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The Object of Love: Exploring Traditional Baby Carriers Used by the Miao People of the Huawu Village*

By

Cho Hsin-ying

Assistant professor, Department of Beauty Science, National Taichung University of Science and Technology.

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Abstract

The Huawu Miao Village is located in a closed canyon in the north-west region of Guizhou Province, China. The location is remote and difficult to access. Therefore, the settlement developed a closed, farming-oriented, and self-sustaining living environment. The Huawu Miao men and women often use baby carriers to carry their children on their backs while farming or doing household chores. The baby carrier culture remains universally popular in the village. These carriers reflect the traditional techniques and cultural implications of the local people. In this study, a field survey was adopted as a research approach to gain an understanding of the techniques, pattern designs and meanings of baby carriers used by the Huawu Miao people. The patterns observed in baby carriers are closely related to the historical relocation of the Miao people, local living environments and the Miao creation myth.

Key words: Miao textile, baby carrier, quilting, bird pattern.

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Introduction

Baby carriers are a piece of cloth used to cover and carry infants. The use of baby carriers can be observed on Egyptian hieroglyphs dating back roughly 5,000 years ago (Chiang, 2016: 16). Baby carriers serve an essential function in people's everyday lives. They free carers' arms so that they may handle daily affairs while caring for their children (Hrdy, 2000: 199). Baby carriers are widely used in a number of countries, including China, India, Japan, Europe, and the United States (Fang, 2007: 33). Baby carriers made by ethnic minorities in Southwest China offer more than just practical functions, they reflect the traditional workmanship, cultural practices, and life views of different ethnicities. Baby carriers are prevalent among the Miao people residing in Southwest China (Lee and Knothe, 2013: 38). Baby carriers are considered the second umbilical cord between Miao women and their children. Miao women generally spend an increased amount of time and effort sewing their baby carriers by hand. Therefore, baby carriers reflect the handcrafting skill of Miao women (Kuo, 2010: 17).

Baby carriers have become a crucial collection in museums in Taiwan because of their exquisite craftsmanship and distinctive ethnic characteristics. The National Museum of Prehistory has collected numerous baby carriers from Asia. Since 2014, this museum has collaborated with the Ministry of Culture of Taiwan to host the "Fertility, Blessings, and Protection: The Culture of Baby Carriers" international touring exhibition. The exhibition was conducted at Taiwan's National Museum of Prehistory in 2014; Stony Brook University's Charles B. Wang Center, Long Island, New York, in 2015; University of Malaya Art Gallery in 2017; and Chulalongkorn University Museum of Natural History, Thailand, in 2018. In addition to displaying baby carriers from Asia, the exhibition showcases children's modern clothing created by the Taiwan-based company Les Enphants Co., Ltd, which drew inspiration from baby carriers made

by ethnic minorities in Southwest China. The author of this study met Tsou Cheng-chung at the venue of the 2014 Fertility, Blessings, and Protection: The Culture of Baby Carriers exhibition. As a collector of Chinese folk art, Tsou began his collection in 1988 and has collected more than 1300 baby carriers made by Chinese ethnic minorities. He told the author that he had recently acquired numerous baby carriers from the Miao in Huawu Village of Qianxi County, Guizhou Province, China. Because of the remote location of Huawu Village, no research has been conducted on the baby carriers made therein. The research questions of this study are as follows: What are the production methods and the meaning of patterns on baby carriers created by Huawu Miao people?, Have Miao people in Huawu Village in recent decades changed their traditional baby carriers production and patterns?

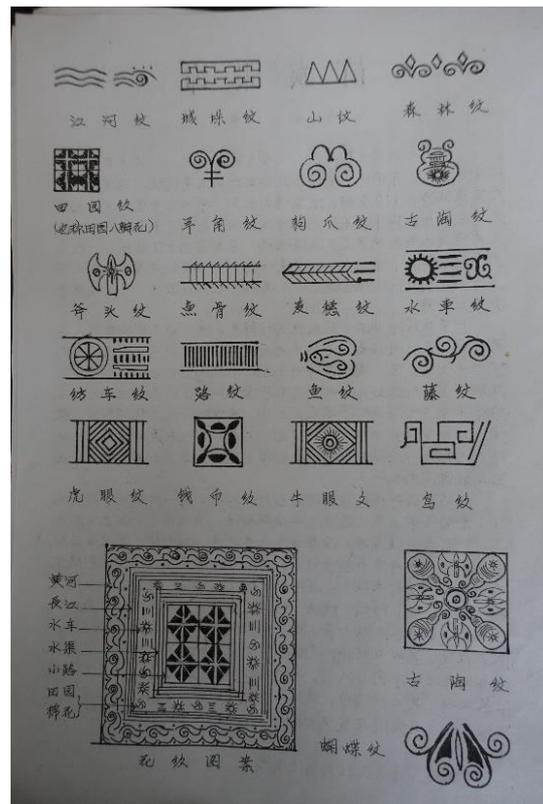
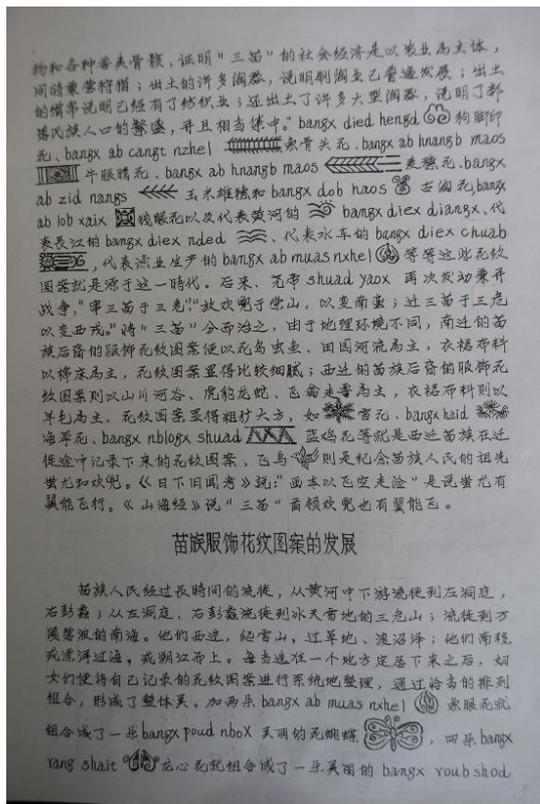
Methodology/Limitations

To answer the above research question, the author conducted a field survey in an attempt to elucidate the local name, production, and pattern meaning of baby carriers. A photoshoot was arranged with Mr. Tsou Cheng-chung to capture images of the baby carriers used by the Huawu Miao people between 1930 and 1980 (The watermark “Totem Empire” shown on the photograph represents the photography copyright from Mr. Tsou Cheng-chung). Bryman (2004) suggests that if researchers have a fairly clear focus for an investigation rather than a very general notion of a research topic before beginning their research, the semi-structured interview is a more appropriate data collection tool. Because this study had clear research questions, a semi-structured interview method was used. Before conducting the semi-structured interview, the researcher designed an interview guide based on the research question and objectives to serve as a guideline and auxiliary tool during the interview (Bryman, 2004).

Based on the research questions, this research drafted an interview guide that was used for conducting interviews with local residents in Huawu Village. The interview questions were designed based on the research question. Examples of the interview questions include, “Are the traditional baby carriers of Huawu Village made by the user’s mother or herself?” “What do the three-square patterns on the baby carriers represent?” “What is the meaning of baby carrier patterns, including birds, dragons, and clouds, to local residents?” In addition, the author printed out photographs of the traditional baby carriers made by the Miao in Huawu Village that were taken at Tsou Cheng-chung’s studio and brought them along on the trip to Huawu Village.

Snowball sampling was used in this study. Tsou Cheng-chung introduced the author to Professor Yang Ting-shuo, who is of Miao ethnicity in Guiyang and works at the Institute of Anthropology and Ethnology, Jishou University. Professor Yang has conducted in-depth research on Miao culture. After arriving in Guiyang City of Guizhou Province, the author interviewed Professor Yang. The author visited Huawu Village and explained to the manager of a local hotel the purpose of the current visit to Huawu Miao Village is to gain a further insight into the production of local baby carriers and the meaning of carrier patterns. The hotel manager introduced the author to Chen Huai, a local woman with more than 40 years of experience in embroidery. After being interviewed, Chen Huai introduced the author to Yang Mei, a retired local elementary school teacher, who then suggested Yang Ching-an as being appropriate to interview in the context of this research. Yang Ching-an is not only the former village chief but also an expert in Qianxi Miao culture. Yang is dedicated to research on the meaning of Miao textile patterns and characters used by the Miao as well as the local culture of Huawu Village.

During his interview, Yang Ching-an showed the author his research manuscript on the meaning of the textile patterns used by the Miao in Qianxi (Figures 1 and 2). He explained to the author how he recorded the meaning of the patterns based on the oral narration of older residents among the Miao in Qianxi. Yang also claimed that following the increasing economic development of Miao Village, young adults of the no longer pay attention to or attempt to understand the meaning of traditional textile patterns, which prompted him to record the meaning of the patterns. Wang Yu-fen, the wife of Yang, is an embroiderer, national singer and choreographer. She showed the author her collection of photographs taken during the Huawu's Tiaohua Festival in the 1980s as well as the baby carriers she made (Figure 3 and Supplemental file).



Figures 1 and 2. The samples of Yang Ching-an's research manuscript. Photograph by the author.



Figure 3. Miao people from the village of Huawu dancing during the Tiaohua Festival in 1981. Photo provided by Wang Yu-fen.

Due to time and budget constraints, this research only involved a 2-week field survey. The author of this study visited the Huawu Village and Jishou University between January 20, 2016 and February 3, 2016. During the expedition, four local Huawu Miao people and one Miao scholar serving in Jishou University were interviewed to elucidate local interpretations of the patterns commonly used to decorate baby carriers and to determine the correlation between local oral history and myths and the meanings of the patterns (Table 1). The interviewees' responses were recorded using digital voice recording pens so that the interviews could be analyzed in detail afterwards.

Table 1. List of interviewees

Interviewee	Gender	Status/Occupation	Nationality	Age	Interview date
Yang Ting-shuo (楊庭碩)	Male	Professor of the faculty of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences of Jishou University	Miao	69	January 22, 2016
Chen Huai (陳懷)	Female	Villager	Miao	57	January 27, 2016

Yang Mei (楊梅)	Female	Villager/Retired teacher of Huawu elementary school	Miao	65	January 27, 2016
Yang Ching-an (楊清安)	Male	Former village chief	Miao	71	January 28, 2016
Wang Yu-fen (王育芬)	Female	Villager (Yang Ching-an's wife)	Miao	63	January 28, 2016

Location and Formation of Huawu Miao Village

The Huawu Miao Village is located in Xinren Township, Qianxi County, a northwestern region of Guizhou Province, China. The village is constructed in Yachi River Canyon, a valley occupying an area of approximately 8.2 square kilometres. It is located in an area that intersects two bodies of water (i.e., the Yachi River and the Liugui River) and three counties (i.e., the Qianxi, Zhijin, and Qingzhen Counties) (Tseng, 2005: 6) (Figure 4). The locals refer to the Huawu Miao Village as “Huawuji”, meaning “roof under the rock” in the Miao dialect (Cui, 2002: 4680).



Figure 4. Map of Huawu Village (Illustration reproduced from Tseng, 2005).

In “The Brief History of the Miao people” (Lang, 1985: 3), historians and Miao experts classified the Miao people into three major dialect zones based on their location

and language, specifically, Eastern Zone (Western Xiang), Central Zone (Southeastern Qian), and Western Zone (Chuan, Qian, and Dian). The dialects spoken in the three areas are mutually unintelligible. Moreover, they have comparatively different beliefs. The Huawu Miao people belong to the Western Zone (Qianxi County Record Writing Committee, 1990: 141). Most Miao people in Huawu are fluent in Hmong, which they use in daily life, and Mandarin, which is used when interacting with people outside their community. According to Yang Mei, a retired local elementary school teacher, the village comprises only ten Han families and four to five Yi families, and the rest of the families are Miao. Even the Han and Yi people in this village speak Hmong rather than their own languages. Therefore, the children in Yang's school initially speak only Hmong and must receive bilingual education from first to third grade, in which they are taught in Hmong and learn to translate their language into Mandarin. In the fourth to sixth grade, the children are taught exclusively in Mandarin.

The folklore of the Western Zone mentions that the Miao people are descendants of "San-Miao" (Su, 2014). The "San-Miao" was led by Huan Dou during the period of Yao, Shun, and Yu governance in China (r. 2357– 2198 b.c.e). In this period, the governors waged a war against the "San-Miao" and defeated it. The majority of the group resettled in the barren mountainous regions south of the Yangtze River.

During the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368 C.E.–1912 C.E.), the Miao revolted against the government and were met with brutal suppression. Many of the Miao fled from Jiangxi to northwest Guizhou; thus, most of the ancestral history of the Miao in this region dates from the Ming and Qing dynasties. According to historical records, the Huawu Village was established by the ancestors of the Huawu Miao people who arrived in Qianxi County, Guizhou Province in Qing Dynasty roughly 300 years ago (Figure 5). They subsequently led secluded agricultural lifestyles where men were farmers and

women were tailors (Wang and Huang, 2012: 22). The Miao in Huawu practiced monogamy, with families typically consisting of parents, spouses, and children across three generations (Qianxi County Record Writing Committee, 1990: 141).



Figure 5. A thatched wooden house in the Huawu Miao Village left standing from the Qing Dynasty. Photograph by the author.

The Miao people were distinguished into numerous subgroups based on location, clothing, and lifestyles, including Gaopo Miao, Pingdi Miao, Changqun Miao, Duanqun Miao, Hong Miao, Hei Miao, Bai Miao, Qing Miao and Waishu Miao, among others. Thus, the Miao ethnic was also referred to as “Bai Miao” (Laumann, 1993: 8) (Chinese name: “百苗” (hundred Miao groups), not to be confused with “白苗”, which is also spelled “Bai Miao”). According to the official classification of ethnic groups in China, the Huawu Miao people belong to the “Waishu” (side comb) subgroup, which earned its name by the way local Miao women wear their hair (Qianxi County Record Writing Committee, 1990: 139). The hairstyles worn by married and single women are different (Figure 6). Single women typically wear straight braids that fall to the

shoulders or braids twisted into a side bun, secured with a colorful embroidered hair band decorated with hanging white beads. Married women combine roughly one kilogram of fine black thread made from dyed sheep's wool with their own hair to make disk-shaped hair buns, which they wear slightly tilted backward on the head. The bun is secured with a crescent comb inserted to one side, hence the name "Waishu Miao" coined by the Han people (Tseng, 2005: 93).

In 1987, the construction of the Dongfeng Hydropower Station by the Chinese government caused the water level of Wu River to rise, flooding the Huawu Village. Most of the residents relocated to the Gaojin Village (locals refer to the village as Gaojia Village) near the Qianxi County (Chou, 2011: 105). In 2004, the government commenced the construction of a connecting road to Huawu Village. At present, the "Twenty-Eight Bends" is the village's primary transport route (Chou, 2011: 106). Now, Miao, Yi, and Han people reside in the Huawu Village, with Miao people constituting roughly 98% of the overall village population. At the time of research, 236 households with 996 people reside in the village.



Figure 6. Hairstyle of a married (left) and single (right) Huawu Miao woman. (Illustration reproduced from Tseng, 2005).

Baby Carriers

Baby carriers, also known as “back fans 揸扇” in the Huawu Village, are long straps attached to a piece of fabric used to tie, cover, and carry infants or young children. To balance housework and farm work, the Huawu Miao women and men often care for their young children by carrying them on their back (Figures 7-9). The baby carrier culture is popular to this day. According to the customs of the Huawu Miao people, baby carriers are given by the mother to her daughters after they get married. Wang Yufen mentioned, “*When a woman is married and has children, her mother would make many baby carriers for her. Some make five or six. Some even make ten.*” Local women also make their own baby carriers. Traditional baby carriers are made by hand and extremely time-consuming. Local women expressed that it takes approximately 6 months to complete a single baby carrier.



Figure 7. A male villager (Chen Huai's son) carries his child in a baby carrier while doing household chores. Photograph by the author.



Figures 8 and 9. The Huawu Miao women use baby carriers to carry their young children on their back. Photograph by the author.

The baby carriers used by the Huawu Miao people are made from batik or embroidered fabric. Local villagers explained that batik baby carriers were still used roughly ten years ago (Figure 10). However, they are now rarely used, because of the dominant prevalence of embroidered baby carriers. Chen Huai mentioned that traditionally, wax painting knives dipped in wax are used to draw patterns on the fabric for the baby carriers. The fabric is then soaked in a vat of bark boiled dye (Figure 11).



Figure 10. (Left) A traditional batik baby carrier with floral patterns used by the Huawu Miao people. Tsou Cheng-chung collection.

Figure 11. (Right) Huawu Miao woman dyeing batik fabric. (Illustration reproduced from Bijie Labour Committee, 2007, p5).

Traditional Huawu Miao embroidered baby carriers are made with natural cotton, silk, horsetail hair, ribbon, and cut paper. The patterns on embroidered baby carriers used by the Huawu Miao people are purely illustrated and embroidered by hand. The patterns illustrated on the baby carriers are largely traditional quilting patterns (Figures 12-16). The Miao embroidery in Huawu is applique embroidery, in which required patterns are outlined on paper, cut with scissors, fixed on silk, and embroidered according to their shapes. Huawu Miao women generally use straight-

stitch or horsetail hair edge-stitch techniques to create exquisite and stereoscopic quilting patterns.

Embroidery represents a traditional folk art of the Miao and is rooted in more than 2000 years of history. The earliest embroidery unearthed in China originates from Changsha Chumu, a tomb built during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (770 B.C.E–221 B.C.E), and features remnants of Miao embroidery (Shen, 2011). Miao embroidery has been listed as a national intangible cultural heritage because of its unique techniques and patterns (Ho, 2014: 53-55). In February 2021, Xi Jin-ping, the current leader of China, surveyed Huawu to understand its local economic development and advocate for the conservation and development of its traditional textiles, recognizing local Miao embroidery and batik as the key industry of Huawu for promoting economic development and revitalization.



Figure 12. The Huawu Miao women (Chen Huai) drawing an embroidery pattern. Photograph by the author.



Figure 13. The embroidery patterns are drawn by hand. Photograph by the author.



Figure 14. (Left) The Huawu Miao women (Chen Huai) making paper pattern. Photograph by the author.



Figure 15. (Right) The paper pattern. Photograph by the author.

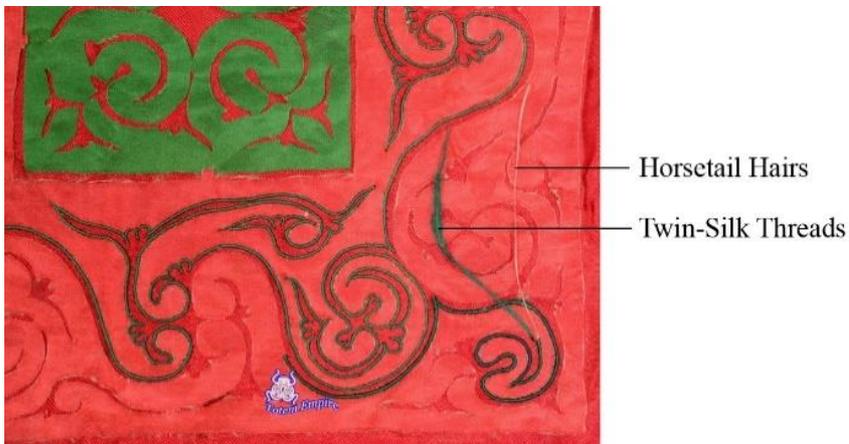


Figure 16. Detail of the unfinished baby carrier. Tsou Cheng-chung collection.

The Meanings of the Colors and Pattern Designs of the Baby Carriers Used by the Huawu Miao People

The Huawu Miao people largely adopt red as the base color for their baby carriers and black as the complementary color. Red is the preferred color of the Miao people. It is the color of blood and represents life and beauty (Yang, 1997: 246). Yang Ching-an explained that the colors and patterns used to make the baby carriers are passed down from mother to daughter. In addition to following tradition, local women also incorporate the inspirations they acquire from their surrounding environment into the patterns. Huawu Village is located in a well-lit and lush plateau. Therefore, the baby carriers made here are colorful and adorned with detailed flower, grass, and vine patterns.

Written language was never developed among the Miao people (Zhang and Liu, 2013: 68). Miao women thus create patterns on baby carriers to record Miao history. These patterns resemble the Miao people's longing for their homeland (Lee and Knothe, 2013: 44-45). Yang Ching-an mentioned that the ornamental edges of the baby carrier represent the Yangtze River, and the multicolored stripes next to them symbolize stratified terrace fields along the rivers, signifying the long hardship that their ancestors endured while relocating from Northern China to the south. The square patterns decorated on the baby carriers represent city walls. Yang Ching-an expressed, "*Baby carriers comprise three squares, representing the cities in which the Miao people once lived. There are two small cities and a large city.*" (Figure 17). To express their longing, the Huawu Miao people embroider the patterns of city walls onto their baby carriers, which gradually evolved into the square patterns observed today.



Figure 17. A traditional embroidered baby carrier used by the Huawu Miao people. Tsou Cheng-chung collection.

Birds are signature patterns on Huawu Miao people's baby carriers. The bird patterns in Huawu differ from those of the Miao people in southeastern Guizhou in their meanings. Hxak Det Mangx Ngul (The Song of Maple), a myth that has been passed down among the Miao people in southeastern Guizhou for generations, relays the story of a butterfly born in a maple tree that falls in love with water bubbles and lays 12 eggs, which hatch with the help of a Ridge Bird. The first ancestor of humans, Jangx Vangb, was thus born along with everything else in the world. The Ridge Bird is enshrined as a sacred bird for its role in the creation of humans and is therefore represented in the embroidered bird depictions produced by the Miao in southeastern Guizhou (Kuo, 2010: 36-37 ; Xie, 2005: 24-25). However, local residents have attested that the legend of the Ridge Bird does not circulate among the people of Huawu. Yang Ching-an stated that the bird patterns exhibited on local baby carriers originate from the bird-worship culture of "San-Miao". The "San-Miao" worshipped bird totems (Jin, 2004: 76). Passages in the *Classic of the Great Wilderness: The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, an ancient book dating to the pre-Qin era, asserted, "Huan Dou has a human face with a bird's beak, and he has wings." (Birrell, 1999: 170) and "Beyond the Northwest Seas, north of the

Black Waters, there are people who have wings. Their name is the Miao People...Huan Dou as their leader." (Birrell, 1999: 188). These passages described the leader of the "San-Miao", Huan Dou, to be a man with wings and the ability to fly. During Huan Dou's rule, the "San-Miao" people were said to be able to fly, confirming the Miao ancestors' worship of bird totems.

Miao women in Huawu also use patterns of bird pairs to pray for fertility and a happy marriage. Figures 18 and 19 show the pattern of a pair of birds on a Huawu Miao baby carrier. The upper section of the fabric presents twin birds facing the sun. Yang Ching-an stated that the Huawu Miao people use the pattern of two birds facing each other in aspiration of fertility and longevity. He explained that the Huawu Village is located in an isolated mountainous location. Due to the poor living environment and lack of survival and medical resources, the Huawu Miao people deem survival and procreation extremely important factors of life and to have many descendants is a common goal among the village people. Therefore, village women tend to embroider the pattern of the two birds facing the sun onto their baby carriers to pray for fertility and procreation. The lower section depicts a combined pattern of twin birds facing the sun and dragon patterns. The dragon patterns encircle a number of sun patterns, which also represent dragon eggs. The entire fabric implies the Huawu Miao people's worship of fertility. Yang Mei said that bird pairs represent Miao couples living happily ever after, with Wang Yu-fen mentioning that birds tend to live in pairs like human couples.



Figures 18 and 19. Pattern of a pair of birds and dragon. Tsou Cheng-chung collection.

The pattern of four birds encircling the sun is often observed on the baby carriers of the Huawu Miao people (Figures 20 and 21). According to Yang Ching-an, in Figure 20, the upper section of the fabric is divided into a left and right pattern, each illustrating four birds encircling the sun, separated by pomegranate flowers. The pomegranate contains many seeds which implies “many children”. The heads and tails of the birds extend upward, representing the high spirit. The “” pattern of sun symbolizes life. Yang Ting-shuo explained that Miao fabrics combine the yin () and the yang () to symbolize life. These two symbols represent the unity of man and women. The yin and yang philosophy describes that eternal life can be achieved when yin and yang are combined. The bottom section is a pattern of two birds facing the sun with nine sunflowers aligned in symmetry. The sunflowers encircle an eight-beamed sun. The entire image portrays the worship of birth and fertility.

In Figure 21, the upper section presents two patterns of four birds encircling the sun. The sun is illustrated with four melons and encircled by six sunflowers. The lines used to illustrate the birds are fluid and dynamic. The bottom section presents a pattern

of four birds encircling the sun. The outer section is decorated with butterflies. The Chinese pronunciation of butterfly (dié 蝶) is similar to melon (dié 瓞) and thus coincides with the four melon sun in the centre, creating a pattern of plentiful melon.



Figure 20. (Left) Pattern of four birds encircling the sun and two birds facing the sun. Tsou Cheng-chung collection.

Figure 21. (Right) Pattern of four birds encircling the sun and plentiful melons. Tsou Cheng-chung collection.

Dragons are also a common pattern observed on Huawu Miao people's baby carriers. In Figure 22, the upper section of the fabric presents a pair of male and female dragons, representing the worship of fertility. The bottom section is a pattern of four birds encircling the sun. The middle bird represents the sun with the body of the bird transitioning into curvy clouds. The tail of the bird is decorated with peacock feathers. The birds are primarily presented in red and black. Red represents fire or "fire birds," illustrating brightness and immortality. According to the descriptions of local village people (Chen Huai and Wang Yu-fen), the dragons and birds are surrounded by vines, and the ♡ shape represents flower petals.



Figure 22. Pattern of two dragons and four birds encircling the sun. Tsou Cheng-chung collection.

Yang (2006) reported that Miao people in Laos have integrated Guanyin, the Buddhist goddess of mercy, into their religious faith, regularly praying to Guanyin for children and protection. Similarly, the Miao in Huawu pray to sacred trees to protect their children (Wang and Huang, 2012: 22-23). According to Yang Mei, the Miao in Huawu have not adopted any religion, including Christianity or Buddhism, but sacred trees are a focus of worship (Figure 23). Each stockaded village has an enormous tree regarded as sacred, with villagers praying to the tree for favorable harvests and for children to grow up into adults as strong as the tree itself. The concept of tree worship is reflected in their traditional baby carriers. In Figure 24, the upper section of the fabric presents a pair of sunflowers aligned horizontally and two suns aligned vertically with four pomegranates at the four corners. The countless seeds of the pomegranate fruit represent life and fertility. The bottom section presents the “Tree of Life” in a vase with a pair of butterflies. Two dragons and phoenixes are illustrated on the outer section. Their bodies entwine to create a sense of elegance and rhythm. The entire pattern represents the worship of fertility.



Figure 23. The villagers in Huawu worship at a tree. Illustration reproduced from Chen Wen-rong.



Figure 24. Pattern of pomegranate sunflower, and dragon-phoenixes. Tsou Cheng-chung collection.

Yang Ting-shuo and local villagers mentioned that to the Miao people, the dragon is the deity of protection, and dragon patterns symbolize protection and blessing for their children, family, home, and harvest. Yang Ting-shuo stated, “*Miao women are*

afraid to lose their children to disaster or illness. They ask the gods for protection by depicting the dragon, praying that their children may live a long life.” Dragons are frequently featured in Miao embroidery, particularly that found in southeastern Guizhou and Xiangxi, and have been the subject of numerous studies in these regions. The form of the dragons depicted in Miao embroidery are not uniform and are often amalgamations of several animals. Miao scholars have categorized the dragon forms featured in southeastern Guizhou and Xiangxi as those incorporating buffalo, silkworms, bird heads, human heads, fish, and centipedes (Xie, 2005: 26-28; Lu and Chen, 2012: 182-183). Dragons represent farming and reproductive traditions in Miao societies. The Miao, who use buffalos for plowing, combine the imagery of a dragon body and buffalo head to pray for favorable weather. Fish represent fertility in the Miao culture and are combined with dragon imagery to pray for fertility (Huang and Li, 2009: 72-74; Lin, 2019: 94-95). Most of the dragons featured on baby carriers in Huawu are centipede dragons, which are slender and have many feet. Centipede dragons are most frequently featured in Danzhai County in southeastern Guizhou. Owing to the different crafting techniques, the centipede dragons in Danzhai differ considerably from those in Huawu, with the relatively complex forms in Danzhai created through batik, and the simpler forms in Huawu produced through embroidery. In the patterns of the Huawu Miao people, the head of the dragon is illustrated in strange, different, and imaginative ways, and the body of the dragon is typically white and curvy. According to the statement of Yang Mei, the white curves of the dragon body represent the glossy scales on its skin.

Miao embroidery commonly features abstract patterns. Most of the embroidery patterns on Miao costumes in western Guizhou, southern Sichuan, and Yunnan and traditional Miao textiles in Laos depict abstract embroidery patterns. These abstract

patterns bear culturally symbolic meanings (Kuo, 2010: 11; Craig, 2010: 8). The abstract patterns on baby carriers in Huawu include cloud patterns and the “gammadion cross (卐)” patterns. Yang Ching-an stated that cloud patterns are frequently used on traditional baby carriers because the Miao people believe that the universe was formed from clouds and mist. The Miao people’s “Creation Epic” (1993) is a folk song that depicts the creation and development of the universe:

When we reflect on the ancient times, which was the first? Which was the oldest? The clouds and mists were the first. The clouds and mists were the oldest. The clouds are shouting. The mists are roaring. Kedi and Ledi were born together. Kedi is shouting. Ledi is roaring. The sky and the earth are formed...The clouds create white soil. The white soil turns to the sky. The clouds create dark soil. The dark soil turns into the land. The land gives birth into everything else (Yan, 1993: 11-13).

The phrase “*The clouds and mists were the first. The clouds and mists were the oldest*” indicates that the Miao people believe that clouds and mists are the root of all things. Miao ancestors believed the heavens and the earth were formed by the constantly changing clouds. They believed that the earth formed by constantly moving “clouds” or “mists”. They described the movement of the clouds as “*The clouds are shouting. The mists are roaring.*” “*Shout*” and “*roar*” are personifications of clouds and mists, illustrating that the existence of clouds and mists is an objective reality and that they complement each other. The continuous movement and change of clouds and mists formed two godly birds from the chaos of the universe, Kedi and Ledi. Thus, “*Kedi is shouting. Ledi is roaring. The sky and the earth are formed.*” The Miao ancestors used the reproduction and nurturing processes of birds to metaphorically explain the constant movement and change of the clouds and mists and the gradual formation of “white soil” (heavens) and “dark soil” (earth) (Shih and Shih, 2005: 27). The song suggests that

Miao people rejected the belief that the physical world was formed by supernatural forces. Rather, they believed that the world was formed by the movement and interaction of materials. The universe, as depicted by the folk song, illustrates the evolution of the universe, sequentially evolving from clouds and mists (water vapor) to soil, the sky, organisms, animals, and humans. The Miao ancestors believed that the earth and everything in it evolved from clouds and mists.

“Clouds and mists,” which the Miao people considered the fundamental elements of the universe, were closely associated with their early living environments. Folk songs described that Miao ancestors initially settled in a place of “land and water with shimmering blue skies.” Later, the Miao people escaped to the high mountains in the south of China after being defeated in war. The images of heavy and ever-changing clouds and mists were constantly refreshed in the minds of the Miao people. Thus, they naturally used clouds and mists to explain the origin of all things (Shih and Shih, 2005: 66-67).

The gammadion cross symbol first appeared on the painted pottery of the Machang Culture (ca. 2300-2000 B.C.) in China (Figure 25). People in ancient China relied on their perceptions of the sun to create a four-beamed sun symbol. The radiance of the sun is a common trait of sun patterns. The gammadion cross is a popular symbol among Chinese ethnic minorities to represent the sun. It symbolizes the sun and brightness and represents people’s worship of the sun (Bo, 2005: 51).



Figure 25. The pottery of the Machang Culture. (Illustration reproduced from Bo, 2005).

According to Yang Ching-an , figures 26-30 show that the traditional batik and embroidered baby carriers made in the Huawu Village are decorated with cloud patterns and the “gammadion cross (卐)” patterns. In Figure 26, the upper section presents swirling clouds forming the “gammadion cross (卐)” symbol (sun pattern). The “XX” symbols mark plains and fields. The lower section presents vines forming the “gammadion cross (卐)” symbol (sun pattern).



Figure 26. A traditional batik baby carrier with cloud patterns and plant patterns. Tsou Cheng-chung collection.

Figure 27 shows the upper section of the fabric presents a pattern of a gammadion cross-shaped sun formed using curvy clouds. Curvy clouds decorate the entire space, illustrating the “clouds shaped the universe” concept in Miao folklore. The bottom section presents a pattern of four birds encircling the sun and the bird pattern in the middle represents the sun. The sides of the fabric are decorated with symmetrical suns and birds. The bottom edge presents a pattern of two birds facing the sun, exemplifying the “sunbird” worship of ancient farming ethnic groups.

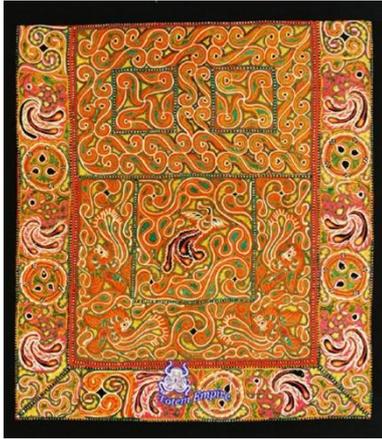


Figure 27. Baby carrier embroidered with the pattern of the gammadion cross-shaped sun and sunbird. Tsou Cheng-chung collection.

In Figure 28, the upper section presents a pattern of a pair of gammadion cross-shaped suns decorated with curvy clouds. The Miao people believe that the universe was formed by clouds. The bottom section presents a pattern of four birds encircling the sun. The wings of the birds transition into clusters of clouds. Five birds encircle the inner four birds with gammadion crosses and clouds scattered randomly around them. Clouds were believed to be theosophical.



Figure 28. Baby carrier embroidered with the pattern of the gammadion cross-shaped sun and four birds encircling the sun. Tsou Cheng-chung collection.

In Figure 29, the upper section presents a pattern of four insects encircling the sun. Insects are an extension of birds. The “☉” pattern of sun symbolizes the egg that hatches into the universe. The bottom section is a pattern of three birds encircling the sun. The bird in the center represents the sun. The gammadion cross-shaped sun and curvy clouds are used to fill the empty spaces around the three birds. The birds are in flight and their feet are represented as curvy clouds. This pattern illustrates the Miao people’s belief that the clouds shaped the universe.



Figure 29. Baby carrier embroidered with the pattern of four insects and three birds encircling the sun. Tsou Cheng-chung collection.

In Figure 30, the upper section of the fabric presents a pair of gammadion cross-shaped suns encircled by six sunflowers and curvy clouds. The bottom section is simplified into three birds encircling the sun. The bird patterns are decorated with peacock feathers and raised heads, seemingly bringing the pattern to life. Red is the primary color used on this fabric. Red is the color of fire and blood and therefore symbolizes fire and life.

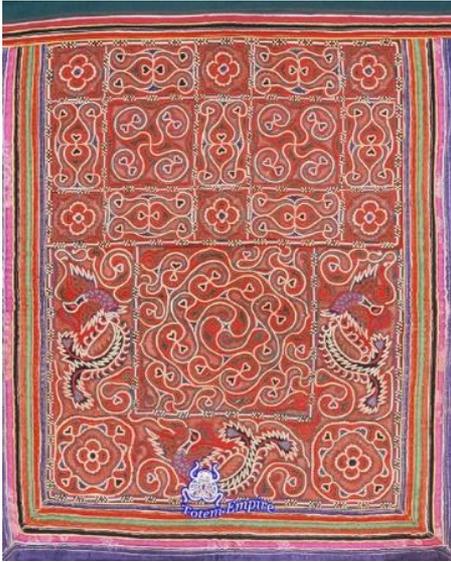


Figure 30. Baby carrier embroidered with the pattern of the gammadion cross-shaped sun and three birds encircling the sun. Tsou Cheng-chung collection.

During the field survey, the author discovered that baby carriers used by many women in the village have spiral computerized embroidery patterns and that some of the baby carriers have decorations (Figures 31-33). Local residents told the author that most local women now work outside the village and thus do not have time to make their own baby carriers. Most residents directly purchase ready-made baby carriers produced by the computerized embroidery factories in Gaojin. The author then visited Gaojin Village to understand how baby carriers are made at the computerized embroidery factories there.



Figures 31 and 32. Spiral patterns on the baby carriers. Photograph by the author.



Figure 33. A female villager carrying an infant on her back using a decorative baby carrier. Photograph by the author.

Gaojin Village

Gaojin Village is located in Linquan Town of Qianxi County (Figure 34). After arriving at Gaojin Village, the author asked the local residents about the location of local computerized embroidery factories. A resident said that he knew the owner of a computerized embroidery factory and took the author there (Figure 35). Multiple computerized embroidery machines were observed at the factory, and numerous female workers were busy decorating the finished garments (Figure 36).



Figure 34. The street view of Gaojin Village. Photograph by the author.



Figure 35. The computerized embroidery factory in Gaojin Village. Photograph by the author.



Figure 36. A local Miao woman working on the traditional Huawu costume. Photograph by the author.

The female workers told the author that the factory received a lot of orders before Chinese New Year and Tiaohua Festival because many Miao women may wish to wear beautiful clothes while attending the Tiaohua Festival. The factory owner told the author that the clothing and baby carriers produced with computerized embroidery machines are widely popular among young Miao women. Computerized embroidery involved importing the traditional Miao clothing patterns to a computer to replace manual work with machine production, thus reducing the time required for making baby carriers and traditional clothing (Figure 37). The computerized embroidery industry also contributes to increasing local job opportunities for and income of the Miao residents.



Figure 37. Computerized embroidery patterns. Photograph by the author.

Conclusion

The Huawu Miao Village is in a remote mountainous region in Northwest Guizhou, China. Baby carriers are a common tool used by local villagers to carry their children. This paper investigated the techniques and pattern designs of the traditional baby

carriers of the Huawu Miao people, and meanings of these patterns observed on the baby carriers through a field survey. The findings obtained in this paper may be valuable for documenting and preserving the traditional baby carriers and historical cultures of the Huawu Miao people.

The baby carriers used by the Huawu Miao people are made from batik or embroidered fabric. A written language was never developed among the Miao people; instead, they use baby carriers to record their relocation history, living environments and creation myths. The city wall, terrace field and river patterns on their baby carriers symbolize their relocation history. The flowers, grass and vines patterns reflect their surrounding environment. The cloud patterns reflect the Miao creation myth. The colors and patterns observed on the baby carriers of the Huawu Miao people represent their worship of life and fertility. The Huawu Miao people largely adopt red as the base color for their baby carriers contrasted by black as the complementary color. Red is the color of blood and signifies the pursuit of life. They use twin-bird patterns or dragon patterns to signify reproduction and fertility, creating lively patterns while expressing their worship for life and reproduction.

Local women in Huawu Village used to incorporate their inner hope for fertility and child protection onto baby carriers through symbolism and realism. However, following the opening of roads to the village, local young women began to work outside their village to earn money. Therefore, they no longer had time to make baby carriers by themselves and purchased ready-made baby carriers. The increased prevalence of direct purchase of ready-made baby carriers produced by the computerized embroidery factories has contributed to the gradual extinction and disappearance of embroidery skills and traditional textile patterns.

Future Research

In the Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou, and Guangxi regions of southwestern China live more than 10 minority races, including the Miao, Yao, Kam, and Sui, among which the baby carrier culture remains popular today. In addition to their practical functions, baby carriers feature patterns with rich religious symbology. Future studies can examine the baby carriers of minority people in Southwest China to broaden our understanding of the religious beliefs and traditional crafts of these cultures.

According to the field survey performed in this study, use of traditional patterns and embroidery techniques for baby carriers in Huawu is in gradual decline; the patterns on baby carriers today are often simplified into spirals, and handstitched embroidery has been replaced with computer embroidery. In the future, researchers could assess and formulate approaches to protect and preserve the traditional embroidery of the Miao people in Huawu.

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