

Tai Yuan Textiles of Thailand

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This is an introduction to textiles produced by the Tai Yuan ethnic group of Thailand. This group is the most populous one inhabiting northern Thailand and composes a minority in the central provinces of Nakhon Ratchasima, Saraburi and Ratchaburi. In northern Thailand, members of the Tai Yuan group primarily reside in Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Nan, Phrae, Phayao, Lamphun, Lampang, Uttaradit, and Sukhothai. Tai Yuan weavers living in the various areas have developed distinctive weavings, serving as identity markers. They use different characteristics of the textiles to distinguish themselves from others, including Tai Yuan from other regions. The subject of Tai Yuan textiles is complex, and a talk could be devoted to Tai Yuan textiles from one area, for example. Before discussing textile types, a brief background of the Tai Yuan group is required.

Background

Before the 13th century ancestors of the Tai Yuan established traditional polities, *muang*, in the area of what is now northern Thailand. Mengrai founded Ngoen Yang, or present-day Chiang Saen, and Chiang Rai before consolidating his power and making Chiang Mai the center of the Lanna kingdom in 1296. (Other rulers founded Phrae and Phayao prior to Chiang Mai.) Lanna

was contemporaneous with the kingdom of Sukhothai (founded 1238). Many of the smaller *muang* in this region were under the suzerainty of the Chiang Mai court, but there were exceptions. The first rulers of Nan were related to the leaders of present-day Luang Prabang but later came under the influence of Sukhothai along with Phrae.

Lanna grew in power during the 15th century, becoming a rival of Ayutthaya, and these two Tai polities were often at war. Sukhothai and Uttaradit were the northern outposts of Ayutthaya, and its settlements were often subjected to warfare between the competing polities. When the Pegu of present-day Burma invaded Lanna in the 16th century, Lanna became a tributary state of Pegu and later Ava. Its various *muang* ruled autonomously but had to provide corvee labor and pay taxes to the Burmese rulers as well as aiding the Burmese in its military campaigns against Ayutthaya. The various *muang* of Lanna were under the suzerainty of Burma for 200 years until 1774 when the armies of Taksin joined forces with Lampang to remove Ava's control over Lanna. Lanna then became a vassal of Thonburi/Bangkok, and it was broken in various *muang*, which were all incorporated into the kingdom of Siam by the early 20th century.



Sanpathong-style skirt border, tiin chok. The black background is visible. (Sanpathong is a district in Chiang Mai Province.)



Chiang Saen-style skirt from Ratchaburi Province. 1860-1890. The oldest style of Tai Yuan skirts is appropriately named after this group's first major polity in Northern Thailand, located in present-day Chiang Rai Province.



Daun Rae-style skirt, sin tiin chok. 1920-1950. Dun Rae weavers favor densely woven red borders.



Daun Rae-style skirt, sin taa muu. 1920-1950. A variation in the ceremonial skirt. Discontinuous supplementary weft technique is applied to the midsection and not the border in this type of skirt.

In the first decade of the 19th century, during the reign of Rama 1, it was feared that the Burmese may return to take control of Lanna. Since Chiang Saen had functioned as the center of Burmese power in the region, this polity was abandoned, forcing its citizens to move to different areas, including Lamphun, Lampang, Uttaradit, and Sukhothai. Some groups were resettled in central Thailand, primarily Nakhon Ratchasima, Saraburi and Ratchaburi provinces.

Prior to the establishments of the various polities in northern Thailand, the population has been ethnically diverse. Tai and non-Tai groups have coexisted in the region, and the continuous movement of people over centuries has always brought changes to the ethnic composition in various areas. Other Tai groups that presently are found in northern Thailand include the Tai Lue, Tai Khoen, Tai Yai, Tai Mao, Tai Phuan, and Lao. Non-Tai groups include the Karen subgroups, Kachin subgroups, Burmese, Lawa, Hmong, Mien, and Lahu, for example. There are numerous other groups, and Chiang Rai apparently has over thirty in its own borders. Inter-marriage occurred between the groups, and other types of contact allowed for the exchange of cultural traits, including in textiles and their production. The interaction of members of various ethnic groups, especially among the Tai, is demonstrated in the marriages between the ruling families of the various polities located not only in present-day Thailand but in neighboring countries of



Khu Bua-style skirt, sin tiin chok. 1920-1950. A very unusual skirt type that is made in this central province.

Burma, Laos, and SW China (Yunnan). One well-known example of a marital alliance between the courts of Chiang Mai and Bangkok is the case of Dara Rasami, who became Princess Consort of Rama V.

Textiles and Clothing

Generally, daily attire of both Tai Yuan men and women is not very elaborate or decorated with complex patterning. Tai Yuan men's traditional dress is similar to the traditional clothing of other Tai males. In the past it consisted of a narrow loincloth with no upper garment. Over time, men adopted attire of a collarless, long-sleeved shirt and baggy, low-gusseted trousers composed of indigo dyed cotton. For a special occasion, a short and narrow shoulder cloth is added to the outfit. The shoulder cloth, *phaa chet*, is generally made of cotton and decorated with multi-colored supplementary patterning. Males belonging to the upper classes, such as the ruling families, may have worn garments composed of silk, and in different styles.

Archival photographs are evidence that women's daily attire lacked an upper garment, but a long shoulder cloth, *phaa sabai*, was wrapped around the torso to cover the bust when necessary. This accessory was not patterned with weaving techniques, and it could be made of either cotton or silk fabric. In the late 19th – early 20th century, imported block printed material from India or England was commonly used as a shawl.

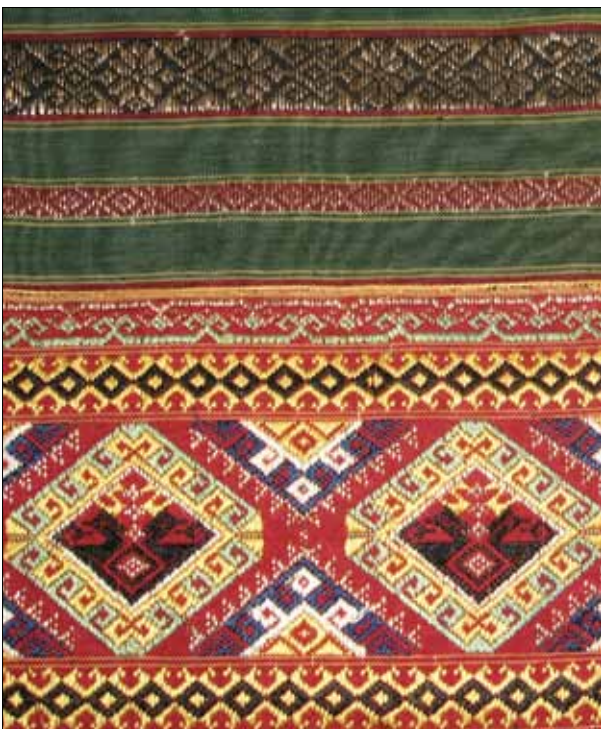
Regarding the traditional lower garment, Tai Yuan women also utilize the tubular skirt that other Tai

females wear. In the past technical limitations from the loom required that several pieces of fabric were required to form one skirt, *phaa sin* or *sin*. The waistband is composed of white cotton and sometimes an additional lower section of red or rust brown cotton is incorporated into the composition. One or two pieces formed the waistband (*hua sin*), and at least one for the midsection (*tua sin*). For daily attire, this part of the skirt may not contain any designs, or it is decorated with stripes. The border (*tiin sin*) end may be incorporated in the same material for the midsection, but it could also be another piece of fabric. The bottom section of an everyday skirt was also lacking in patterning.

If the midsection is decorated, the designs are in a horizontal orientation rather than a vertical one. For horizontal stripes, the warp may be composed of several colors, thus, only requiring one length of fabric to form this part of the skirt. If the weft threads form the bands, at least two pieces of material are joined together. A skirt decorated with stripes is called *sin taa*. Sometimes, the stripes are composed of plied yarns, or two different colored threads twisted together. This is called *pan kai* in Tai Yuan language. For ceremonial occasions, weaving techniques, such as supplementary warp (*muk*) and continuous supplementary weft (*khit*), are applied to form designs in the midsection. Sometimes, the continuous supplementary weft patterning is called *muk* because the motifs mimic the ones created with supplementary warp technique. An observer must closely inspect the textile to ascertain which technique was applied. Cotton is the favored material for daily and ceremonial attire.

Borders of skirts worn for ceremonial occasions are elaborately decorated with discontinuous supplementary weft patterning and are called *tiin chok*. This type of skirt is called *sin tiin chok*. In the past, members of the upper classes wore skirts with borders composed of silk and metal wrapped yarns. Generally, borders are also composed of cotton but the complex patterning make them valued items. There are several bands of designs with the main one often decorated with diamond shaped lanterns. This motif often contains other ones, and the *hong* bird is quite common. Secondary bands of patterning flank the primary one and may contain flowering vines, *naak* serpent deities, and *hong* birds. The weaver has some freedom in selecting the motifs to decorate the skirt border she is creating. However, the final band is decorated with the *soi saa* or *hang sapao* motif. These are lines drifting down the fabric. *Soi saa* means fringe, while *hang sapao* refers to the bottom of a type of float used in Northern Thailand.

Some distinctive identity markers are found in the ceremonial skirt borders of the Tai Yuan living in different parts of Thailand. Generally, the skirt borders produced



Detail, border of new Saraburi-style skirt



Mae Chaem-style skirt, sin tiin chok. 1970-1990. In the border, the supplementary threads are thickly plied and woven densely together so that the ground fabric is not visible.



Laplae-style skirt, sin tiin chok. 1920-1950. A combination of silk and cotton compose the skirt. Weavers favor a dark ground with green and yellow silk designs.

in the provinces of Chiang Mai, Phrae, and Nan confine the patterning to the top section of the border, leaving the bottom end plain. The warp of skirts from these areas is composed of black and red yarns forming the two sections. The black warp composes the top part where the designs are woven while the red warp composes the lower section. In Uttaradit and Ratchaburi provinces, supplementary designs cover all or most of the border's surface. The warp of the borders from these two provinces is primarily composed of red yarns with a narrow strip of yellow forming the bottom edge.

There are different styles of Tai Yuan borders, which are named after *muang*. Chiang Saen is considered the oldest style, which was produced by all Tai Yuan weavers throughout Thailand. For Chiang Saen style, the designs are confined to the border's upper section, and the ground fabric is visible. Thus, the supplementary patterning is not densely woven so that it covers the background completely. Over time, the weavers in settlements scattered throughout the kingdom developed distinct styles for their polity, changing color combinations, thickness of the designs, materials, and so forth.

As the center for the former kingdom of Lanna, Chiang Mai was home of the ruling classes. A Chiang Mai court style developed, and its distinctive marker is the



Nam Ang-style skirt, sin taa tiin chok. 1920-1950. The border's red ground is another variation and is also woven in Laplae. Laplae and Nam Ang are located relatively close together so overlapping of styles is not uncommon.

use of either locally reeled or imported silk and metallic wrapped yarns, especially when creating the skirt borders (see back cover illustrations). Often, the other skirts sections were made from silk or even velvet.

Nearby former *muang* that are located in present-day Chiang Mai province developed their own styles. These styles include Sanpathong, Chomthong, Doi Tao, Hot, and Mae Chaem. Mae Chaem is a small community located southwest of Inthanon Mountain. Their ceremonial borders are composed of cotton, favoring the colors of yellow and white. The supplementary threads are thick consisting of several plies so that the ground fabric is not visible. The diamond-shaped lanterns are elongated rather than square. Chom Thong style is similar to Chiang Mai style but composed of cotton with accents of silk and metal wrapped yarns. In Sanpathong style, the black background is visible rather than covered with supplementary patterning.

The textiles originating from various areas of Uttaradit Province have been the subject of debate for many years. There are Tai Phuan, Lao, and Tai Yuan residing here. This area served as a border post for centuries and was in the center of a regional trade route so people have moved in and out of this present-day province for centuries. Two textile producing areas of Uttaradit, Lap

Lae and Nam Ang, are near Hat Sieo in Sukhothai, which consists of Tai Phuan settlers who are renowned for hand-weaving. Some scholars state that the weavers of Lap Lae and Nam Ang are also Tai Phuan. However, other researchers state that they are Tai Yuan. Many weavers in Lap Lae state that they are Tai Yuan. It is likely that some Tai Phuan have assimilated into Tai Yuan settlements in some parts of the province while others maintained their group identity. It is generally thought that Tai Yuan borders are less colorful while Tai Phuan ones include a wider range of colors. Tai Phuan also weavers apply geometric motifs more often than the Tai Yuan. However, I believe it is too simplistic to attempt to designate ethnicity by these factors alone.

Skirt borders, or *tiin chok*, from Lap Lae, Nam Ang, and Thaa Plaa of Uttaradit are completely covered with patterning. The midsections from the former two areas are generally black and green. There is more variety in the composition of skirt midsections from Thaa Plaa. One specific style is the application of five rows of continuous supplementary weft designs. The motif is called *dauk khia*.

The Tai Yuan living in central Thailand have been able to retain their cultural heritage to a certain degree. They came to this area after 1804 when Rama I decided that Chiang Saen be abandoned to prevent the Burmese from overtaking the north. The armies of Chiang Saen

assisted the Siamese armies to defeat Muang Thanh and Muang Muey, now in present-day Vietnam. The soldiers' reward was to have their families settled on good rice farmland in central Thailand. Some settled in Phu Khieo of Nakhon Ratchasima (they no longer weave) and Sao Hai of Saraburi Province. The weaving style of the latter was truer to Chiang Saen style. However, none of the weavers in Sao Hai continue to produce the ceremonial border. They are known for producing cloth decorated with complex supplementary warp designs. The final destination of the Tai Yuan was Ratchaburi Province. The weavers have maintained their creativity by applying a number of techniques to decorate skirt midsections, including weft ikat. However, they prefer to use discontinuous supplementary weft technique and thickly plied yarns to form designs. Both silk and cotton composed the body and border sections of a skirt although cotton was more commonly used. There are several sub-styles from this area: Khu Bua, Daun Rae, and Bang Krado. Daun Rae borders favor red and black and the patterning is dense, for example. Khu Bua style also contains red and black yarns, but these colors are complimented with yellow and white. Bang Krado is less common and favor more yellow and orange in their patterning.

Photos by Pattana Decha.

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Weaving a skirt border, tiin chok, in Laplae, Uttaradit Province. The weaver uses a porcupine quill to create the designs. The obverse or "right" side of the fabric faces her.