

Taiwan Aboriginal Textiles: Translations and Transformations, An Exhibition by Yushan Tsai

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The Shung Ye Museum of Formosan Aborigines is located on Yang Ming Mountain overlooking Taipei city in Taiwan. This summer from June 19 through August 31, 2012 the museum will present an exhibition called "**Recovering Lost Woven Treasures**". It will consist of eighty six reproductions and creative interpretations of beautiful historic textiles from Taiwan's "first peoples", the *yuanzhumin*, woven and embroidered by Professor Yushan Tsai. She is an accomplished textile professional, scholar and artist with vision and a mission. The exhibition is the culmination of more than ten years of her research and textile reproduction work. In Figure 1 we see her modeling a beautiful costume from the Rukai indigenous group.

When I lived in Taiwan from 1996 to 1999 I was a frequent visitor to the museum. It was established by a private foundation in 1985 and opened its doors in 1994. Its mission was to showcase a private collection of artifacts from Taiwan's indigenous peoples, promote, research and stimulate public awareness and cultural and artistic values of these through the display of its permanent collection, special programs and exhibitions.



Figure 1. Yushan Tsai in
Traditional Rukai dress.

As a visitor to the museum, it was the collection of traditional textiles which immediately attracted my attention. Colorful and varied fabrics and garments were set within the cultural context of their respective groups. The equipment and techniques which had been used to produce them were included in the display. For a hands-on weaver and textile historian like me, these displays were valuable sources of information and a powerful motivation to seek further information.

In the early days of my research I could find little information published in English about these textiles. I did find some old Japanese books and catalogues from private collections, but I do not speak or read either Chinese or Japanese so their text was lost to me. I looked for other sources of information and my quest soon took me to the Fu Jen Catholic University Department of Textiles and Clothing, College of Human Ecology, where I met Professor Yushan Tsai. Here I was able to talk to the professors and examine the collection of historic textiles which would become the basis for a departmental museum in this University near Taipei.

I am happy to say that progress has been made since then in researching and publishing about these textiles. Yushan has authored and published several books alone and in co-operation with her colleagues at Fu Jen University. (A list of her publications will be found at the end of this article.) "Heartbeats from the Taiwan Indigenous Loom" (*isbn 978-986692295-4) a bilingual publication from the Chinese Textiles and Clothing Center at Fu Jen Catholic University



Figure 2. Heads motif, possibly reference to trophy heads. Reproduction of an old textile by Yushan Tsai.

is especially welcome.

Statistically, the *yuanzhumin* constitute a small minority of non-Han Chinese population not more than two percent of the total population of the Island which is predominantly Han Chinese. But with recent political changes, interest in the aboriginal cultures has been part of a shift to a more “Taiwanese” identity. Besides matters of ethnic pride, official recognition of the minorities bestows certain legal rights to those groups and grants them some some favorable economic concessions.

The history of the *yuanzhumin* is interesting and goes back a long way. They speak languages which belong to the Austronesian family and are racially distinct from the Han Chinese who migrated to the island starting from the sixteenth century onward. Austronesian is one of the largest language families with speakers dispersed widely throughout maritime South East Asia and the Pacific Islands linking the Taiwan groups to the wider Austronesian world. It seems likely that the early aboriginal settlers quickly divided the island off into their own territories where distinctive cultures were able to developing relative isolation. This is easily observed in the textile styles which have preserved their distinct tribal identity over long periods of time.



Figure 3. Creative transformation of Yami textile patterns integrated with painted boat designs. Yushan Tsai.

Head hunting was part of the culture of the Taiwan groups (except for the Yami) as it was in other Austronesian populations but it was ended by the 1930s during the period of Japanese occupation 1895-1945. Taking heads had bestowed status through valor on the victorious hunter and there were ceremonial aspects to it, too. The Japanese occupiers also discouraged the *yuanzhumin* from weaving their traditional textiles and practicing the art of the tattoo. It is worth noting that patterns on clothing and easily visible tattoos enhanced the status and aesthetic appeal of the wearer and would have revealed the individual's tribal affiliations.

Some of the tattoo patterns seem to be reminiscent of old black and white textile patterns on ramie textiles which I saw in the museum, but experts disagree on the connection between tattoo and textile patterns. Both patterning and predominant color combinations reflect aesthetic preferences and tribal affinity and possibly the original availability of dye stuffs.

With increasing population pressures from Chinese immigrants, some of the aboriginal groups retreated to the mountainous uplands where they lived in relative isolation with a degree of cultural continuity until modern times. The Yami (Tao) live on Orchid Island some sixty miles apart from the main island of Taiwan and they are the most isolated of all. There is evidence suggesting that the Yami reached Orchid Island less than a thousand years ago from the Batan islands in the Bashi Channel between Taiwan and Luzon, the largest of the Philippine Islands.

Professor Tsai has made a special study of Yami textiles as part of a co-operative research project with a team from the Kobe Design University, Japan and presents some of the resulting samples in her current exhibition. We may assume that the unique Yami patterns in blue and white and their weaving techniques reflect a very ancient continuity. Like most of the other *yuanzhumin* groups, the Yami originally wove their cloth a back strap looms using fibers from local forms of ramie which differ from that used on the main island. Today these native fiber plants have been replaced by manufactured cotton yarn. In Figure 3 we see Yushan's adaptation of Yami traditional patterns with designs drawn from painting on their famous fishing boats. See Figure 3.

Yushan was trained as a textile professional in France and has been Associate Professor of Textile Design in the Department of Textiles and Clothing, College of Human Ecology, Fu Jen Catholic University, Taipei since 1993. Under the inspiration and guidance of Chairman Sister Maryta Lauman, head of the department, a collection of historic textiles from Taiwan and mainland china has been assembled. This fine collection is now housed in a small research museum, which provides valuable resource material for study by staff and students. Figure 4 shows Yushan's contemporary expression of textiles from a traditional source.



Figure 4. Memories of Past grandure. Contemporary interpretation of traditional aboriginal textiles. Yushan Tsai.

The Fu Jen museum collection was the starting point for the research which led to Yushan's forthcoming exhibition. From 1999 to 2001 Yushan and her colleagues at Fu Jen University were deeply involved in an educational initiative sponsored by the Council on Indigenous Peoples of the Executive Yuan (Taiwan's legislative body). The faculty was tasked with carefully training a group of fifteen tribal students as 'seed' teachers. Following the two-year course, they would be prepared to go back to their communities to help revitalize their respective textile traditions, conduct research and build cottage industries.



Figure 5. Original Paiwan cloth fragment(left) and analysis work sheet with draft(right).



Figure 6. Needle weaving a Rukai embroidery pattern on the loom. Yushan Tsai.



Figure 7. Yushan at her dobby style sample loom. She is re-weaving the pattern from the Pinpu man's vest in Figure 8.

Yushan has used all available resources in researching for her creative re-productions of the old aboriginal textiles. There are museum and private collections with actual specimens, old books and catalogues with photographs and contemporary photographs of the old pieces. (Figure 8) and.. But how would one determine what had gone into its making and how could it be reproduced?

You would have to count the threads in warp (the "up and down" threads) and weft (the "across threads") and note the way they interact with each other. This over

and under path of the weft across the warp is called the interlacement. These interactions could then be recorded in a specialized standard code on a paper graph called a "weaving draft". From the directions derived from the draft you could set up your loom and proceed to reproduce it. Or you could make your own variations as Yushan has done.

Pattern can be either woven into the cloth or embroidered on top of a foundation cloth. Recording information in this kind of format preserves the instructions for making the cloth even if the original sample is no longer present. In this exhibition Yushan has woven some samples but others have been embroidered. In the case of embroidery, this painstaking work includes counting the threads of the foundation cloth in order to space the stitches evenly and build the patterns uniformly. In the case of weaving, colored weft threads may be used to build the pattern into the structure of the cloth. Figure 6 shows Yushan needle weaving by hand a Rukai embroidery pattern into a warp on her loom. This pattern could later be converted into a loom-controlled wave on a dobby loom at a great saving of time and effort.



Figure 8. (Left) Original garment, Pinpu male's vest. The process of analyzing, drafting and re-weaving historic textiles is an arduous and exacting art but one which Yushan Tsai has mastered completely.

Weaving complex patterns on a simple loom, such as the back strap loom traditionally used by the *yuanzhumin*, is a very time consuming and exacting process. A great deal of effort must be devoted to counting and selecting threads, warp and weft, with which to build the pattern. The same patterns may be more efficiently created by using a dobby loom such as the variety used by Yushan to make her samples.(Figure 7) This word is actually a corruption of "draw boy" an archaic term applied to the weaver's helpers who manually controlled the warp thread by pulling on individual draw threads. In Yushan's sample dobby arrangement, the warp threads may be picked up using selected levers needed for each row of weaving. She has taught her *yuanzhumin* students how to weave their patterns using the dobby mechanism to expedite their production.

Some of the oldest textiles which Yushan examined are woven from ramie yarn. This is a tough, thick fiber derived from a variety of nettle, which the *yuanzhumin* traditionally harvested and processed by hand. The fiber is rather stiff and thick in spite of thorough hand processing. Figure 9 shows a hank of hand spun ramie yarn used by the Atyal. The resulting textile can be quite dense making it difficult to see the interlacings of closely packed threads even with powerful magnifiers.



Figure 9. Atayal ramie yarn, Hand spun by Bakan Chan. Collection of the author.

Yushan has worked both from original textiles and photographs to create her reconstructions. In some cases converted embroidered patterns into woven patterns for her dobby loom. She has patiently counted and recorded the stitches of lovely old embroidered patterns, graphed them and given them new life in her creative transformations. Through the medium of her crisp and impeccably woven and embroidered samples we are encouraged to take a fresh look at the wealth of color, pattern, composition, variety of materials and techniques employed in making these meaningful cloths.

Professor Tsai's work focuses on woven and embroidered patterns and structural analysis of rare fabrics representing thirteen of the fourteen aboriginal tribes of Taiwan: Atayal, Truku, Sedeq, Yami, Bunun, Tsou, Puyuma, Paiwan, Saisiyat, Rukai, plus Pin-Pu, Amis and Thao tribe's embroideries. She intimately knows these textiles from the inside out and in "**Recovering Lost Woven Treasures**" presents us with a unique glimpse of a rich and varied textile heritage framed in a new vision for the twenty first century. In spite of the fact that she was often working long hours in chilly museum vaults, thread by thread, stitch by stitch she persevered in her analyses until she unlocked the secrets within the old fragments of fragile cloth and brought them to life in a new form. She has freely shared these discoveries with us in this exhibition and through her teaching has passed on her knowledge to future generations of weavers and textile scholars and for this we are grateful.



Figure 10. Rukai embroidery sampler. Yushan Tsai.



Figure 11. Finished swatch based on a pattern from Pinpu male vest, see figure 8. Woven by Yushan Tsai.

***Books by Yushan Tsai:** Tsai has been the sole author of three different books, all published by the Taichung County Cultural Center in Taichung, Taiwan. *Tablet Weaving: Technique and Creation* (1998), *Shuttle Weaving Technique and Textile Structure analysis* (2000, reprint in 2007, 1200 NT \$), and *Textile Fabrics of Aboriginal Tribes in Taiwan: An Analysis of Textile Structure and Weaving Patterns of the Atayal Tribe* (2006, with English translation, 700 NT \$).

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