

The Myth of Mien Origin, Symbology in Textile: An Archive of Lu Mien Embroidery Motifs from Ban Pang Kha, Pong District, Phayao Province

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Abstract

This research focused on the study of Lu Mien embroidery motifs. Lu Mien is a Thai ethnic group, which generally lives in the hill area. Their dress and costume have a strong, unique ethnic identity. Lu Mien's knowledge and skills in textiles are usually hands-on by a matriline. Lu Mien embroidery is across-stitch technique, and the appearance is in a geometric pattern based on the fabric grid lines. The distinctive feature of ethnic embroidery is that the design is stitched directly onto the fabric's reverse without leaving any knots, so it is beautiful on both the front side and back side. Moreover, the pattern is connected to myths, beliefs, and ways of their life. The study site was in Ban Pang Kha, Pong District, Phayao Province, Thailand. The objective was to collect data and evidence of traditional embroidery motifs in text and photographs for an archive and as a document for future generations. The research approach

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and methods were studied using evidence from old fabric and personal interviews. The analysis was based on the theory of material folklore by studying the myth of the lu Mien's origin, a deity named Pan Ku, a dragon dog, and a scripture painting called Cia Sen Pong - a passport of the lu Mien tribe. The results showed approximately 60 traditional embroidery motifs of the Ban Pha Chang Noi, Ban Pang Kha, and Phu Lanka Districts. Some of the motifs were linked to the myth of the lu Mien's origin. Other patterns were inspired by the environment, nature, and life.

Keywords: lu Mien embroidery, lu Mien textile, Material folklore, Myth of textile.

1. Introduction

Phayao Province, Thailand has a diverse ethnic group of people who live in different areas. The ethnic groups of *Tai Lue*, *Tai Yai*, *Tai Yuan*, and *Tai Kern* live in the lowlands near the Ing River, whereas the *Hmong and Mien* live in the highlands. This study focused on the *Mien* ethnicity who live in the hill area of Pong District, Phayao Province. Scholarly sources from ethnic studies have mentioned that the word *Mien* is the name of the five groups of the *Mien* people, which are *lu Mien*, *Kim Mien*, *Keim Mien*, *Kam Mien*, *Kem Mien*, and the *Muns*. The *Muns* tribes have subgroups: *Kim Mun*, *Byau Min*, and *Yau Min* (Pourret, 2002, p.11). In the past, texts or official documents referred to them as the ‘*Yao*’ or ‘*Yao hill tribes*’, which means barbarians, while the term *Mien* means human. Later, academic texts gave them a polite meaning by calling them ‘*Mien*’. The *Mien* at Ban Pang Kha, Pha Chang Noi District is the *lu Mien* group.

The *lu Mien* group in Thailand was a group that travelled through the hill area. The *Mien* people originally lived in the provinces of Guangzhou, Yunnan, Hunan, and Guangxi, China. After the war and political problems between the ethnic group and Chinese government, either in the Ming Dynasty or earlier, the *Mien* and *Muns* decided to immigrate. The immigration was divided into a group travelling by sea, and another group travelling by land.

The research studied the *Mien* cultural area of Ban Pang Kha, Pha Chang Noi Subdistrict, Pong District, Phayao Province. From interviews with Mr. Kaeven Srisombhat, his great-great-grandparent was the leader of the immigration group. He said that the group of *Mien* and *Hmong* travelled together with 200-300 people from Southern China. They first stopped and settled at Luang Namtha in Lao PDR. because they could not enter the territory of Thailand (which was called Siam at around the reign of King Rama V the Great) due to the country's rule. However, they brought tribute to the King of Nan in Thailand every year. After eight years in Luang Namtha, a bandit was causing a problem for them, so they decided to move to Nan by asking permission from the King of Nan under the reign of King Anantha Vorra Rittidej. Jan Kuan Sae Tang was the leader's name or his official name *Pra Ya Kiri*². He was a great warrior who helped the King protect the territory and fight his enemy. King Anantha Vorra Rittidej had a good relationship with *Pra Ya Kiri*, so the King allowed the migrating group to cross the border into Thailand. At first, they settled down around Doi Phu Wae in Nan before moving to Phu Lang Ka during WWII. In 1967, there was a communist insurgency in Thailand. A guerrilla war occurred around the northern border of Thailand. For this reason, the Thai government pushed the tribes who lived in Doi Phu Lang Ka to the Pha Chang Noi area. The group of *Mien* who moved to Ban Pang Kha almost came from the same clan of Chinese as 'Tang'. That surname is nowadays known as 'Srisombhat' (Srisombhat, 2021; Wannamas, 2009).

²Pra Ya Kiri means the mountain protector.

2. The Importance of the Case Study Area

Besides having the *Mien* tribe living in Ban Pang Kha, the importance of this area for the history of *Mien* in Thailand is the *Mien* document called ‘*Cia Sen Pong*’, the document for travelling through the mountains. This document has approximately 129 copies around the world (Thongkum, 1991), but the only issue found in Thailand belongs to the Srisombhat Family. *Cia Sen Pong* is associated with the legend of the *Mien*’s origin and the meaning of the embroidery designs; therefore, the existence of *Cia Sen Pong* of the Srisombhat Family would make the legend content closer and more comparable than other areas.

One of the ethnic identities of the *Mien* tribe that has been carried over time is the dress and embroidery patterns. Nowadays, the traditional patterns and embroidery knowledge is facing a difficult time due to the advancement of modernity and the rapid emergence of technology; as a consequence, young *Mien* people ignore to learn the craft. They believe that they cannot earn sufficient money from embroidery products, thus resulting in the traditional handicrafts would vanish.

3. Purpose of the Study

To collect data and evidence of traditional embroidery motifs in text and photography for an archive and as a document for future generations.

4. Method of Study

4.1. Study from the old fabric and clothes

The only tangible objects, which remain in the touchable history of embroidery, were the old fabric and clothes. Some of the old generation of *Mien* in Ban Pang Kha (in this case, the older generation means a person who was aged up to 50 years old) have kept a significant old dress, such as wedding dress, pants, and turban. The remaining old fabric could help the *Mien* artisans be reminded of the old motifs. However, with health and sight problems, the old ladies could no longer embroider the old motifs. Furthermore, it was very difficult to find someone to embroider it; for this reason, the old motifs had a chance of disappearing. Therefore, this study would help to record and preserve them.

4.2 In-dept interview

The interview was an important activity in this research by interviewing the Srisombhat Family, particularly Foei Srisombhat and Keaven Srisombhat. Additionally, the research interviewed old ladies who had experience in traditional embroidery motifs. Brainstorming was generated with them for the information of archiving.

4.3 Photography and documentation

A photograph as documentation was one tool to employ in a research method. The photographs of the embroidery motifs would become essential visual evidence and as the photography archives.

4.4 Immersive learning

Unlike the participatory research method, immersive learning was the in-depth understanding of learning by doing. It was related to learning the craftsmanship with the teacher (*Mien* artisans) and practicing embroidery of the *Mien* technique. The expected result of immersive learning would be the explicit output.

5. The Myth of the *Mien*'s Origin

The *Mien* and *Mun* share the same myth of origin, which has still been preserved today. According to this myth, a deity named *Pan Ku* created the world. King *P'an Wang*, a local king, was experiencing difficulties with another ruler. He announced that those who could help him win this war would marry a princess and get some land as a reward. Only a large five-coloured dragon dog named *Pan Ku* could return the enemy's head. King *P'an Wang*, at first, felt embarrassed if he must give his daughter to the dog. The King then tricked the dragon dog. If he could choose the proper princess among many of them, the King would allow him to marry his daughter, the third princess. Due to *Pan Ku*'s vision as a god, he was able to select the right princess. The King had to do as he had promised and rewarded him with the land and princess. *Pan Ku* and the princess later became the ancestors of the *Mien* people. They had 12 children who became the 12 clans of *Mien* with different surnames.

The myth of the *Mien*'s origin is reflected in their costumes. It is portrayed in the 'document for travelling through the mountains' (*Cia Sen Pong*) that implied an order for the next generation of *Mien* to cover the body of the dragon dog, *Pan Ku*, who gave birth to the *Mien* by using an upper cloth or tunic, waist belt rope, turban, and embroidered pants with five-coloured threads of red, yellow, blue, green, and white (Foei Srisombhat, 2021). The five colours represent the hair colour of the dragon dog. Traditionally, the *Mien* followed this rule by embroidering the clothes with five-coloured threads, but nowadays, with the availability of various materials, the *Mien* use a variety of coloured threads. Moreover, they have created a new pattern of embroidery instead of the traditional motifs. The variation of the new creations varies from place to place depending on where they live.



**Figure 1: Traditional costumes and dress
of the Mien from Ban Pang Kha**
(Patcharabhorn Lueraj, a photographer, 2022)

6. Material Culture studies and Material Folklore, the theories approach to the study of Mien embroidery

The study of material culture focuses on objects, their qualities, and the materials from which they are constructed, as well as the significance of these material aspects for understanding culture and social connections. It challenges the historical distinction between the natural sciences as the domain for the study of the material universe and the social sciences as the domain for the comprehension of society and social connections. Rather, culture and society are viewed as being formed and reproduced through the ways in which people create, design, and engage with items. It also challenges the premise, reinforced by disciplinary divisions and philosophical paths, that the object and subject are distinct, where the latter is supposed to be immaterial and the former to be inert and passive. Many works under material culture studies are critical of the notion that objects only symbolize or represent features of a pre-existing culture or identity because they view the material properties of things as important to their possible meanings. In the literature on material culture, the notion of agency and the ways in which objects can produce effects or enable and permit particular behaviours or cultural practices is a contentious topic. This is developed through the concept of objectification, which is central to many studies of material culture — albeit conceptualized differently depending on the disciplinary and theoretical stance taken — that investigate the complex and frequently dialectical relationships between

people and things. Material culture scholars are in numerous disciplines, including archaeology, anthropology, geography, history, design, and sociology. Despite that material culture studies span numerous disciplines, there are still theories, methodologies, and views that are firmly rooted in certain fields. Understandings of material culture have been fundamental to anthropology since its inception; during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Anthropologists largely collected material culture for display in museums across Europe and North America. Only when ethnographic fieldwork began did the study of material culture become less significant. This bibliography of material culture will not primarily focus on the study of ethnographic museums (except for the section on display), but rather on the so-called new material culture studies that have emerged since the 1980s and that combine ethnographic fieldwork and anthropological debate. Within this field, empirical study investigates specific genres of material culture, such as food or clothing, and empirical and theoretical work considers categories of objects, such as gifts and commodities, as located within larger systems of exchange. There is also a concern over how items ‘move’ between domains and different value systems as the practices and meanings surrounding physically altering objects change (Woodward, 2013).

Material culture studies was designed to answer long-standing issues involving the social/cultural and material relationships. Material culture studies have attempted to integrate

structuralist and semiotic approaches. It provided an alternative to structural functionalism, which viewed material items solely as indicators of economic or social activity.

Richard M. Dorson defined material culture as the contradiction between tangible folklife and oral literature. This sort of inquiry focuses on the involvement of more tangible characteristics than hearing in human behaviour. This folk behaviour persisted much before the onset of the industrial revolution. It is a response to methods, skills, texts, recipes, and skills that have been passed down the generations. Nevertheless, material culture remains related to oral literature, it is always evolving. Dorson noted that a student of material culture concentrates about how ancient people constructed their dwellings, how we weave and produce garments, how we prepare food, how we crop, how we make pottery, and how we create various tools, equipment, and things are all representations of knowledge that have been passed down from generation to generation (Anantasant, 2000, Online)

Traditional materials, according to Simon J. Bronner, include buildings, wooden carvings, and certain cuisines, native artefacts are the primary components of mythological traditions. The know how of making traditional product is typically taught by copying the work of an artisan in community or family, and by participation in traditional ritual ceremony. Folklore material exhibits the same recurrence and variety as other kinds of folklore, such as oral literature, songs, proverbs, and riddles; hence, folklore objects exhibit an inherent relationship or connection that is shared by all folklore genres (Anantasant, 2000, Online).

Extended to this research, the researcher employed the material folklore theory to explore the myth of embroidery motif. The patterns on the fabric, the materials used for embroidery, the clothes worn, the tools used, all reflected the shared experiences of the artisans and people in the community. The object express thoughts and values of the community associated with the environment to which they are tied and demonstrate their compatibility with the everyday lives of individuals and communities.

7. Archiving lu Mien Embroidery Motifs of Ban Pang Kha

Mien symbols involve human beings, animals, birds, nature, objects, etc. *Mien* motifs are inspired by things they see in everyday life. The *Mien* people believe that the embroidery pattern can symbolize the prosperity of life and portray wisdom. The belief told that appropriate embroidered motifs could bring happiness, peace, and protection against all evil and disasters.

There are four types of *Mien* embroidery techniques.

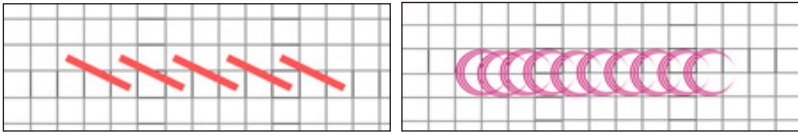
- 1) Yio Yio (หยี้ยว)



Figures 2-3: The basic stitch and stem stitch
(Patcharabhorn Lueraj, a photographer, 2022)

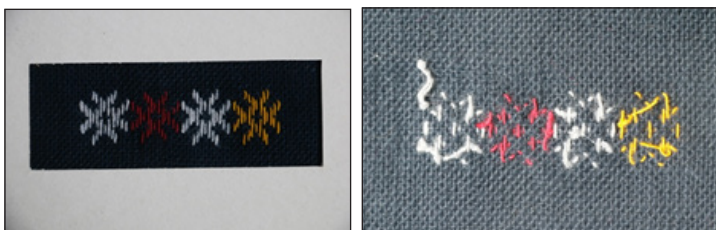


Figures 4-5: Basic stitch and chain stitch
(Patcharabhorn Lueraj, a photographer, 2022)



Figures 6-7: Illustration of the basic stitch
(Patcharabhorn Lueraj, a photographer, 2022)

2) Chiam (เจียม) Phan Chiam (พันเจียม)



Figures 8-9: Basic straight stitch
(Patcharabhorn Lueraj, a photographer, 2022)

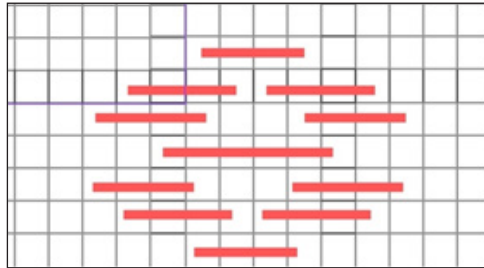
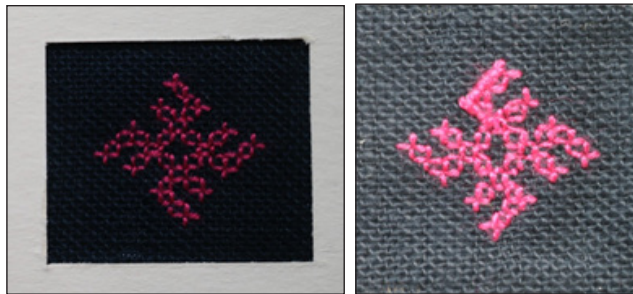


Figure 10: Illustration of a straight stitch
(Patcharabhorn Lueraj, a photographer, 2022)

3) Thio (ทิว) is a line crossing technique and is sewn from a central point. The stitch line sewn around the centre looks like flowers. This technique is the most difficult because it is not sewing each flower one by one. The idea is that during the sewing process, the maker cannot repeat the same line.



Figures 11-12: The Thio technique
(Patcharabhorn Lueraj, photographer, 2022)

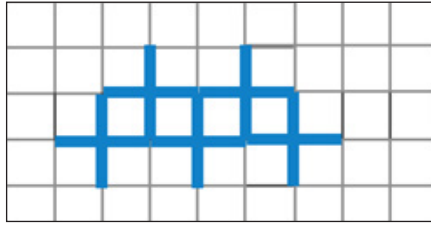
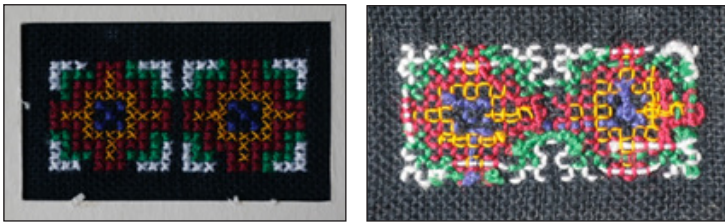


Figure 13: Illustration of the Thio technique
(Patcharabhorn Lueraj, a photographer, 2022)

4) Dap Yat (ด้ายยัด)



Figures 14-15: Basic cross stitch
(Patcharabhorn Lueraj, a photographer, 2022)

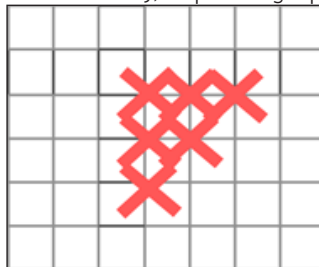


Figure 16: Illustration of the Dap Yat technique
(Patcharabhorn Lueraj, a photographer, 2022)

The researcher collected embroidery motifs during

the limitation of the research time. There was a total of 51 motifs presented in this paper. However, this does not conclude all the traditional motifs due to the lack of artisans who could embroider the old motifs. There are a few motifs left to explore. Hence, this paper would analyse 51 motifs made by hand. The researcher categorised the motifs into two major groups of design: figurative and abstract or concept. There were 24 motifs that fell into the abstract or concept group, including the basic technique stem stitch and chain stitch. Others fell into the figurative group.

The figurative group was divided into a subgroup of inspirations. There were 11 motifs inspired from the origin myth, such as Songsear meaning the princess's servant, and Sanplang, which is the bottom of a rice steaming pot, and TomsĀng that symbolised the princess. There were four motifs inspired by plants and eight motifs inspired by animals. Objects were inspired by three motifs, and one fell into the inspiration of the gods.



Figure 17: The Mien embroidery motifs,
which were collected for analysis
(Patcharabhorn Lueraj, a photographer, 2022)

8. Matrilineal tradition and the discussion based on folklore material theory

Usually, in terms of social structure, *Mien* is a male-dominated culture (Srisombat, 2018). A woman, after marriage, must move to her husband's house and worship the spirits of the husband's ancestors. Even though a woman is under the law of her husband, she plays a vital role in the household and is a good supporter for the entire family. The significance of the woman's role emerged in 'the Myth of Origin' that mentions the third daughter of King P'an Wang could advise about battles well. In addition, history told embroidery was like a hidden letter sent to each other as a secret code during wartime. Therefore, in history, women also played an essential role in helping men

to win the wars with embroidery motifs. For example, the *Zom* motif portrays soldiers. *song sear* represents the princess's servant, and *Chong set* implies the end of the boundary.

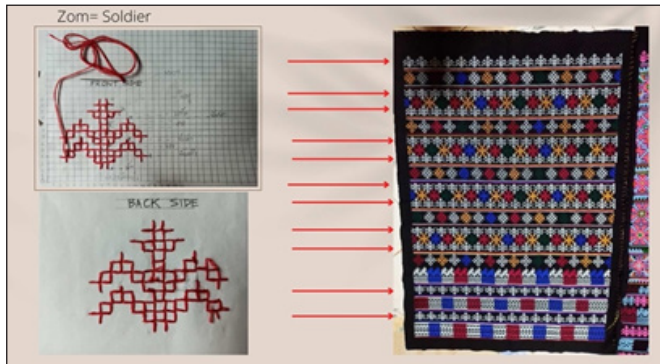


Figure 18: Zom motif represents the soldier
(Patcharabhorn Lueraj, a photographer, 2021)

The unique embroidery technique of the *Mien*, which is distinct from other tribes, is that they embroider from the back side without seeing the front side so that it looks beautiful on both sides. The philosophy that mothers try to teach their girls is ‘you should do good things not only when we meet face to face, but also behind the back.’ (Interview with Foei Srisombhat, 2021). This lesson also implied the relationship between mother and daughter. and how they taught a life lesson through woman's craft practice. Moreover, the delicate handcraft of embroidery and pattern layout can indicate the personality of the embroiderer which can be known as impatient, good-hearted, selfish, honest, etc., However, this kind of personal analysis may need experience

of the viewer. Fei stated that in the past, mothers would select a wife for their sons based on the clothes she wore and the way she entwined herself. At social gatherings, such as housewarmings, marriages, and festivals, members of the community wore hand-embroidered, exquisite garments. On this occasion, the mother would select a woman who was good enough to be her son's housewife. However, the mother will just instruct the son to come to her house first. Before making a decision, they should get to know one another. If they are compatible, they will marry. But if the two do not like each other, it is not required that they marry (Srisombat, 2021).

The symbol of the myth of origins are depicted in the embroidery designs. The *Mien* embroiderers take great satisfaction in telling the history of each motif. The *Mien* origin story inspires a sense of unity. They can feel a sense of belonging to the same group during narrating its story. As same as the garment, clothing is an essential component of a culture composed of identities that define both the individual and society. Although *Mien* embroidered themes are comparable to other tribal motifs, the technique of needlework from the reverse side is unique to the *Mien* people, particularly for mythological motifs. Motives can be roughly classified according to the following significant patterns:

- The city wall pattern (*Chongchoēi*): This motif is used to begin needlework and is a metaphor for the first creation

of everything, such as when you begin to walk. It is thought that this design served as a symbol of the city wall in the past and was embroidered on war maps.

- Soldier pattern, Guard pattern, (*Zom*): According to mythology, the *Zom* represents the guards provided by King *P'an* Wang to protect his daughter and son-in-law on their expedition to locate a site for a new city.

- The maidservant (*Songsear*): The servant who accompanied King *P'an* Wang's third daughter on her legendary journey is shown in this embroidery design. *Songsear* also refers to a young woman in another context. The young girl depicted in this embroidery design is a symbol of innocence and purity. This design must be stitched on the second and fourth belt lines of the pants. This shin embroidery design is a decorative accent. It's sometimes used as a divider in embroidery, and it's great for making gowns for little girls.

- Cat paw motif or the dragon dog paw (*Lom Chiam*): It was during the reign of King *P'an* Wang that the cat nail motif, also known as the dragon dog paw (*Lom Chiam*), first arose. According to the legend, the Dragon Dog God stamped the footprints on the fabric and gave it to the third daughter of the King, who then embroidered the pattern into a *Lom Chiam* design in accordance with the mark that had been stamped.

- *Drosophila* pattern (*Chongkong*): *Drosophila* pattern arises in history when the daughter of King *P'an* Wang sees

a *Drosophila* while travelling. There was a head-on collision. As a result, it is regarded as a record of the stories from our natural voyage that she experienced along the route.

- Big tiger footprints or King's stamps (*Tomsīanotmāwa*): It mentions the seal of King P'an Wang's decree, which was conferred upon Pan Ku, the dragon dog, during his voyage to create a new city. Also as a symbol of leaving her parents' home to live with her husband, this embroidery is commonly embroidered as the design of the bride's pants. It is also a pattern thought to safeguard the wearer so that all business endeavours are successful.

- The huge flower design or the third daughters (*Tompīangū*): The *Tompīangū* design symbolises the third daughter of King P'an Wang, who subsequently wed the Dragon Dog God. This pattern is said to be fortunate. Popularly embroidered on the bride's veil in large wedding ceremonies. In the same way people wearing a shirt with a seal for the prosperity of starting a business, or for a new beginning without problems, as the seal is the precursor. Before leaving her house to go to her husband's residence, for instance, the bride chooses to wear slacks embroidered with a seal.

Examples of *Mien* embroidery patterns and motifs associated with the nation's history and travel are shown. In the past, needlework was approached with great caution. There is an established custom. The pattern of the sequence is utilized

according to its significance. Nowadays, *Mien* people continue to embroider, but very few people understand its true significance; therefore, it is essential to document it for the benefit of future generations.

9. Recommendation

The archiving record should further the embroidery technique in the classroom for the new generation, not only for the *Mien* people, but for everyone to access it. This way the traditional motifs of the *Mien* embroidery would not only be preserved, but also allow for the continuity of the craft practice.

10. Acknowledgement

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