (In recent years while conducting fieldwork, I have observed a family of five sharing one chicken leg for a meal. Frugal consumption of meat continues today.) The ceremonies justify the slaughter of numerous livestock that will feed the whole village. An ill person may also need the nourishment of a large meal and feeding the spirits is a valid “excuse” to slaughter precious livestock. The annual ceremony could be considered a localized Thanksgiving, where members of the community gather at a feast.

*Mon* shamans utilize special textiles to contact *mon* spirits, or *phii mon*. In general, these textiles may be called *Phaa Mau Phii*, or shaman’s cloths. The weaving are generally over two meters in length, often 3-4 meters, and 48 cm wide. A weaver applies



NE Laos. 1890-1920.  
Length 221 x Width 50 cm.

The *ngeuak* serpent deities appear on this shamanic accessory as the trunks of the mythical *hong* bird and elephant-like creatures called *sang hong*, a hybrid of an elephant and *hong*. Multi-colored torsos symbolize pregnancy. Fertility is vital in an agrarian society where its members long for a life without worries of hunger or famine.

discontinuous supplementary weft technique to create the complex designs. Occasionally she uses continuous supplementary weft technique. The patterning may completely cover the fabric's surface (leaving only small bands of ground cloth visible near the ends), or the opposing ends are decorated leaving the center free of designs, or only one end is adorned with motifs.

The design composition may also be arranged in either vertical or horizontal reflection (mirror images). On rare occasions both types of reflection are present. The weaver creates the majority of the designs in white silk, allowing other colors to accentuate features. An animal's eyes are often rendered in different colors. The secondary colors also assist the viewer to visualize the motifs, which are generally woven closely together barely allowing the indigo blue background to be seen. The weaver's creativity and abilities are reflected in her success in combining colors and patterns.



Sam Neua District, Hua Phan Province, Laos.  
1890-1920. Length 208 x Width 46 cm.

The weaver applies fine silk yarns to create supplementary patterning of lanterns, real and mythical creatures and flora. This detail of a large diamond composed of various small designs symbolizes a lantern. Lanterns illuminate the routes in between realms. Mating animals, as well as the abundance of seeds, flowers, and other types of vegetation, signify fecundity.



NE Laos. 1890-1920.

Length 251 cm x Width 47 cm.

Horizontal reflection or mirror imaging appears with each row of patterning. The weaver has changed the colors of the details within the reflections to enliven the arrangement.

In shamanic textiles, some of the real creatures symbolized by the motifs include elephants and various birds but mythical animals seem to dominate the imagery. The *hong* is a majestic bird that can travel between the natural and supernatural realms. *Hong* is sometimes translated as swan or goose, but I prefer to use the indigenous name since the *hong* has supernatural abilities. Serpent deities are depicted in numerous forms. There are several types of snake-like supernatural creatures: *ngeuak*, *naak*, and *long*. Other imaginary creatures are hybrids of real ones, such as *sang hong* or the elephant/*hong* mix. The *maum* is part horse and part deer.

As stated earlier, various designs symbolize different types of flowers and vegetation. A man-made tree is often rendered in the composition. This ar-

CONTINUED ON PAGE 13

clothing. Soon researching, collecting and writing became a full time occupation, and several more books followed. Since the early 1980s, as China opened up to the outside world, I traveled often to Shanghai, Beijing, and other major centers to visit antique shops, markets and museums. I collected anything and everything a Chinese person would wear from the Qing dynasty to the mid twentieth century, from the top of their head down to their feet. My ever expanding collection even meant we had to move house.

Then, after *Chinese Clothing, an Illustrated Guide* appeared in 1994, I decided it was no longer right to just keep my collection in storage, I wanted to make it available to a wider audience, so I offered part of it to the Victoria & Albert Museum in London where it was quickly accepted. A Gala evening was held in the presence of Princess Alexandra when my unique collection of 250 pieces of rural clothing from a part of Hong Kong now urbanized and changed forever was displayed in the Dress Court at the Museum in the spring of 1996. Since then *The Valery Garrett Study Collection* became available in the museum's study rooms to all those interested in Chinese rural costume for generations to come. Most of the rest of my collection has now been acquired by other museums, including the Powerhouse in Sydney, Hong Kong Museum of Art, Hong Kong Museum of History, and the Hong Kong Heritage Museum, as well as several private collectors.

Ms. Garrett has written eleven non-fiction books and had over a hundred articles published in Hong Kong and overseas. She is a reviewer for the Asian Review of Books. Ms. Garrett lectures frequently at home and overseas. She is a Council Member of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch, and an Honorary Research Fellow at the Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong. Ms. Garrett very graciously served as *Textiles Asia's* first Contributing Editor for Chinese textiles. For more information: [www.valerygarrett.com](http://www.valerygarrett.com)

#### CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10

rangement of bamboo and/or tree branches plays a part in the ceremonies and is considered a tree of life connecting the different realms together. Trays and other offerings are also depicted. Most importantly, human figures are found atop the various animals and on vessels in the form of serpent deities. The figures represent the shaman's spirit, the ill person's spirit, ancestor spirits, and other types of spirits including *mot* and *mon*.

The decline of the occurrence of shamanic healing rituals has led to less production of *Phaa Mau Phii*. But weaving of these types of textiles continues since there is a demand by others who appreciate the beauty of the textiles and the mastery of their production. Changes in the design composition are noticeable, such as a repetition of patterning at both ends, and the designs are larger.

The Tilleke & Gibbins Textile Collection in Bangkok, Thailand, houses excellent examples of *Phaa Mau Phii* of various ages and compositions. The ones illustrating this article are some masterpieces dating from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Antiques are highly collectible and scarce, but contemporary versions are available in the market. It is important to support the production of weavers today in order for the tradition to continue in the future.

Photos by Pattana Decha

© Tilleke & Gibbins Textile Collection

Dr. Linda McIntosh specializes in mainland Southeast Asian textiles, particularly examples produced by the Tai ethnic groups. She is an advisor to the Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre in Luang Prabang, and serves as a consultant on development projects in Laos. She has curated exhibitions at the Jim Thompson Art Center and the National Museum of Laos in Luang Phabang. Linda currently acts as a consulting curator for The James HW Thompson Foundation and the Tilleke & Gibbins Textile Collection in Bangkok. Her book on the Tilleke & Gibbins Textile Collection is scheduled to be published in 2011.



USA \$12  
Hong Kong \$100  
Japan ¥1300

# Textiles Asia

---

P.O. Box 423, General Post Office, Hong Kong