

THROUGH THE THREAD OF TIME

Southeast Asian Textiles

The James H W Thompson Foundation Symposium Papers

Edited by Jane Puranananda




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RIVER

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FOREWORD

When in 1957 the American James H. W. Thompson began constructing a Thai teak house in Bangkok on a canal across from a Cham weaving village, he set in motion the events that would lead to the publication of this work. While alive, he welcomed hundreds of visitors to his unique home filled with art treasures. Then on March 27, 1967 he mysteriously disappeared in the highlands of Malaysia. In an act of great generosity his only heir, nephew Henry Thompson, donated the house and its contents to establish the James H. W. Thompson Foundation, ensuring that a continuing stream of visitors would enjoy the famous cultural landmark. Under the Foundation's charter, proceeds derived from operating the House and Museum must be used to support the conservation, preservation and dissemination of Thailand's rich artistic heritage through research projects, publications and seminars.

For many years the Trustees of the Foundation have wanted to undertake a major cultural event focusing on textiles. On August 2nd and 3rd, 1999 this goal came to fruition with the textile symposium "Southeast Asian Textiles through the Thread of Time". Renowned guest lecturers from around the world were invited to participate in this academic dialogue which drew a large audience of textile enthusiasts. Unfortunately, plans to publish the papers from this conference had to be postponed due to unforeseen difficulties.

However, in 2002 when the Foundation broke ground to build a new Textile Museum on land adjacent to the Jim Thompson House, the decision was made to proceed with publication of the papers. Due to the time lapse, all the scholars who participated in the symposium were contacted and asked to update and revise their work, if needed. Thus, the present publication is the result of their kind efforts in assisting the completion of this project.

There are many people to thank for the success of the textile symposium and the publication of this work. Sadly, for health reasons former President, H.S.H. Prince Subhadradis Diskul, who had been a valuable

supporter of the Foundation was unable to participate. However his long-term guidance and support remain at the heart of this project. Professor Smitthi Siribhadra, Foundation Board Member and Thai scholar, assisted this project in many ways including leading the symposium speakers on a stimulating post-conference visit to the northeast. Foundation President Professor William Klausner and Board Member William Booth had the vision to ensure that this project was carried out in a manner that would meet the highest standards of the Jim Thompson legacy and of academic excellence. Jean-Michel Beurdeley, a well-known and highly respected member of the Asian art community, was a driving force in bringing speakers together to participate in the symposium. Overseeing the entire project and handling the many important administrative details was Foundation Board Member Eric Booth, assisted by Beverly Jangkamonkulchai of the Jim Thompson Silk Company.

In terms of preparing this publication, the Foundation is deeply appreciative of the advice and support of M. R. Narisa Chakrabongse and Paisarn Piamattawat of River Books. In addition, grateful appreciation must be expressed to David Lyman for sharing his beautiful Tilleke & Gibbins Textile Collection for use in this book and at a special exhibit held during the symposium.

Finally, warm thanks and deep appreciation go to the twelve speakers who each, in their own way, made such a valuable contribution to *Through the Thread of Time – Southeast Asian Textiles*. Through their scholarship our understanding and appreciation of Southeast Asian textiles has been greatly expanded.

It has been my great pleasure to meet and work with such a wonderfully talented group of people.

Jane Puranananda

The James H. W. Thompson Foundation

INTRODUCTION

A common thread amongst the many civilizations of Southeast Asia has been the great importance placed on textiles. However, today the rich heritage of textiles is slowly fading from the memory of many Southeast Asian cultures. For a variety of reasons, the art of weaving and the meaning and importance placed on textiles has diminished. In even the most remote areas, long-held beliefs and traditions relating to the role and function of textiles are losing their vitality and validity.

Through the Thread of Time – Southeast Asian Textiles presents the efforts of twelve highly respected scholars and art historians to share their knowledge, expertise and research in a field which, ironically, is growing in academic interest even as weavers and old textiles disappear. The guest lecturers, who participated in the James H. W. Thompson Foundation symposium, were given carte blanche to speak on any Southeast Asian textile topic of their choice. As a result, the symposium provided a rich spectrum of ideas, themes and images and served as the basis for the publication of this work.

The papers found in this volume, although based on the symposium lectures, have in many cases been expanded or updated with new information. For reference purposes, the articles included here have been arranged under the modern nations to which they are predominantly related. However, certain articles actually span more than one country, and of course, the historical papers predate modern geographical boundaries.

At the conference, a few of the papers were presented in French or Thai, with the speaker assisted by a translator. However, for this publication, the Thai and French texts have been translated into English. In terms of editing, every attempt has been made to retain the original voice and ideas of the writer.

As to the texts included in this volume, the only deviation from the original list of topics is the addition of a second paper by textile expert Susan Conway on 19th century Shan court dress. Since the time she presented her paper, Conway has expanded her research. She thus offered to provide an additional article with valuable new information.

The reader will note that this volume ends with a selection of textiles which were exhibited during the symposium. These are from the Tilleke & Gibbins Collection in Bangkok. This collection is a valuable resource on Thai, Lao and regional weaving. The James H. W. Thompson Foundation is most grateful to David Lyman for allowing photographs of this collection to be included here.

Arranged in alphabetical order by country, this volume begins with topics under the heading of Cambodia. The first article by Gillian Green provides a fascinating study of ancient Khmer textiles. Through art historical detective work, Green has constructed a convincing account of what types of textiles were used in the ancient Khmer court.

In contrast, Bernard Dupaigne presents a paper that touches on the other end of the spectrum of Khmer textiles by documenting weavings and village culture he studied while living in Cambodia in the late 1960's and 1970's. His report begins with a poignant reminder of the difficulties in pursuing research in the region. Sadly, the Khmer Rouge killed many of the students who assisted him with his research.

The subject of Indonesia textiles is so rich that an entire symposium could easily be devoted to this topic alone. Both the articles included under this heading contribute in very different ways to our understanding of the complexity of this subject. In her article "Motifs and Meanings in Indonesian Textiles" Helen Jessup provides a fascinating overview that focuses on cultural heritage. As an art historian, Jessup explores the various influences on Indonesian civilization and how this bears on the symbolism found in the weaving.

In contrast, Marie-Helen Guelton provides a technical and extremely precise documentation of weavings from East Sumba. The work is based on a detailed study of textiles found in private collections in Paris. Guelton was assisted in this research by ethnologist Danielle Geirnaert, who supplied new unpublished data.

The James H. W. Thompson Foundation was extremely honored to have the renowned textile expert Matiebelle Gittinger participate in the symposium. Her paper reports on field work involving the customs and weaving of three different Tai groups (speakers of the Tai Lao language) in remote areas of northern Laos. While weaving still continues in this part of Laos, as she documents, the meaning and use of whole categories of textiles are being altered beyond recognition.

The other paper listed under the Laos heading, which also includes research in Thailand, was given by Karen A. Bunyaratavej. Her ability to understand the Tai dialects spoken by the groups she interviewed greatly enhanced Bunyaratavej's first-hand account of her research. Through interviews conducted in both Laos and Thailand she investigates and solves a puzzling question about the use and meaning of one particular type of cloth.

The James H. W. Thompson Foundation is very grateful for Susan Conway's contribution to the symposium. Little has been written about the Shan States of Myanmar; thus, her paper provides an insightful introduction into this unique topic. Additionally, her research on Shan dress compliments and links with her original presentation on Lan Na court attire, making this an important addition to this volume.

The James H. W. Thompson Foundation was also extremely fortunate to be able to include John Guy, Senior Curator of Indian and Southeast Asia Art of the Victoria and Albert Museum, in the list of symposium speakers. His paper, under the heading of Thailand, gives a fascinating and well-illustrated historical account of Siamese court dress. He includes information about textiles produced in India for the Thai market.

Also under the Thailand heading is Susan Conway's other article, which presents historical insights on the Lan Na court. For a long time the unique and diverse culture that flourished in the northern Thai Lan Na kingdoms had been greatly overlooked. By specifically focusing on the rich cultural traditions of this area, Conway adds a new dimension to Siamese cultural history.

The third paper listed in the Thailand section was written by Somboon Thanasook, who is a researcher of Thai textiles living in southern Thailand. In this case, the reader benefits from a study presented by a native scholar who intimately understands the culture and traditions of his region. Southern Thailand has long been linked in trade with the Malay Peninsula, thus the beautiful weaving described in this paper reflect this connection.

Under the heading of Vietnam, French scholar, Emmanuel Guillon gives an intriguing introduction to ancient Cham textiles based on a study deduced from sculptural representations. As the origins of the Cham civilization date to the 6th century A. D., this is a challenging task due to the limited amount of available archeological material. However, through his descriptions, fabrics and costumes represented in stone come alive.

Gerald Moussay, lived and worked in Vietnam for many years, until he was unable to undertake further research there for political reasons. He studied the customs and textiles of the Cham people, an ethnic minority presently living in southern Vietnam. Moussay collected information and data about the traditions and ceremonial weavings of the Cham, and provides a very concise account of the Hindu and Muslim influences that underline their textiles.

Finally, also listed under Vietnam, Christine Hemmet gives an engrossing account of the textile traditions of the Hmong minority groups living in Vietnam. Her paper is richly illustrated with excellent photographs she took while doing research amongst these people living in remote mountainous regions. She documents a society and way of life that is currently under much pressure to change.

Through the publication of this volume, The James H. W. Thompson Foundation has hoped to act as a catalyst to further research, analysis, and the sharing of information in the field of textiles. We believe this volume represents an important step in placing on record valuable knowledge and ideas.

The subject matter contained here is extremely diverse, representing an interesting melange of topics and fields of interest. Even as the memory of textiles and weaving traditions disappear, this volume demonstrates that there is much to record, remember and preserve. Hopefully this work will encourage others to pursue new avenues of research into the fascinating field of the roles, function and design of textiles.

Jane Puranananda

The James H. W. Thompson Foundation



TEXTILES AT THE KHMER COURT, ANGKOR

Origins, Innovations and Continuities

Gillian Green

Elegant and enigmatic, the costumes depicted on stone and bronze images of deities and kings of the pre- and Angkorian periods subtly signal those universal indicators, status and beauty. Interestingly many of these costume forms are still in evidence, hardly altered, in modern Cambodia.

Although no textiles appear to have survived from Angkorian times, an analysis of their forms and patterns depicted on sculpted images invites more detailed examination of a number of issues often taken for granted. Indeed finding answers to questions about the sources of the fabric, clothing conventions and styles (long the subject of serious research) actually opens up a mine of information supplementing that gained by historical and archaeological researches. Overall it is clear that a sequence of changes occur over the centuries. With a starting point at the mid-first millennium AD, the dates of the earliest available images, a sequence of innovations become apparent and indeed, these changes have been used as an aid to date the images themselves. They are manifested in novel patterns, fabric types and also the styles in which fabrics are draped. These innovations serve in addition, to distinguish royalty and the elite from those lower down the social scale whose simple, unpatterned cotton cloth costumes remain unchanged from that day to this. This paper aims to demonstrate that developments such as these are an inherent feature of the so-called Indic impetus which had such a profound influence on indigenous Khmer religion, aesthetics, architecture and society.

Primary sources of information include epigraphic inscriptions from which a contemporaneous textile vocabulary can be elicited. Visual evidence comes from depictions of costume and also non-costume textile uses sculpted in stone, cast in bronze and carved in relief. Finally, there exists a single surviving literary source in the form of observations recorded by a Yuan dynasty, Chinese emissary, Zhou Daguan who spent a year at the Khmer court at Angkor at the very end of the thirteenth century AD.

Inscriptions both in the vernacular, Old Khmer, and in Sanskrit, the language used in sacred context of the temples, have been intensively studied. This distinction, between sacred and secular, itself may suggest the origin, indigenous or introduced of any particular item referenced in an inscription (fig.1). Saveros Pou's dictionary (1992) has been seminal to interpreting inscriptional information. She has compiled Old Khmer and Sanskrit words deciphered from stone tablets in Romanised form and the dictionary's entries are glossed with their meanings at the time of inscription. Further she has included

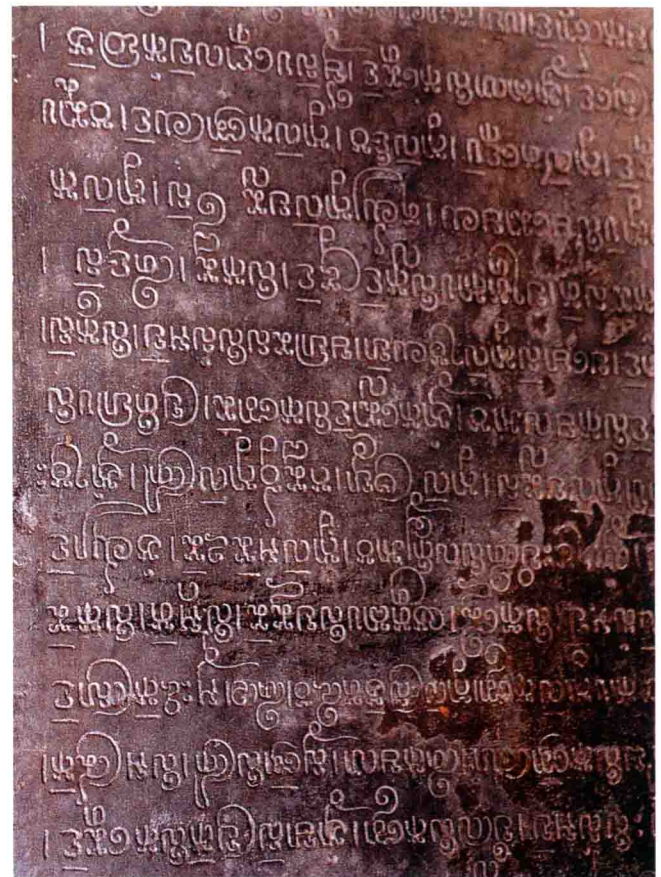


Fig. 1 Sanskrit text inscribed on a door frame in the Roluos group of temples, 9th century AD

their modern Khmer counterparts, also transliterated, together with their meanings and pronunciations. Lastly, many of the inscriptions, concerned as they were with listing possessions, be they slaves, riches or land, extend our knowledge of Khmer life beyond the temples and palaces.

Combing through Pou's dictionary, words relating to textiles may be selected. Even though their specific features are generally unknown, these words can be categorised into: styles of costume, types of cloth, techniques and technology and dyes. Some twenty words are glossed as costume forms; thirteen relate to types of cloth suitable for clothing and five to non-costume use; eight words to techniques and tools applicable to textile production, three to dyes and therefore colours; and three to materials from which fabric could be prepared. A selection is listed in Table 1. Some inscriptional words, only slightly modified, are still used in modern Khmer suggesting a remarkable continuity between then and now, in types and techniques as well as in the traditions they represent.

Moving from carved inscriptions to what can be learned from carved images, there are numerous surviving examples of figures in the round as well as bas relief images. Images in the round generally depict human and animal deities and semi-deities of the Hindu pantheon. Buddhism contributes images of bodhisattvas and, in the latter period images of the Buddha and royalty, who commissioned their own sculpted portraits in Buddhist mode. Reliefs, however, portrayed a broader canvas illustrating vibrant depictions of the great Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, or recorded historical exploits of Khmer warrior kings. The images portrayed not only the elite but also Khmer people of the lower echelons of society – soldiers, peasants, slaves and those involved in crafts and economic activities. The most notable examples of the epics are at Angkor Wat and of everyday life at the Bayon (figs. 2, 3). Common to all these forms of imagery is the fact that textiles are omnipresent in all these contexts. They are not merely supplementary to the artistic vision but are an integral part of Khmer life.



Fig. 2 Ceramic pot throwing and sticky rice making, bas relief, Bayon, 12th century AD



Fig. 4 Victory banners, bas relief, Bayon, 12th century AD

Fig. 3 Women consulting an astrologer, bas relief, Bayon, 12th century AD



Fig. 5 Fans and parasols, bas relief, Angkor Wat, 12th century AD

Looking at the detail in these images, textiles are used in two broad contexts: decorative and utilitarian, mainly in the form of royal regalia and furnishings in palaces and temples, and costumes. We will examine the former first. Regalia includes fans, long vertical “victory banners”, parasols, all prominent processional items accompanying, for example, warrior kings into battle (figs. 4, 5). Roofed litters made by attaching a piece of fabric to carrying poles balanced on porters’ shoulders become transport for royal princesses while elsewhere, a brahmin can be seen borne along by his helpers (fig. 6, 7). Animal trappings are part of royal regalia. Round, patterned cloths are seen on the backs of horses, water buffalo and elephants, these revered animals often sporting an additional head cloth.

Fig. 6 A Khmer princess being transported in a litter, bas relief, Angkor Wat, 12th century AD



Turning to textiles used as furnishings, we see a panoply of parasols made with patterned material on a relief depicting a relaxed Suryavarman II (fig. 8). The king is seated on a patterned and fringed sitting cloth laid on an upholstered couch firmly stuffed with what was undoubtedly locally-grown kapok. Both fabrics are patterned with the same four-petalled flower fabric. Fans constructed of two oblong panels with patterned fabric stretched across them are apparent as well as other forms made of palm leaves or peacock feathers. Inside the royal palace patterned fabrics are employed as roll-up blinds (fig. 9) and blinds to shade window spaces (fig. 10), and curtains made of plain fabric loosely tied back ornament palaces and temples (figs. 11, 12).

Fig. 7 Hindu ascetic being transported in a litter, bas relief, Angkor Wat, 12th century AD



Fig. 8 Suryavarman II relaxing on a couch, bas relief, Angkor Wat, 12th century AD

