



fabric *folios*

miao textiles from

china

Gina Corrigan

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china

THE BRITISH MUSEUM PRESS



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Gina Corrigan has asserted her right to be identified as the author of this work.

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COVER: Detail of a woman's festive jacket from Leishan and Laijiang county. (See pages 78-9)

INSIDE COVER: Detail from bead embroidery from Taijiang county.

PREVIOUS PAGES: Detail from the central panel on a baby-carrier from near Guiding county.

THESE PAGES: Detail from bead embroidery from Taijiang county.

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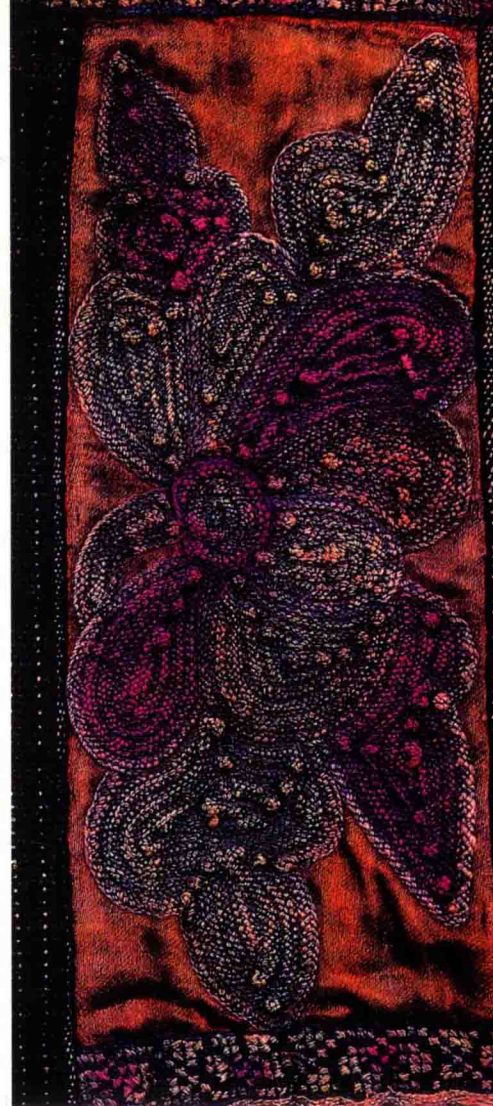
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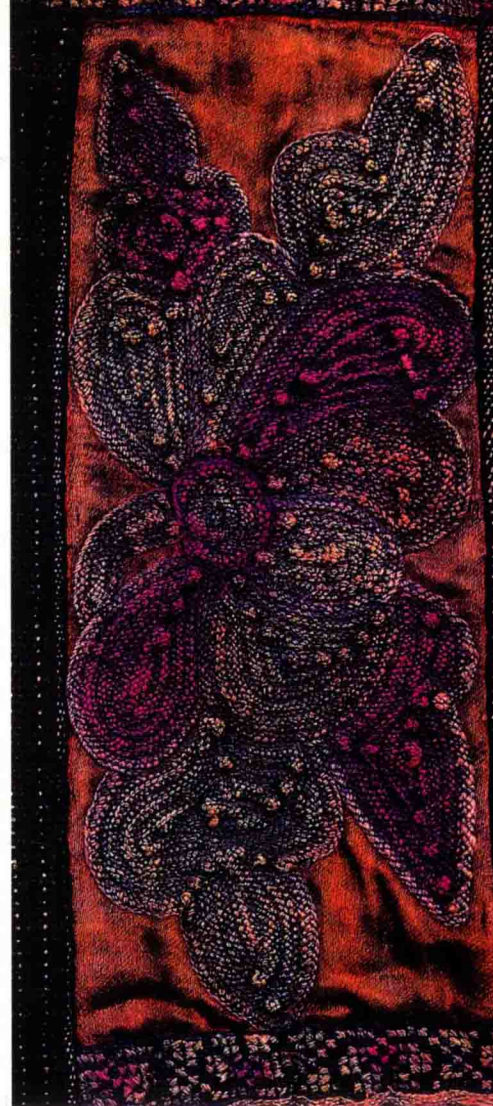
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Opposite are details from a selection of textiles

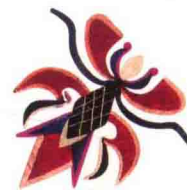
TOP: Baby-carrier from Taijiang county. (See pages 60-1)

LEFT: Female festive jacket from Huangping county. (See pages 54-7)

RIGHT: Female apron from Kali city area. (See pages 70-1)

BELOW: Female festive jacket from Taijiang county. (See pages 50-1)

introduction



ORIGINS OF THE MIAO

The textiles in this book are those of the Miao people of Guizhou province, which lies in the subtropical zone of south-west China. Migrants into this area, the Miao are thought to have lived originally in the Huang He (Yellow River) basin, some 5,000 years ago. According to legend, they were beaten in battle by the Yellow Emperor and had to migrate south to the middle reaches of the Chang Jiang (Yangtze River), possibly 4,000 years ago. By the Qin-Han period (221 BC – AD 220) they had migrated to what is today western





Hunan and south-east Guizhou, and later to south Sichuan. But pressures such as the presence of rival Han settlers and established indigenous groups, and imperial troops pushing from the north, meant that the Miao had constantly to seek new regions in which to live. The problem was exacerbated by the fact that the Yunnan–Guizhou plateau, an extensive area of karst limestone with rounded bare mountains, was largely unsuitable for cultivation.

When Guizhou became an administrative province under the Ming dynasty in 1413, consolidation of imperial rule was ensured by military invasion of the tribal areas, as well as subjugation of the Miao and other minorities and encroachment on to their land. The Miao, who by then were in central and southern Guizhou and eastern Yunnan, were thus forced to continue migrating — into Thailand, Laos and Vietnam.

In south-west China, according to the 1992 census, there were seven million Miao, approximately four million of them living in Guizhou province. Today they live peaceably alongside the Han and other minorities, but in the nineteenth century there were many bloody Miao uprisings against the Han. The Miao and other tribal peoples resented the influx of Han settlers, and objected to high rents and taxes. During this period of unrest it is suspected that nearly five million people

A timber-framed Miao village beside paddy fields in Taijiang county.

died out of a total population of seven million. Abject poverty persisted, especially among the Miao, and observers in the first half of the twentieth century have told of the Miao being dressed in rags and of their children having to share clothes. Even today, many Miao live below the poverty line.

The Miao can be divided into four main dialect groups and many subgroups. The only language in which they can all communicate is Putonghua (standard Mandarin). There is no written Miao language, but a strong oral tradition. At the end of the nineteenth century the missionary Samuel Pollard devised a writing system for the Miao of western Guizhou, but the search for a common written language continues among Miao scholars.

Within the official Miao minority is a subgroup with its own distinctive culture and dialect, known as the Gejia ('Ge family'), who live in and around Kaili. Not wishing to be classified as Miao, the Gejia have been seeking their own minority status for many years, but as yet without success.

CLOTHING AND TEXTILES

Because the Miao were one of the later groups to arrive in Guizhou, they settled mainly in the mountains and rarely in the river valleys, which were already occupied by other minorities. Living as swidden cultivators with virtually no chattels, their most valued possession was their richly woven and embroidered festival costume. This not only identified them as belonging to a specific



Miao girls from Jianhe county wearing festive costumes and elaborate silver jewellery.

group but was also an indicator of family wealth, as was the wearing of several skirts or layers of jackets. Such traditions continue today — at festivals even the poorest families wear elaborate costumes, which can be considered the major living visual art form of the Miao culture.

Crafts such as decorative wood carving and pottery are not practised by the Miao, although specialized craftsmen, especially in the south-east, make superb silver crowns, necklaces, bracelets and plaques, which are stitched on to the girls' jackets. There is also a musical tradition of songs and lusheng bamboo pipe-playing by the men at funerals, festivals and weddings.



Miao people at a Lusheng festival near Liuzhi.

Since traditional costume is one of the most striking features of the Miao culture, it is hardly surprising that the Han, and foreign anthropologists, have come to identify the various groups within it by their mode of dress. There are probably eighty different Miao costumes in Guizhou (depending on how you categorize them) and local people have given nicknames to Miao groups according to particular aspects of their dress, such as Long and Short-Skirted Miao, White and Blue Miao,

and Flowery Miao. However, the Miao dislike these nicknames intensely and identify themselves according to their own dialect names.

The women's costumes are inventive variations on a basic theme. A long-sleeved jacket is worn over a full, pleated skirt that can vary in length from 27 cm (10 ½ in) to ankle length. Many groups have aprons, often worn front and back, and traditionally puttees or gaiters cover the lower legs. Garment construction depends on the use

of narrow-weave, hand-loom cloth, which is rarely shaped by cutting, and there are normally no seams on the shoulders. Jackets and skirts are decorated with woven strips and with wax-resist and embroidery pieces. Each group has its own distinctive hairstyle. The baby-carrier, a prestigious accoutrement and part of the dowry, is elaborately decorated using the finest techniques. Men's costumes used to have design and decorative features similar to those of the women of their group, but much of this has now been lost.

FESTIVALS AND COURTSHIP

Young girls are taught by their grandmother and mother to spin, weave, dye and embroider, as every Miao girl needs a full traditional costume in which to attend festivals and to wear for her marriage. If a girl has not acquired these skills, her mother will make her costume, or, if she is too busy or her sight is poor, buy the various parts of it at the market, from Miao women who increasingly make an income from selling fabrics, woven ribbons and embroideries.

The major Miao festivals take place in the low agricultural season, between harvesting and planting the rice, or in the summer after the crops have been planted. Several villages, usually of the same costume type, get together to organize them. Families flock to these events, often carrying bundles of costumes on shoulder poles. Young unmarried girls try to have a new costume for each festival. Once at the site, they dress up in their finery, aided by

their mothers. Some festivals go on for several days, and in remote areas, if it is too far to go home, families camp out on the hillside, where they heat pre-cooked rice and pork on small fires. There is always plenty of local alcohol to drink and related families and their friends will talk long into the night. Mothers often see their married daughters for the first time since their marriage on such occasions.

During the festival itself, the unmarried girls perform simple, slow-moving circle dances to the music of lusheng pipes, showing off themselves, their costumes and their jewellery to the unmarried boys. There are various distinctive courting rituals within groups. In some, liaisons can be made over the festival period, more formal arrangements being entered into later. Others involve complex rituals such as antiphonal singing, whereby the girls gather in someone's house after the festival and the boys court them from outside by singing through holes in the wall. The girls reply if they wish to make a liaison, and the boys are then invited inside.

It is said that unmarried Miao girls are judged by their future husbands on their ability to spin, weave, embroider and make an elaborate costume, the beauty and workmanship of which indicates their tenacity and industriousness. The number of skirts and jackets and the quality of the materials also show the wealth of the family. Poorer families, unable to allow their daughter much time off from agricultural pursuits, would have less ornate costumes.

BASIC FIBRES AND EMBROIDERY SILK

The base fibres used in Miao textiles vary from region to region within Guizhou. In the past, the main fibres for clothes were hemp or ramie, both of which come from the stalks of plants. Hemp (*Cannabis sativa*) is an annual, sown in March and harvested in August when approximately 2 metres (6 ft 6 in) high. The stalks are cut down, the leaves removed and the fibres teased out of the stems. After short lengths have been joined by splicing, the thread is wound into balls by the women. Some groups then twist it on a treadle-operated multiple-spindle wheel, presumably to give it extra strength. The yarn is boiled with ash and pounded until creamy white. It is then unravelled and balled, ready for weaving. Ramie (*Boehmeria nivea*) is a perennial, of which the stem is cut several times a year. The fibres are lifted and separated out from the stem with a metal tool. The process of making the yarn is similar to that of hemp, and from it a fine silk-like cloth is woven. Today ramie and hemp are increasingly woven with cotton or synthetics, although, for reasons of cost, pure hemp and ramie continue to be used in the poorer west and drier central areas.

Cotton crops will grow in the south of Guizhou, and here the Miao prepare their own cotton textiles by ginning, spinning and weaving. Increasingly, because of pressure to get the most out of the land, food crops are replacing cotton and therefore spun cotton from other provinces is being brought into the

weekly markets. In the wealthier south-east, which is too damp for cotton-growing, both cotton yarn and manufactured woven cloth is sold at the markets.

In the north-west, which is more than 2,500 metres (8,200 ft) above sea level, women wear woollen felt capes and gaiters made by itinerant felters. Wool is also woven into the shoulders of the local hemp or ramie jackets for extra warmth.

Silk has traditionally been used as a base fibre by a few richer families in the south-east, especially in the Kaili and Huangping areas where it is possible to raise silkworms. One can still find Miao women selling the eggs and worms at the markets, and small amounts of silk continue to be produced for weaving. In 1996 a Miao woman told me that in the 1950s the local people used to make and dye their own embroidery silks, but now only the poor do this – others can afford to buy quality threads made in Shanghai.

LOOMS AND WEAVES

There is a rich weaving tradition in Guizhou, especially in the south-east. Two main types of loom are used. The more ancient is the body-tensioned loom, with the shafts usually operated by a rope around the foot. The other is the treadle-operated frame looms with up to four shafts. Most base cloth for skirts, jackets and trousers is woven in tabby (plain) weave. Lozenge twill weaves are common in the south-east, where an alternating float weave is also found, which is very highly regarded. The



A Miao woman with an embroidered baby-carrier watches another woman weaving ribbons on a frame loom, near Huangping.

hand-woven cloth varies in width from 32 to 38 cm (12½–15 in) and is normally dyed after weaving, although a few groups use dyed yarn to produce stripes and checks.

Supplementary weft techniques are common, in fabrics woven in wool, silk and cotton. Patterns for the decorative areas of garments and for baby-carriers are sometimes extremely complex, featuring birds, butterflies and geometric designs put in by hand. Weft-faced strips are also used on the back panels and decorative sleeve pieces of jackets. These are made on the large frame looms used for cloth production, as a piece of fabric 36 cm (14 in) wide, into which a spacer straw is

woven every 2–3 cm (¾–1¼ in) to create a sequence of strips. These are then cut out and sewn on to the costume, with the raw edges turned in. If a longer 'ribbon' is required — for example, for the front edges of a jacket — the selvages are joined.

Some groups weave warp-striped coloured silk ribbons as decorative bands to be sewn on to skirts. Again several are woven at once, by leaving gaps in the warp. Also common are narrow (2.5–6 cm; 1–2⅓ in) warp-faced cotton and silk bands for tying gaiters, puttees and aprons, which are usually woven on smaller frame looms than those used for making cloth. Similar but wider bands are used as ties on baby-carriers. In Shidong an especially fine multicoloured ribbon is woven out of silk, with a warp float pattern on the front only. The Gejia use a body-tensioned loom to make waist and puttee ties, weaving with the warp tensioned on their big toes as they sit on the ground. Some Miao groups tie the warp on a post and tension the cloth beam around their body as they work sitting on a chair.

A particularly sophisticated weave has recently been identified on baby-carriers from the Geyi area (near Taijiang) in the south-east, although the details of this weaving technique are still speculative (Boudot 1994). Further interesting techniques will undoubtedly be revealed in other remote areas.

DYES AND CALENDERING

The most common dye in Guizhou is vegetable indigo, usually made by women, which is used