

Patricia Cheesman's latest book on Lao-Tai Textiles

Patricia Cheesman, *Lao-Tai Textiles: The Textiles of Xam Nuea and Muang Phuan* Studio Naenna, Chiang Mai, www.infothai.com/naenna, 2004, 21.3cm x 28.7 cm, 298pp, 532 colour illustrations, 53 b/w, 3 maps, hard cover and paperback ISBN 974 272 915 8.

I must declare an interest in advance in that I purchased one of Patricia Cheesman's early books, *Lan Na Textiles: Yuan Lue Lao* written with Songsak Prangwatthanakun and published in 1987, on my 'road to Damascus trip' to Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai in 1988 when I bought my first two old Lao textiles and was initiated into worship of these fine weavings.

Cheesman has been studying Lao textiles for 29 years and has the advantage of fluent Lao and intimate knowledge of Tai culture from living in Laos for 8 years and in Thailand for 19 years. The book is based on empirical research conducted in the field using only historical textiles older than 50 years in Cheesman's own collection. She has required a minimum of five persons to confirm each piece of information and concluded hundreds of interviews over many years of returning to the same villages again and again and building trust. She used original textiles for identification since photographs of textiles were not useful to the majority of informants over 60 years of age and with poor eyesight. Even gifts of eyeglasses did not overcome the problem of lack of experience of two-dimensional images.

Cheesman chose to use the term Lao-Tai rather than Tai, more commonly used in academic research to speakers of the Tai-Kam-Sui-Kadai language groups. The term Lao is the oldest known reference to these peoples and used continuously in Chinese historical documents from 271 BC to 1067 AD.

Whilst originally aspiring to write one book on all the textiles of Laos, after five years she had barely covered half the intended area and for the sake of an in-depth study decided to cover each region in different volumes. The current book focuses on the textiles and clothing styles of Muang Xam Nuea and Muang Phuan. Cheesman retains the indigenous word '*muang*' meaning the control over manpower and covering all aspects of political, geographic and administrative systems of the Tai prior to Western geography. The two Lao-Tai entities studied approximate to regions known today as Houa Phan and Xiang Khoang provinces in Laos but with influence spreading to present-day provinces of Thanh Hoa and Nghe An in Vietnam.

Core to Cheesman's research and classification of textiles is that Lao-Tai peoples used textiles and clothing to express their desire to belong to certain communities whilst pledging allegiance to their chiefs. Clothing styles were outward signs of allegiance and when people relocated to different *muang* under a new chief they changed their clothing and textiles accordingly. Thus she identifies textiles by their most recent provenance giving localities in an historical setting. This contrasts to the traditional approach of explicit identities along ethnic lines. Generally Cheesman's research indicated that, unlike clothing, textiles made for household use maintained their original style despite migrations and deportations as they were not publicly seen. Discontinuation of home-produced textiles indicated availability of commercial household textiles.

One of the purposes of the current volume was Cheesman's desire to present a system for the understanding and identification of Lao-Tai textiles. To this end the organisation of the book into its particular chapters is both a help and a hindrance since it may require sight of several chapters to identify a particular textile. Chapters include the usage chapters of: Textiles for women's everyday wear; Textiles for women's ceremonial dress; Textiles for men's clothing; Textiles for shamanic rituals and Buddhist ceremonies; and Household textiles. There are also chapters on Textile motifs and symbolism and Techniques for dyeing and weaving. Where the book really excels is in the profuse use of (generally good quality) illustrations of textiles around descriptive text with clear annotation on each page of each textile. I and fellow Lao-Tai textile enthusiasts have found it a good aid to examination of our collections and opening our eyes to identification of their use and regional origin.

Although, since Cheesman published her first books in the late 1980s, the amount of literature on the subject has increased substantially, in the current book, as Robyn Maxwell states in her foreword, Cheesman 'concentrates on bringing clarity, recognition and cultural understanding to yet another set of the region's traditional textiles in an engaging and accessible style'.

As with Cheesman's previous books this volume is self-published through Studio Naenna and only available via the Studio and the local Suriwong Book Centre in Chiang Mai. I am, however, pursuing with the Studio availability of the book since I feel that it is such a worthwhile addition to any serious enthusiast's library.

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