

Miao National Minority

- Historical Evidence for Dress
- Twentieth-Century Policies Affecting Dress
- Characteristics of Traditional Dress
- Cut and Construction
- Fibers and Thread Production
- Dyes and Finishes
- Wax-Resist Decoration
- Embroidery
- Twenty-first Century Trends

The word *Miao* refers to the ethnic minority as recognized by the Chinese government in the 1950s. In the early twenty-first century, the Miao live in southwestern China in the provinces of Hunan, Sichuan, Guizhou, Guangxi, and Yunnan and have a total population of 8.9 million. About half of the entire Chinese Miao population lives in Guizhou. There are six autonomous prefectures in which Miao are the principal populations and an additional twenty-three Miao autonomous counties in the six provinces where the majority of China's Miao live. Outside of China, the population of Miao subgroups in Southeast Asia and immigrants living in the United States, French Guiana, France, and Australia is estimated at another 4.5 million. The Hmong/Miao branch of the Hmong/Mong-Mien (Miao-Yao) language family has traditionally been classified as a branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family, but a growing consensus among contemporary linguists suggests that the Hmong/Mong-Mien (Miao-Yao) constitutes its own family. Miao consists of six languages and about thirty-five dialects (some of which are mutually intelligible).

The origin and migration of the Miao are controversial and poorly documented. It is generally believed that three to four thousand years ago the Miao lived in the Yellow River Basin. When defeated in battle by the Han tribes, they migrated south to the middle reaches of the Chang Jiang (Yangtze River) and settled in the Dongting Lake region. By the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.) the Han Chinese had begun to migrate southward in search of new settlement areas for their expanding population. The Miao were displaced by Chinese imperial troops and took various routes into western Hunan, south Sichuan, Guizhou, north Guangxi, and finally into Yunnan, looking for new land. Other tribal people already occupied the more productive countryside, and later the Han Chinese settled in the valley basins. The Miao usually pursued a slash-and-burn economy on the higher mountain slopes. Later, in the nineteenth century, some Miao groups in Yunnan migrated into Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand, where they are called Hmong. Miao migrations have always been accompanied by conflict, and attempts to subdue them have been difficult.

HISTORICAL EVIDENCE FOR DRESS

Pictorial evidence for traditional Miao dress includes a number of Chinese paintings. During the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), Chen Hao (fl. ca. 1795–1820), a Chinese county magistrate living in Guizhou, commissioned a book of paintings and descriptions about the ethnic people of Guizhou. The original gave an important insight into everyday life and dress of the Miao groups, but this album has been lost. However, it was copied many times. A copy of the *Baimiaotu*, or A Hundred Miao Paintings, is in the special collections of the University of Calgary Library (No. 10635); others are in the Museum of Guizhou, Guizhou Nationalities College, Guizhou Normal University, Taiwan Central Institute, and the Institut des hautes études chinoises, Paris. All of these copies were illustrated by anonymous Chinese artists who were not familiar with the ethnic groups or country life and sometimes put in details of their own, thus affecting the reliability of this data. Although an important resource, it should be used cautiously.

Additionally, in 1750 and 1751 the Qianlong emperor (r. 1735–1796) commissioned a cataloging project to depict the diverse people who paid homage to the Dragon Throne. A set of four hand scrolls, known as the *Huangqing zhigong tu*, or Qing Imperial Illustrations of Tributaries, is illustrated with figure groups of male and female pairs shown wearing their national costumes and engaged in distinctive activities. Above are commentaries in both Manchu and Chinese describing the people, their regions, national dress, customs, local products, taxes, and the tribute they paid, as well as their relationship to the Qing court. Over 125 ethnic groups are shown. Scroll four shows the minority peoples of Yunnan, Guizhou, and Guangxi provinces. There is a sizable body of published observations, mainly in French and English, by late-nineteenth-century Western travelers, military personnel, and missionaries.

The British Museum holds a large collection of black-and-white photographs taken in the 1920s by the Rev. Harry Parsons, a Methodist missionary working at the missionary station of Shimenkan, situated near Weining in western Guizhou. It includes various groups of Miao and other ethnic groups in their national dress. Of particular note are the pictures of the so-called Hua Miao, or Flowery Miao (a name used at that time, but based on translations of descriptive names given by the Han Chinese—in general these are resented by the Miao themselves, who prefer to be identified by the region in which they live). One notes the basic sleeveless jackets and pleated skirts, without decoration, made from loom-width lengths of hemp, and the more elaborately decorated jackets with long sleeves worn by the more prosperous members of the Miao society. The dress style and decorative motifs in pattern weaving and wax-resist dyeing remain almost identical in the early twenty-first century, but the elaborate jacket has sometimes been reduced to a simple cape. In the past, after the birth of their first baby, the women used to wear their hair in a *pook*, or a conical arrangement of hair and wool supported by an iron rod worn on the tops of their heads. Influenced by the missionaries, they began to wear their hair in more convenient buns on the tops of their heads. Reverend Ken Parsons, born and brought up in western Guizhou, recalls how

the Miao women copied his mother's hairstyle. Images of the Chun Miao, or River Miao, captured in Parson's photographs are recognizable in the early twenty-first century. French travelers' photographs, preserved in the Bibliothèque de la Société des Missions étrangères de Paris, taken between 1846 and 1925 of the Miao women in costume in the Anshun and Guiyang area, show outfits that are stylistically similar to early-twenty-first-century dress.

TWENTIETH-CENTURY POLICIES AFFECTING DRESS

In the 1930s the Nationalist Chinese Government followed a policy of attempting to assimilate tribal peoples into a single Chinese nation and urged all tribal people to wear Han Chinese dress, particularly when coming to market. This was supposed to stop Han Chinese attacks that ripped ethnic clothing to shreds. The Miao in particular were resented and feared, because of their imagined magical powers. Later, during the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), Chinese universities moved to the southwest, and the Han Chinese developed a more educated awareness of the minorities living there. The Communist government recognized the status of the ethnic groups and in the early 1950s began to classify them.

In 1954 Miao became one of the officially recognized *minzu*, or minorities. This status gave them a limited degree of autonomy, with the same rights as other citizens but recognizing their own traditions and beliefs. Previously the Miao, not speaking Chinese

and with an illiteracy rate of 94 percent, had been portrayed by the Han Chinese as mountain-dwellers and barbarians with a low cultural level, since they had no written language. Government authorities, wishing to promote the "unity of all the peoples," invited Miao dancers and musicians to Beijing to perform at official meetings and important national events. Naturally, this led to adaptations of ethnic dress to accommodate performance. Also, Miao embroidery and weaving were exploited for official presents and commercial purposes, with the result that a variety of new nontraditional patterns and designs were introduced and imposed.

From the mid-1950s on, roads were built into remote areas of the southwest. This happened in Yunnan first, since the province was more commercially important to the nation. Major road building did not come to the mountainous provinces of Guizhou and Guangxi until the 1990s. With the improved road network, fabrics, trimmings, and silk threads have become available to those Miao with a small amount of cash income. However, many Miao remained isolated and impoverished, because they lived in the high mountains with thin and poor soils that were not conducive to raising cash crop surpluses. Previously, the Miao in Guizhou and Yunnan had grown opium as a cash crop for trade, but the Communist government stopped the opium production. This left the Miao with a subsistence economy. In the early twenty-first century many Miao still live below the poverty level, often unable to produce enough food for sustenance, despite land reforms in the 1950s, in which they had been allocated land of their own. Traditionally Miao girls in the more affluent areas of western Hunan and the Qingshui River Basin of Guizhou, not having



Young girls of the Miao minority in Yanshan, Yunnan, China, in 2001, wearing bright, modern costumes, which have been manufactured and bought. Note the extravagant use of beads on the Chinese-styled tops and hats. In the 1980s, the central government started to encourage and organize ethnic tourism in Yunnan. This initially stimulated the production of traditional dress but later gave rise to the manufacture of imitation versions, with poorer craftsmanship and exaggerated accessories and decorations. These outfits have since increasingly lost their resemblance to the traditional dress. Photograph by Gina Corrigan.

bound feet, often worked on the land of Han Chinese landlords during the busy rice-planting and rice-harvesting seasons. They were paid cash, which they saved for their dowries to buy silver ornaments, cloth, and silk thread to embroider their garments. The Communist land reforms were sometimes unpopular, since they meant that the girls who had worked for the landlords no longer earned cash for their dowry. In this region, too, some Miao were themselves landlords until the reforms. They had employed servants to embroider their festival garments. These former servants then had to earn a living in a different way and ceased embroidering jackets, which affected the quality of workmanship on garments of this period.

The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) attempted to impose national cultural uniformity. Traditional dress, hairstyles, and festivals were classified as one of the “Four Olds” and banned by the central government. Accounts of how this affected the southwest are mixed. It is likely this area was treated the same as the rest of China and that women and men adopted the Mao “uniform”: plain blue jackets and trousers with a “Mao cap.” Women abandoned their elaborate hairstyles and wore their hair in plaits. However, some minority women deny that this happened and say that traditional costume was worn throughout the period. This could have occurred in the isolated high mountains, but in the towns and at official meetings, traditional dress was abandoned or hidden in wooden clothes chests and kept in safe places. Following the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, there was a movement of cultural liberalization, and the minority female population in the countryside once again took up wearing traditional dress, since it was an opportunity to express their ethnic cultural identity. Festivals were reestablished to which most women proudly wore their best jewelry and clothes. However, by this time, men had abandoned their ethnic dress; instead, they wore Chinese-styled or Western clothes, which they could buy cheaply at the market. Men had, in many cases, given up traditional attire by the beginning of the twentieth century for Chinese farmers’ style of everyday clothes to blend into the majority Han Chinese culture; ethnic festivals remained an exception.

In the 1980s in Yunnan, and in the 1990s in Guizhou, the central government established ethnic tourism as a deliberate policy to relieve rural poverty, so traditional customs and dress took on a new importance. Specific villages were allocated for visits from tourists. Money was awarded to a village to improve the environment and provide it with facilities, such as new roads and better housing. Streams and water supplies were cleaned up. The village people were taught to put on costumed welcome ceremonies and song-and-dance performances for their guests. Souvenirs were also organized. At first, this encouraged traditional dress, but many adaptations were made, and more showy costumes were worn, often embroidered and worked in an inferior manner. Traditional fibers in tourist villages were no longer woven but replaced by bright commercial fabrics and trimmings bought at the market. In some areas, stage costumes no longer resemble the original traditional garments. In addition, provinces organized annual talent contests for the minorities. Performances were shown on television, and big prizes were awarded. Some girls achieved fame on national television shows and earned large advertising fees. This all encouraged the development of exotic stage costumes, and all the minorities in the southwest have been influenced by these commercial media interests. Consequently, girls have adapted their own festival dress accordingly, with new

fabrics and decorations bought from the markets, resulting in evolving local styles.

CHARACTERISTICS OF TRADITIONAL DRESS

The Miao living in remote mountain regions developed a wide range of individual garments as a form of local cultural identity. In 2000 a picture book published in China illustrated 173 different styles of Miao dress. Some authorities suggest a higher figure; others would claim a lower one.

The basic Miao female dress consists of a jacket and skirt. Traditionally, no garments were worn under the jacket, which is usually fastened with a pair of simple narrow ties at the waist. There are no buttons. The majority of Miao women wear a very full pleated skirt of varying lengths, depending on the area, which swings sensuously as they walk. The pleated skirt is wrapped around the waist, but in some cases the skirt is tubular. Some Miao, especially in the south, wear a back and front skirt. Usually the back skirt/apron is full, and a rectangular apron covers the overlap. In the south of Guizhou the front apron has a bib, which acts as a breast covering and is worn inside the jacket. Gaiters or puttees protect the legs. A variety of head coverings are worn,



Miao minority people wearing bright blues and adorned with many silver ornaments to welcome guests to Taijiang County, Guizhou, China, in May 2007. These crowns and other elaborate ornaments are more widespread now than ever, thanks to the availability of cheaper alloys. Young girls tend to wear the most decoration and brightest colors, with darker blues worn by boys and older women. Photograph by Gina Corrigan.

including turbans, embroidered headwraps, and decorative hats. The local hairstyle is a particularly important element and is the last thing that will be given up. As early as the 1920s, those Miao living in western Hunan and Taijiang County who were sinicized began wearing trousers and a Chinese-style jacket buttoned on the shoulder. Throughout the southwest, many girls now wear trousers with blouses and T-shirts every day. Those still wearing traditional dress wear Western-style bras, blouses, and sweaters under the jacket.

In the past, all garments were made at home. Girls, with the help of their family members, produced several sets of clothes for festivals that were held during the year. Festivals were an opportunity for girls to meet and fraternize with boys from the surrounding villages and find marriage partners, since in traditional Miao societies, marriages were not arranged by the family. A girl from a rich family would wear several sets of clothes on top of each other to show off her wealth. Many silver ornaments were worn, especially in southeast Guizhou. In the poorer western areas, women's hair was arranged in a more bouffant style, using hair gathered from their mothers and grandmothers augmented with wool. This compensated for the lack of ornaments, which could not be afforded. In the early twenty-first century, however, there has been an explosion of the wearing of silver crowns and other ornaments, as cheap alloys of copper and nickel have become available.

Young women were married in their festival clothes. These were then worn on other special occasions. Everyday clothes constructed in the same way were not embellished to the same degree as festival clothes. In some groups, after the wedding, there were small variations to the costumes, and older women sometimes over-dyed their jackets in indigo. In the past, and even in the early twenty-first century, the Miao are buried in their best garments. These are made from bast fibers such as hemp, ramie, or cotton—otherwise it was believed the path to meet the ancestors would be impeded.

CUT AND CONSTRUCTION

Traditionally, women wove cloth during the period between the end of one agricultural season and the beginning of the next. The width of handwoven cloth (approximately twenty-three to thirty-eight centimeters, nine to fifteen inches) dictated a garment's cut. Most jackets are formed of two lengths of loom-width fabric folded at the shoulders, seamed at the center back seam, and left open in the front. Short lengths of loom-width fabric are used for the sleeves, which are attached along the edge of the shoulder and seamed under the arm. Some groups attach further fabric pieces to the basic shape to create different shapes. In some cases an additional triangular shape is added to the center front seam and fastened at the shoulder. Triangular pieces are also sometimes added to the bottom of the side seam to give a flare to the jacket. Occasionally, the upper body garment has a tabard shape seamed at the sides. It may be made with or without sleeves, but it also uses lengths of loom-width cloth.

The pleated skirt is also made using loom widths. Either a number of loom-width lengths are seamed together vertically, or two to three very long loom-width lengths are sewn together horizontally. Pleating is done in a large variety of ways, and the Miao are particularly skilled at this. Cotton is worked into very sharp knife-edge pleats, but hemp gives much softer pleats. A woman is greatly admired for her pleating abilities. In the past,

seams were hand-stitched, but in the early twenty-first century sewing machines are used. Garments, especially those made recently, tend to be left unfinished in areas that cannot be viewed. Commercially manufactured fabrics, with a wider loom width, are now often used, but the garment is usually cut to the dimensions of the handloom cloth.

FIBERS AND THREAD PRODUCTION

In the past, and still in the early twenty-first century for many, the Miao living in southwest China have used hemp fibers from the annual *Cannabis sativa*. Seeds are planted in sheltered areas in the mountains in May, and by September the plant has grown to 2 to 2.4 meters (6.6 to 7.9 feet) in height. The plant is cut down and the leaves removed, and the stalks are stacked outside the house by the men, but women are responsible for processing the fiber and weaving. Throughout the winter the bast stem fibers are lifted with a sliver of bamboo or a fingernail from under the outer skin of the stalk. The ends of fiber lengths are spliced together forming rove (a skein of bast fiber prepared for spinning), which is carefully stored in bundles. The rove is given an extra twist on a wooden foot-powered spindle, then washed and boiled in wood ash many times until it has bleached to an off-white. The yarn is untangled using a swift, a reel for winding spun threads, then measured out on a warping frame or wound on bobbins. The warp is placed on a wooden loom built by men, but woven by the women. The finished fabric is often calendered, a process that compresses fabrics, smoothing and polishing their surfaces, or made soft and glossy, by rocking a large stone over it.

Below 1,200 meters (3,937 feet) elevation the perennial ramie (*Boehmeria tenacissima/nivea*) is grown for its fiber. Fiber production is similar to that of hemp. Generally, ramie cloth is finer, has a higher luster, and is whiter than hemp. It has often been called the poor man's silk.

Since fiber preparation is time-consuming, hemp and ramie production in the early twenty-first century is limited and only favored in the poor central and northwesterly region of Guizhou. The Miao of central Yunnan also used hemp until the provincial government banned the planting of hemp in 2000 because of its association with narcotics. Consequently, all new clothes are being made of cotton yarn or of fabric bought at the market. Women over forty years old still wear hemp skirts, since hemp is very hard-wearing and skirts made of hemp can last at least twenty years. In the 1980s and 1990s, the young chose to weave skirt lengths in colored cotton yarns, bought at the market. They felt this was more attractive and saved them from the difficult work of processing the hemp yarn. Hemp skirts are very heavy to wear, and the young favor lighter skirts. Although not formally banned in Guizhou, hemp production is low, and only a limited amount of ramie is produced for local use among the Miao. Many can now afford to buy yarn from the market, because cash is being sent home to the villages by the younger generation, many of whom work away in the towns.

Cotton was introduced to China from Southeast Asia, probably during the Song dynasty (960–1279). Its cultivation did not spread quickly, since new spinning techniques had to be developed to process the short cotton staple. Guizhou's climate is generally too wet to grow good cotton. Some is still grown in the southeast region, but the quality is poor. A very limited production continues in the early twenty-first century in Yunnan. However, manufactured



Miao minority girls in Liuzhi, Guizhou province, China, May 2007. They have an unusual hairstyle, which is supported by a wooden horn and incorporates the hair of relatives and wool. These girls wear cloth decorated with wax-resist dye and embroidery, together with felt aprons. The boy wears a blue jacket, an embroidered apron, and off-white hemp culottes. Photograph by Gina Corrigan.

cotton yarn from the northern Chinese cotton-growing areas is sold in the local markets and is woven on domestic looms.

Wool is not widely used. However, sheep and goats are kept in the colder climate of northwest, west, and central Guizhou and the eastern area of Yunnan. In Weining and Zhaotong, Miao women spin sheep wool with a drop spindle and use the wool to weave warm jackets, using a hemp warp. Felt capes and puttees are common. Industrial-made felt is replacing homemade felt almost everywhere.

Silkworms are raised in a number of areas, especially in south-east Guizhou, and some fabrics are made of silk in the Qingshui River Basin. In the past it was usual to produce silk thread and "silk felt." The latter is made when silkworms are put on a board, at the time of making their cocoon. The silk filaments, instead of being secreted as a cocoon, are trailed randomly over the board, because the worm cannot find anything to attach itself to. The threads mesh together and form a mat-like structure, which can be dyed, cut, and applied to garments as a decorative feature. This continues in the early twenty-first century, but women tend to buy silk threads from the market. It is a sign of wealth that they can afford to buy silk threads.

Straw and palm bark are used to make rain capes. When they can be found, modern waterproofed clothing and sheets of polythene are commonly used to protect the farmers from the rain. Straw sandals were made on a wooden frame by a craftsman in most county towns, and these were the only footwear worn until army-style plimsols (rubber-soled cloth slip-on shoes) were

introduced at the beginning of the 1950s. Farmers working in the fields have always used large hats made of split bamboo to protect themselves from the sun and rain. These hats continue to be made but increasingly synthetic fibers stripped out of fertilizer sacks are added. In the early twenty-first century, the makers also incorporate pieces of plastic sheeting for extra protection.

The Miao use a number of different types of looms. A back-strap or body-tension loom is the most common and produces widths used for jackets and skirts that are between twenty-three and thirty-eight centimeters (nine and fifteen inches). Tabby and twill weaves are the most common for garments. Subtle self-patterned weaves alternating with weft floats are especially important for jackets in richer areas. There are also a number of supplementary patterned fabrics, using both continuous and discontinuous wefts. Supplementary weft patterns are often woven on simple two-shaft looms, and the patterning is laboriously picked up warp by warp. Embroidered "memory cloths" are used to show the maplike pattern of the Qingshui River area. Narrow warp-faced bands are made using a rigid heddle by many groups and are used as ties on jackets, puttees, and gaiters. Stronger straps are made for baby carriers. Very colorful silk decorative bands are used as belts. Weft-faced bands are stitched onto jackets as an important decorative feature. Weaving is an acquired skill, and, since many girls are now going to school, they are not taught weaving by their mothers and grandmothers. Consequently, many complicated weaves are no longer done; rather, embroiderers embellish woven designs or even reproduce woven



Girls in Longlin County, Guangxi, China, in 2006, wearing a type of cotton tabard with sleeves, heavily embroidered in rich colors. The skirt used to be made of hemp or ramie, but these girls are using cotton. While the planting of hemp is not banned in Guizhou as it was in Yunnan, production has become rare there as well. Photograph by Gina Corrigan.

patterns entirely as embroideries. Weaving, once a winter occupation done inside by most women, is in the early twenty-first century generally a pursuit of women over forty years of age.

DYES AND FINISHES

Southwest China is one of the most active indigo-dyeing regions. Cellulosic fibers like hemp, ramie, and cotton are efficiently dyed with indigo. Indigo does not require a heated dye bath. Miao women prepare a dye vat, which often stands in the corner of a room. The indigo paste used in the vat is usually made from plants grown in vegetable patches and includes *Strobilanthes cusia*, *Indigofera tinctoria*, and *Polygonum tinctoria*. Women mix the indigo paste in a wooden vat with lye water, rice wine, and other secret ingredients. A ceremonial offering is made to the vat. A properly prepared vat can be kept going for a year. Dyeing usually begins in the autumn. The cloth is dipped in the vat, drained on a wooden rack, and then hung on the wooden farmhouse balconies

to oxidize and dry in the air. It is dipped many times to achieve a dark blue. The above processes are carried out by women at home, but in the early twenty-first century there are a few commercial producers of indigo paste and some male professional dyers. Some synthetic dyes are used.

A variety of finishes are used on the fabric, depending on the region. In Taijiang County in southeast Guizhou, after dyeing in indigo the fabric is dipped in cooked ground soya bean juice and the juice of red chili peppers. It is dried in the sun and folded, ready to be beaten with a wooden hammer on a stone. Next, the fabric is wrapped in a cloth and steamed. Some Miao then dip the fabric in a mixture made from steeped walnut leaves. Water buffalo skin and tendons are boiled and the liquid separated off. The fabric is dipped in this solution, dried, dyed in indigo, and washed, dried, and beaten for the final sheen. Some Miao in this region also mention that they put pig's blood on the cloth to give it a red tinge. In the rest of the southeast similar tales are told about the finishing of cloth with local variations. In Rongjiang County, the Dong minority, after dyeing the fabric in indigo, dip it in a mixture of barks, leaves, and a sweet potato-like root. The cloth is also coated with egg white, brushed on with a chicken feather. It is thought that this process is also used by the Miao living near the Dong. In some areas beeswax is rubbed on and polished to add a sheen. Miao in Yunnan often rub their cloth with a smooth round stone to make it shine. Throughout the indigo dyeing region, all the Miao prefer a fabric with a high sheen.

WAX-RESIST DECORATION

Dark shiny indigo is the dominant color of Miao dress. It is used for both jackets and skirts. In regions where hemp predominates, skirt and jacket are usually an off-white color. Decorative motifs are extremely important. They are usually made in strips and applied to the jacket back, shoulders, sleeves, and lapels. It is much easier for an agrarian society sitting in the daylight outside their farmhouse or in the fields to work small pieces of embroidery or wax resist. Small pieces are convenient as they do not drag in the dirt.

Traditionally, the shaft of a chicken feather and slivers of bamboo were used to apply beeswax to the fabric in a geometric or floral design. The cloth was then dyed in indigo and the wax removed in hot water. A design in white was left behind where the wax had been applied. Later, possibly dating from the nineteenth century, a more sophisticated tool made of several triangular pieces of metal bound onto a bamboo stick was introduced. Various sizes of tools are employed, and the liquid wax is held between the metal veins and flows onto the material, from the pointed edge, as the tool is tipped slightly. Various types of stamping tools are also made. The Miao have become very competent waxers and outstanding designers. Many prefer to avoid the crackle effect that is usually typical of wax resist dyeing. Their best work is done on fine cotton, and then the fabric is stitched onto the jackets. Various groups also embroider onto the wax resist in various colored silks, which gives an even more subtle effect. Some Miao design directly onto hemp skirt widths. This work is a little coarser, as the hemp is rougher and more intricate designs cannot be achieved. Each group generally has its own motifs and designs, which are copied by the next generation. It should be noted that some groups use tree resins instead of wax. Various other resist techniques such as stitch resist and possibly paste resist, a technique used by the Han Chinese, were formerly used.



Girls in their festival dress and ornaments in Kaili, Guizhou, China, in May 2007. The girls apply “silk felt” as well as strips of “white metal” to their aprons and shoulder decoration. The work is very intricate. Photograph by Gina Corrigan.

EMBROIDERY

There is a noticeable difference in the embroidery styles between the eastern areas of Miao culture in Guizhou and those from the western Guizhou and the southwest. There is a greater variety of designs and stitch techniques in the east. The east shows a strong Chinese influence, since the Miao lived side-by-side with the Han Chinese. This is particularly noticeable in western Hunan and the Qingshui River Basin, which connects with the Chang River. Many of the Miao were boatmen trading with the Han. These areas were in the forefront of innovation. A variety of new fabrics, trimmings, silk threads, and polished, tapered needles, which are important for fine embroidery, could be traded relatively easily. Miao servants in Han homes also saw Han embroidery designs and techniques. There often appear on embroideries typical Chinese symbols such as fish, pomegranates, peonies, butterflies, dragons, and the everlasting knot of Buddhism, alongside faces of Miao heroes, silkworms, water buffalo, and other mythical creatures.

Many of the stitches found in Miao embroidery in the east of Guizhou and the west of Hunan are also used in Chinese embroidery. The stitches are often worked slightly differently. A variety of satin stitches, including needle-weaving, or darned stitching, is very common, as is stitching over paper cuts. The paper-cut patterns are made by the older generation, who sell them in the market to the young. Varieties of chain and knot stitches are common. There are many edging stitches. A two-needle stitch is used in the southeast, with combinations of running stitches and couching using homemade gimp, or plied

cords. Herringbone and buttonhole stitches are also popular. Silk folded into minute triangles and applied in intricate patchwork designs or lines of thin appliquéd strips of fabric are found on jackets edgings. Minute geometrical shapes made of fabric or silk felt are often applied to skirts and jackets; these may even be edged with couched hair.

An unusual “white metal” technique is found in Jianhe County, Guizhou. It appears on aprons and on the backs of jackets. A grid of stitches is embroidered on a white cotton base fabric of the back and front apron, which is then dyed in indigo. The person making it works on a small area at a time, protecting the unworked area with another piece of cloth that is basted over the dyed gridwork of stitches. A needle is used to lift the stitch of the grid, and a thin metal strip is bent around and under the stitch, overlapped, and pinched into place until the whole apron surface is covered. Fringes made of warp threads may also be wrapped with white metal, and threads beaded with metal may be stitched onto the fabric. This very time-consuming process is practiced only by the young with good eyesight. A further interesting method is the making of silk braid by hand, sitting on a stool, using bobbins. The braid is then stitched onto the fabric flat or pleated up, giving exceptional three-dimensional embroideries.

Toward the west of the Miao cultural region, one finds more geometrical embroideries, worked with variations of cross-stitch often combined with appliqué. Cross-stitch is worked from the back of the fabric. Reverse appliqué, in which a design is cut through layers of colored cloth, is used by a number of Miao groups. While older work demonstrates incredible skill, and its minute scale is one of its most outstanding qualities, after 2000



Older women in this group can still work reverse appliqué, as seen on the sleeve of the woman at the front left. The technique is now being copied using machinery. Hemp skirts are still worn by this generation, since they are very durable. Note the embroidered puttees and modern shoes bought at the market. Qiubei County, Yunnan, China, 2000. Photograph by Gina Corrigan.

sophisticated sewing machines are now being used to copy fine traditional embroidery techniques, including reverse appliqué. Decorative woven strips in cotton and silk are similarly applied to the jacket for decoration, and larger pieces of weaving are applied to jackets for warmth in the cooler western areas.

TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY TRENDS

The appeal of traditional Miao dress is the combination of many hand-crafted textile techniques, which include fiber production, weaving, dyeing, wax resist, and embroidery. This is especially illustrated in the decorative features of a completed garment, which shows an intuitive sense of color and pattern. The palette is often different from that used in the Western world, but it always gives an exciting and stimulating effect whether in embroidery or weaving. Since the Miao have no written language,

the patterns and designs used on the embroideries are a unique record of aspects of the Miao's folk history and cultural heritage, as expressed and perpetuated by the women of the various regional groups.

However, during the last twenty years, Miao dress has begun to change radically. The introduction of the free movement of labor in China, to fuel China's booming economy, has encouraged Miao girls to attend school and learn to speak Chinese. These skills allow them to work in cities away from their home villages. They are able to send money home to support their families. As a result, girls no longer learn textile techniques from their older female relatives. Young men were the first to attend school, since the society favors boys, and it was only recently that girls have also attended school, as communities found young women could also work away from home if educated to speak Chinese. However, the Miao were so poor that many families could not afford to send girls to school. When young men sought work away from home villages, the agricultural work was left to middle-aged or older women and old men. Since women do agricultural work and now often look after their daughters' children, they no longer have time for textile pursuits of their own or to teach the young the techniques. Young women who are working in the cities are exposed to global fashion trends on television and in magazines. Even girls living in the villages see television, so they are similarly exposed to modern ways. Consequently, traditional dress is increasingly losing its appeal and will probably not survive long beyond the present generation of Miao.

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See also Snapshot: Dress and Cultural Memory among the Miao.