

大绣于野：“施洞苗”刺绣艺术图案考

Shi-Dong Miao Embroidery: Looking Behind the Patterns

胡仄佳

Zeja Hu

硕士论文

MA

悉尼科技大学

UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY, SYDNEY

2016

CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

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内容摘要

中国施洞苗的刺绣图案文化历史深厚独特，相当长历史时期里处于悄然蓬勃自生状态，其文化来历底蕴被外部世界关注极短且浅。

受近年来中国经济环境巨大改变带来的影响冲击，施洞苗刺绣文化迅速走向衰落。

按共产党中国政府的民族认定，施洞苗不过是中国苗服装色彩斑斓的一分子，其独特的文化价值未得到足够重视，且已到了分崩离散境地。

本论文是对施洞苗刺绣图案的文化底蕴的系统研究。

研究论文以难得的施洞苗传统刺绣精品私人收藏为研究基础，试图系统分析探讨中国苗在中国历史上的说法来历及现状，解析“生苗”、“熟苗”在中历史上的地理环境成因，并从黔东南历史上的陆路、水路交通、人文环境等方面，分析施洞苗刺绣文化的特殊缘由文化地位，并由之深入探讨施洞苗刺绣图案所蕴含的特殊族群文化表现，同时在不同层面接触到的他文化影响。

此研究的特别价值在于，利用综合多角度视野及各种历史资料，独辟其径地深入研究施洞苗刺绣艺术图案文化的来历，还其此族群被“大一统族称”下掩盖的独一无二的自身特质及文化价值。施洞苗的刺绣图案语言，其研究价值意义已远远超出一般刺绣工艺图案范畴。本文系统梳理探讨施洞传统原始刺绣艺术图案，以挖掘其背后的丰富文化信息。

Summary

Shi-Dong Miao Embroidery - Looking Behind the patterns

Zejia Hu

Aims and Significance

The cultural history of the Shi-Dong Miao (施洞苗) community of southwest China, as embodied in the unique style of their traditional embroidery art, is enigmatic and largely undocumented and therefore worthy of further investigation. This sub group of the broadly termed “Miao” ethnic minority had been quietly flourishing in its distinct autogenic way over a long period while eluding assimilation with the Chinese Han majority and attracting little attention from the outside world. What anthropological interest there had been in this group in pre modern times, was relatively shallow and from the dominant culture’s perspective and therefore having a pejorative tone, and in any event poorly documented. While research interest has grown in recent times, it largely post dates the period of rapid decline in the traditions of such minorities under the influence of the economic transformation that has occurred in China in recent years. Such late starting research is impeded by the Miao groups not having developed their own written language and hence the need to rely on less direct research sources.

In accordance with current Chinese Government official policy in regards to the recognition of ethnic minorities, the Shi-Dong Miao is considered a constituent member of the “Miao” ethnicity. It’s distinguishing colourfulness and artistry of its costume embroidery is seen as one example of the eclectic array of costume decoration of the numerous groups that are collectively defined as the Miao ethnic minority. This attaches little significance to the uniqueness of the Shi-Dong embroidery style, which suggests a particular cultural heritage, but one which is now losing its uniqueness as the Miao traditions collapse due to modern economic influences and the loss of their region's remoteness.

This research analyses the ethnological history of the Qing Shui river Miao in China’s southwest Guizhou region, inspired by, and substantially informed by, the researcher's pre-eminent private collection of rare traditional Miao costume embroidery, particularly from the Shi-Dong area that borders the Qing Shui river (清水江). The study identifies the geographical factors that led to the

long standing historical differentiation between a so-called “Sheng Miao” and a “Shu Miao” (roughly translatable as unassimilated Miao and assimilated Miao). It is argued that this distinction evolved due to specific aspects of the land and water trade routes, with the Sheng Miao (including the Shi-Dong group) occupying the more remote and inaccessible areas of China's Guizhou Province.

This study analyses the unique features and status of embroidery culture of the Shi-Dong Miao and explores manifestations of its ethnic identity and revelations of its distinguishing history that is alluded to in the symbols and patterns of its traditional embroidery. One such idiosyncrasy of the Shi-Dong embroidery patterns are the extraneous cultural symbols that are integrated into the traditional designs, at least in part for artistic affect, but also indicative of infrequent but significant interaction with external mainstream (Han) Chinese society.

There are subtle but arguably real indications of the cultural origins and identity of the Shi-Dong in the design and embellishments of their traditional embroidery patterns. By considering anthropological aspects of the Shi-Dong culture, supported by the (limited) historical materials and records, in addition to the examination of the distinguishing embroidery itself, this author argues that the Shi-Dong Miao represent a distinct and unique ‘micro culture’ within the diverse set of peoples referred to collectively as Miao.

Past dynastic Chinese authorities had come somewhat in recognising the cultural diversity amongst the Miao, albeit characterised by superficial labelling associated with costume coloration or artificial differences associated with the degree of assimilation with the Han culture. However, when the Chinese Communist Party came to power in 1949 even this limited historical recognition of diversity was replaced by a reversion to ancient Chinese Han culture's predilection for defining a single culture under the unitary "Miao" label.

The Chinese government initiated a project in 1965 to research and document the histories of the nation's ethnic minorities, resulting in a set of publications including one dedicated to the Miao, published in 1985. However the lack of internationally credible scientific anthropological research underpinnings is evidence that these documents were somewhat political in promoting the government's policy position of representing the existence in China of only a limited number of broadly grouped minorities, including a single Miao ethnicity. This was reflective of 1950s Soviet approaches where defining a minimum number of broadly defined groupings simplified control and management of ethnic minorities. Representing the Miao as a single culture does not reconcile with the evidence of the substantial diversity seen in the traditional Miao artistic styles featuring on their ceremonial costumes. It is proposed that this artistic diversity is indicative of fundamentally differentiable cultures.

Throughout Chinese dynastic history, from at least the Song Dynasty through to the modern post 1949 period, the so called Miao peoples have managed to preserve their multiple cultural identities, as illustrated by their continued production of diverse artistry embodied in distinctive embroidery styles. This is particularly well exemplified by the Shi-Dong Miao. Only with the momentous market reforms that swept across China from the late 20th Century did this cultural diversity begin to break down as the various groups, including the Shi-Dong Miao, ceased to produce traditional embroidery work, in favour of commercial work to satisfy the undiscerning and cost conscious tourist trade.

The traditional embroidery of the Shi-Dong Miao women exhibit exceptional creativity and deep artistic imagination that is unique and arguably unsurpassed amongst all ethnic embroidery in China in terms of both its technical excellence and its depth of expression.

Chinese ethnic minorities have been marginalised over Chinese history by successive imperial central governments, and the Guizhou Miao were further isolated and largely ignored by the dominant Han culture because of their mountainous surrounds, leading to little appreciation of, or interest in, the diversity of the Guizhou Miao culture. Within that diversity and isolation, the art form of the Miao of the Shi-Dong, located in an area bordering on the Qing Shui River, blossomed.

The lives of the ethnic minority groups living in the mountains of Guizhou Province were affected only to a limited extent by the momentous changes that followed the 1949 communist takeover. While signs of the national political changes can be detected in their art form, the quality and style of the Shi-Dong embroidery survived largely undamaged for the following 30 years. Without road and rail connections to much of the mountainous Guizhou area, the impact on the Miao from the succession of politically driven social upheavals, through to the Cultural Revolution, was remarkably limited, and their culture was largely preserved, in contrast to the devastating impact such changes had on mainstream Chinese society and culture.

The Miao societies were not however totally immune from the communist "reforms", including richer landlords having their valuable property, which for the Miao largely meant their families' embroidered ceremonial costumes and associated jewellery, being taken and given to local poorer 'peasant' families. However, Miao girls and young women continued the practice of learning embroidery, and Miao society continued to value this traditional art form, and continued to recognise the material and cultural value of both old and new skilfully produced fine embroidered costumes. This wealth of costume art largely survived when much of Chinese traditional artistic culture was being devastated by momentous politically driven social change.

However, China's dramatic economic growth and associated social change over the last three decades can be seen to have irreversibly degraded the traditional Shi-Dong embroidered costume art form that had for centuries been emblematic of that group's uniqueness within the greater Miao grouping of peoples. Chinese "free market" commercialisation and materialistic values have swept through China across both urban and rural areas. The Guizhou Mountains have ceased to be the barriers to societal changes occurring in the rest of China that they had previously been. The upgrading of road, rail and aviation infrastructure as well as modern communication technologies, including television, phone and the internet, have brought changes to the Miao societies reflecting national trends.

For the first thirty years under China's Communist rule, where small scale commercial enterprise was outlawed, the Chinese population as a whole were generally impoverished, but ethnic groups such as the Miao lived in particular poverty. Then when the commercially promiscuous "economic reform and opening up" period arrived, people all across China were seeking opportunities to become more affluent. The Miao looked for something to trade to improve their material circumstances in the developing market economy that they found themselves joining. They naturally looked to their dowry silver and ceremonial embroidered costumes, which traditionally would be passed down to their daughters or grand daughters. As the Shi-Dong Miao embroideries became a commercial commodity, the tradition of painstakingly producing beautifully artistic work infused with cultural values was quickly compromised. Over the last thirty years the commercial transactions with outsiders has severely depleted the resource of high cultural value traditional Shi-Dong embroidered costumes, which are now rare in the local area.

The departure of the younger generation was associated with a loss of interest in cultural tradition. Even young Shi-Dong women who did stay at home were losing the pious commitment and motivation needed to learn and create the traditional art form that had relied on their mothers and grandmothers instilling the required enthusiasm and motivation.

From the early 1980's Chinese Han tourists and foreigners started to visit the Shi-Dong area, initially as a trickle, but in later decades in large numbers as Guizhou became part of a blossoming tourist destination. Young and old Shi-Dong women adapted their skills to produce attractive but relatively crude contemporary renditions of their traditional embroidered art form to satisfy the tourist trade. This modern work had lost its diversity, and its artistic and technical quality, and therefore its symbology is a poorer source of anthropologically significant meaning. Therefore a key aspect of this research study is to focus attention on the older traditional costume embroidery produced by the Shi-Dong and surrounding communities (particularly early 20th century), largely facilitated by the author's pre-eminent collection of such work.

The rugged topography of the Guizhou area limited travel and communication over many centuries which helped to create many different Miao communities, with their own local styles of embroidered clothing being a key distinguishing characteristic. The embroidery of the Guizhou Miao of the Shi-Dong locality has a unique style that stands out in terms of both its fine quality and its imaginative designs. The designs often depict mythical stories and contain rich layers of cultural symbology. While the overall clothing design configuration remains true to the typical Miao form, the Shi-Dong Miao distinguish themselves by not repetitively reproducing particular simple embroidered geometric patterns, that is characteristic of almost all other Miao sub-groups. Each piece of Shi-Dong embroidery is its own artistic creation reflecting the personality and imagination of its creator, while nevertheless honouring the unique Shi-Dong style with its reoccurring symbology and artistic characteristics.

Approach and Methods

Although ethnological study of the Miao in China has become prevalent in the past three decades, there is limited depth in the literature in regards the specific subject area of the Shi-Dong Miao art form and the anthropological information that it may yield.

This study investigates why the Shi-Dong Miao embroidered art developed to be so distinctive and artistically elegant. The study then closely examines the reoccurring symbology that features in the Shi-Dong embroidered art form and hypothesises what this is alluding to in terms of the anthropological history of the Shi-Dong society.

The study firstly looks at how the mainstream Han culture came to define the “Miao” cultural grouping and what they understood about such peoples, and then how, over many centuries, degrees of cultural diversity amongst this broadly defined group was perceived.

The study then postulates why real diversity amongst the Guizhou Miao developed. It is proposed that the mountainous topography constrained travel and communication both between Miao groups and with the ‘outside’ world occupied by the Han dominating culture. What communication and trade there was, was predominantly transacted up and down rivers, such that the location of different communities with respect to their proximity to the river systems, and their relative distance upstream on such river systems, were the key factors in determining the character of each sub-culture. So while the Shi-Dong locality was highly remote, which rendered the people materially poor and largely self

sufficient, their position on the Qing Shui river did expose them to some interaction and trade opportunities with other Miao groups and, to a limited extent, with the Han 'outsiders'. This cultural exchange did not extend to being dominated or assimilated by others including particularly the ruling Han dynasties. Consequently the Shi-Dong culture, as represented in their embroidery art form, developed to be relatively rich as it reflected influences from such cultural interaction, while retaining its own unique cultural independence.

The research focuses on the symbology of the designs and images incorporated in classical Shi-Dong embroidery, and for contrast, more modern pieces. The research will investigate the relationship between Miao embroidered art and their oral history as expressed in their extensive folk songs ("Da Ge ") as well as other myths and legends passed down through the generations. The influences of Han culture on the Miao culture as expressed in the embroidery is also investigated.

The study considers how the Shi-Dong Miao have interpreted aspects of anthropology, artistry, Chinese politics, economics, philosophy and other internal and external cultural influences and reflected such in their embroidered art.

The most important source material for this research has been the researcher's own private collection, acquired more than thirty years ago directly from the people that are to be the focus of this research. The collection includes in excess of three hundred classical embroideries, with the majority originating from the Shi-Dong locality and most of the remainder from the directly surrounding localities. The collection includes some twenty complete classical embroidered costumes from the Shi-Dong and neighbouring Lei-Shan Miao. Most of the other pieces are either epilates or are main arm band embroideries that form the centre pieces of the traditional ceremonial costumes. The collection represents a comprehensive thematic representation of classical embroidery of the Shi-Dong Miao. These materials provide the most direct and important physical basis of the proposed research.

The Shi-Dong Miao are an atypical example of "Sheng-Miao" (re the historical Han sub-division of Miao into "Sheng-Miao" & "Shu-Miao"). While being located in a historically remote locality, their on-river location had facilitated some limited trade with the Han in historic times. This limited and self-controlled contact with the 'outside world' is naturally to be expected to have had a significant influence over their cultural and economic development and their political relationship with the Han peoples and governments. A central hypothesis for this research is that Shi-Dong Miao preserved their uniquely refined artistic culture primary because of their geographic circumstances.

The more remote, and hence poorer and less culturally sophisticated Sheng-Miao, and the assimilated Shu-Miao, both arguably allowed their equivalent artistic culture to devolve into the more simplistic forms long before the general decline in the traditional Miao embroidery customs in the late 20th Century blurred such long standing distinctions.

The research investigated Chinese historical records that document aspects of Miao history and culture to piece together as far as practicable a chronology of the Han culture's perspective of the "Miao". However given that the Miao did not traditionally have their own written language, and the Han's general disdain of minorities, particularly for one's like the Miao who resisted assimilation, this written record is as expected found to be neither comprehensive nor objectively accurate.

It is argued that any attempt to explain the uniqueness of Shi-Dong art form, as it was found to be at the beginning of the 20th Century, must take account of the Shi-Dong locality's geographical particularities and the impact this must have had on the degree and timing of cultural intercourse with the Chinese dominant ethnicity and government. The historic fact that the Shi-Dong could not, for many centuries, be assimilated to the point of being classified as "Shu-Miao", is no doubt strongly influenced by their geographic position. Therefore a credible hypothesis is that this 'geo-political' circumstance was the dominant reason for the 'language' of the Shi-Dong embroidered art form to have remained far better preserved and uniquely sophisticated in comparison with other Miao groups.

The Shi-Dong's beliefs, cultural practices, traditional songs and recounted ancient legends represent the Shi-Dong's cultural memory, and undoubtedly provide important inspirations for their embroidered 'language' of symbols and 'creatures'. Therefore the interpretation of the meaning behind the embroidered 'language' must go hand-in-hand with study of such other cultural traditions.

In summary, this research will explore the Shi-Dong Miao's artistic culture in the tradition of art history. The ancient and recent prevailing tendencies toward "ethnic unification", that fails to recognise substantial cultural diversity as exemplified in the qualities and style of different groups' traditional embroidered art form, is challenged.

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