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Artisan Textile Traditions as Luxury and Livelihood in East Asia

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In this paper I propose to present an illustrated case study, in a cross-cultural context, of interactions between craft production, design and manufacturing, and the positions of the craftsperson and designer in the value chain.

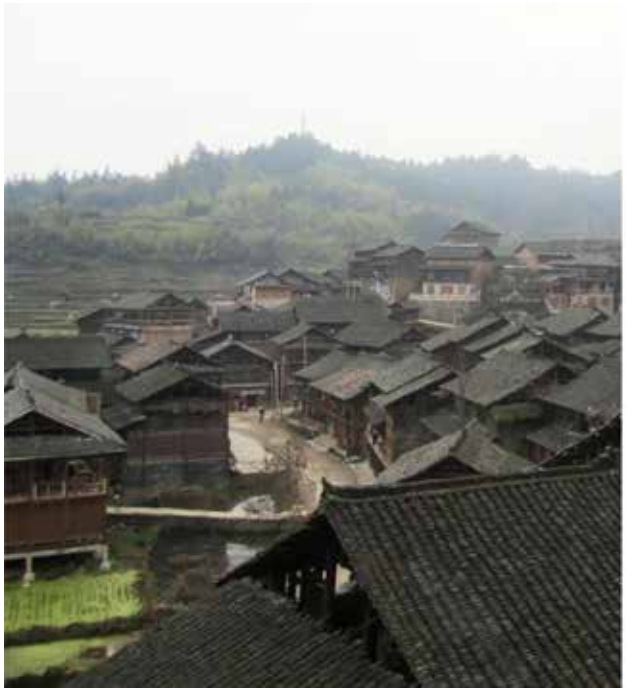

Fig. 1. A Dong village in Guizhou.

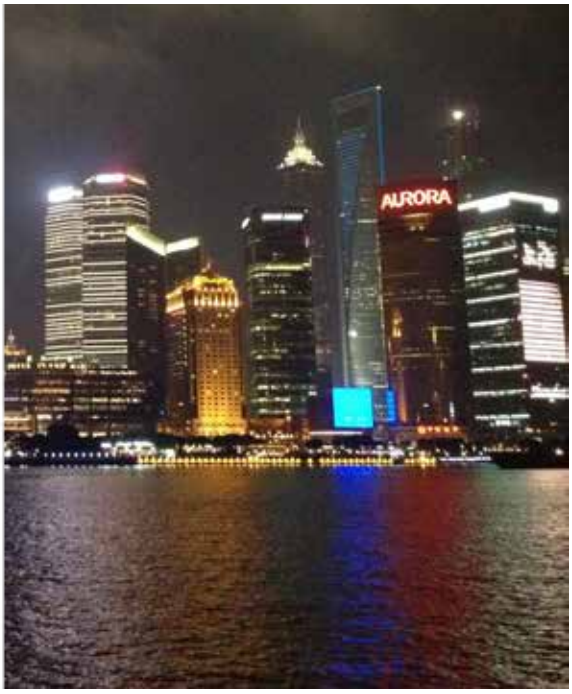

Fig. 2. Pudong skyline, Shanghai.

I have spent the past five years living in China, working as a British textile designer for Shang Xia, a new Chinese luxury brand in Shanghai. Shang Xia's aim is to establish the first international Chinese luxury brand. Run by Jiang Qiong-er, its Chinese creative director and CEO, with the backing of Hermès International, the aim is to reverse the general perception of 'Made in China' to celebrate Chinese and Asian artisan traditions, and draw on China's rich 5,000-year history of craft and design heritage. Such workmanship and quality has the significant brand advantage that it cannot cheaply be imitated.

I was lucky to be employed right at the beginning of the development of the company, so have been fortunate to see its growth and the changing of attitudes towards locally-made luxury goods within China.

As an emerging superpower China is one of the most fascinating places in the world, especially today. With its ancient and incredibly rich history, mighty but unorthodox political system and now rapid modernisation, it is a country of sharp contrasts that is changing fast. In the West we had the Industrial Revolution with the introduction of new manufacturing techniques that propelled development into fast forward. Three hundred years later, after vast advancement in science, we are now going through a post-Industrial Revolution with pioneering green technology, and high-tech cleaner production techniques. On an industrial level China is carrying out both of these revolutions at the same time, at a speed that is unheard of in the developed world. This causes many problems as well as opportunities in a country with a population more than 2.5 times the size of the European Union.

Whilst living in the fast-developing mega city of Shanghai, through my work I have also developed relationships and established an understanding of traditional crafts in India, Nepal, China, and Mongolia. I have learnt first-hand from producers and local masters an array of techniques, including artisan cashmere and yak-wool weaving and felting, block printing, embroidered textiles and natural dying. I have had the chance to visit and research in rural areas, to study craft techniques and learn about how the changing culture and gathering momentum of modern China and its opening up to the outside world has affected and is affecting previously isolated peoples.

China opened its doors to the rest of the world in the 1980s. Thirty years ago it was a country isolated from the outside and any western influences. This led me to questions regarding the place that crafts have traditionally held in culture, and how these artisan traditions are changing under the growing influence of not only the western world but also the dominant Han Chinese culture and the onward march of state capitalism. How does the cultural momentum of modern China affect previously relatively isolated peoples, and how might such isolated textile cultures gain future sustainability in an increasingly global economy?

One example I looked at is the Miao and Dong ethnic groups in Guizhou, China. Researching their traditional textile, natural dying and embroidery techniques and culture brought up questions about the notion of value. How do we define value in terms of materials, techniques, design, cultural significance and fashion? How is value 'added', or inherent, and how is 'luxury' perceived, either as an essential quality or indulgent excess? How also does the definition of, or regard for, the value of an object differ between the craftsperson and the consumer, or (in terms of cultural identity) the insider and the outsider?

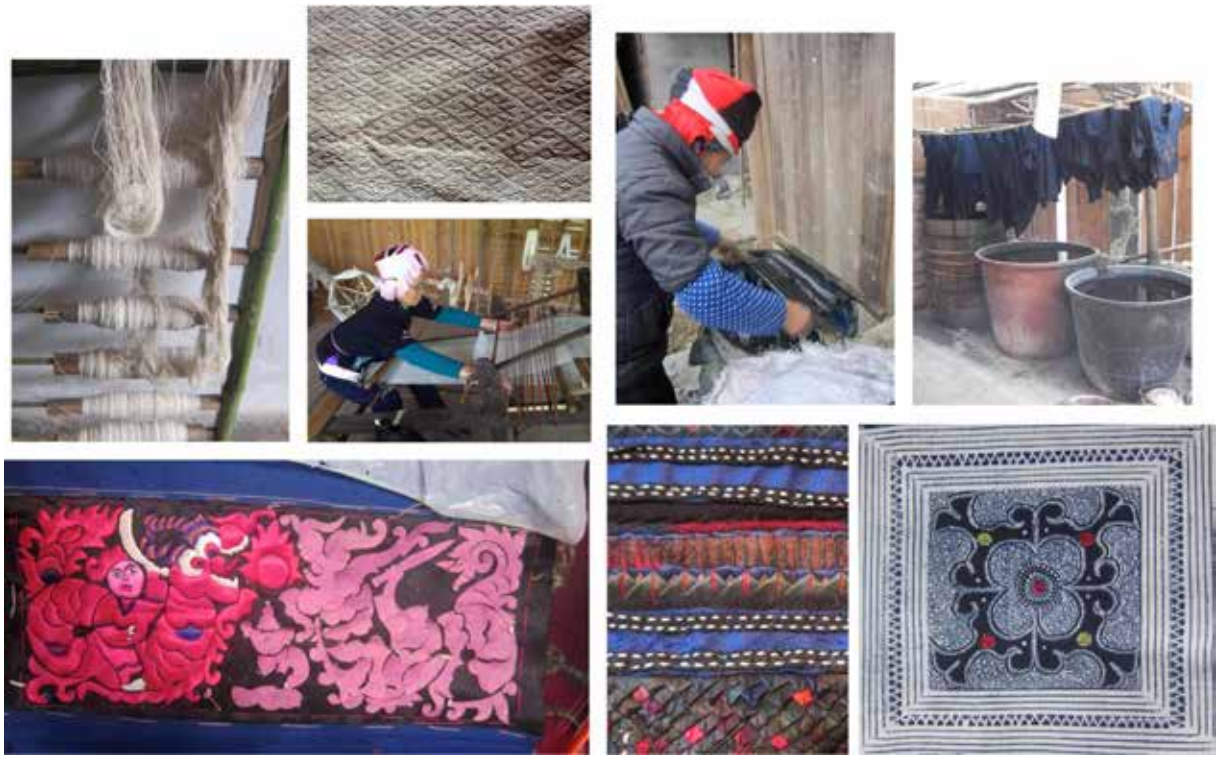

Fig. 3. Various Miao and Dong textile techniques from Guizhou.

The Miao and Dong peoples are two of the fifty-five (non-Han) minority ethnic groups officially recognised by the People's Republic of China. They reside primarily in the mountainous areas of southern China, with the majority living in Guizhou province. As semi-migratory agricultural societies – subsistence farmers who are largely self-sufficient – the Miao and Dong traditionally grow and produce their own food, paper, jewellery, textiles and clothing. Their houses and community buildings in each case have unique architectural styles, built from wood without the use of nails, with distinct eaves and roof details. Their textiles are world-renowned for their decorative beauty and for extraordinary skill in the use of many different weaving, dyeing, batik, embroidery and embellishment techniques.

The Miao and Dong use several similar techniques to create the base of their garments and textiles. Embroidery and embellishment, as well as the use of dominant colours, vary between the groups and indeed the various sub-divisions of the larger of the two peoples, the Miao. These sub-divisions are often named after the colour of the skirts made and worn by the women in their society, for example 'Black Miao' in south-eastern Guizhou, 'Large Flowery Miao' in north-western Guizhou, and 'White Miao' and 'Green/Blue Miao' in western Guizhou. This underlines the cultural significance of the various textile techniques and clothing styles in their use as the distinguishing characteristic between the different groups.

The creation of textiles is a cyclical process, with different stages dependent on the seasons. The cotton is grown and harvested amongst other crops grown for food, to sustain the villages and to sell at market. Silk is also collected from silk worms in the area. Both cotton and silk are then hand spun into yarns of varying thicknesses and woven on small wooden looms in the home. This is done during quiet times in the farming calendar. The patterns woven vary from a simple cotton plain weave to more complicated brocades (as seen in Fig. 3 above). The most important of all of the dyes, indigo, is also grown in the villages. The woven fabric has to be dyed at a certain time of year when the weather is at an optimum temperature to create the richest and deepest colour. Each stage is labour intensive and entirely handmade using techniques passed down through generations.

Fig. 4. Details from an elderly Miao woman's clothing in Xijiang, Guizhou.

The photos (Fig. 4) show clothing worn by village elders in the Miao village of Xijiang, Guizhou. The elderly woman wears clothes that she handcrafted herself. All the fabric used to make her outfit was hand woven and dyed, from the silk brocade surrounded by a cotton plain weave fabric on her apron to the cotton woven in a diamond pattern on her top and the ribbon used to tie the belt around her waist. The sleeves and collar of the top are all hand embroidered and appliquéd. The entire costume would have taken years to complete, and will be passed down through future generations of women. This lady takes pride in what she wears and the fact that she made it all herself. These details are not merely personal but have always been strong social signifiers, part of the intrinsic cultural identity of Miao communities.

Fig. 5 (left). Miao men's clothing.
Fig. 6 (right). Women lining up to welcome visitors.

The man above (Fig. 5) wears much simpler, less ornamental clothing, but the fabric used to make his tunic was also hand-woven and hand-dyed for a prolonged period of time in natural indigo dye. The Miao use indigo in many of their everyday clothes and ceremonial costumes. It is prized for its aesthetic beauty and also for its natural anti-bacterial, anti-fungal, cooling properties.

Xijiang has traditionally been one of the larger Miao villages in Guizhou, and its picturesque traditional houses and rice paddies, along with the riverside setting and surrounding countryside, made it a prime location for development. It is now designated as a 'historical cultural ancient town' and, although it still functions as an authentic Miao village, the local authorities have turned the town into a tourist attraction with many hotels, restaurants and the ubiquitous karaoke bars that are found throughout China – it is advertised as a 'living fossil' of Miao culture. This phrase is particularly unfortunate, indicating a petrified culture, something entirely defined by and closed into its past.

The development of roads and infrastructure around the village, whilst good for the economy, has led to relatively easy access and influences from outsiders. The women welcoming visitors in the photo above (Fig. 6) are all wearing matching 'Miao' costumes. However, instead of hand-woven cotton, their tops and aprons are made from synthetic velvet fabric, with machine-embroidered ornate designs. You can also see that the style of the embroidery is much more figurative compared to the more abstract designs on the handmade costume of the woman in Figure 4. From a distance they may look similar, but these women wear a mass-produced imitation of a traditional outfit whose techniques have been taught and learned for generations, reducing a process from fifty separate stages to only five: a kind of wholesale reproduction that would be at home in a museum gift shop.

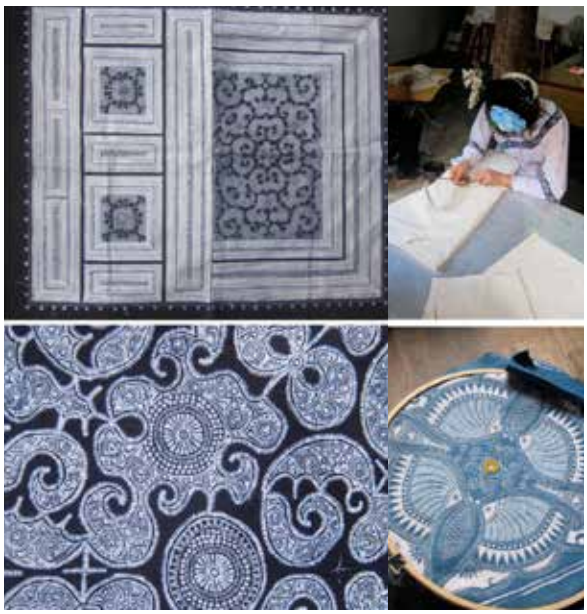

Fig. 7 (top left). Traditional Miao wax resist.
Fig. 8 (bottom left). Detail of traditional Miao wax resist.
Fig. 9 (top right). Woman preparing wax on T-shirt.
Fig. 10 (bottom right). Commercial wax resist detail.

The photos above (Figs 7–10) show traditional wax resist designs dyed with natural indigo and then embroidered in certain points. Each design takes several days, if not weeks, to complete the application of the wax before they can start the dyeing process. The traditional Miao designs are very intricate with large patterned white areas meaning that more wax has to be applied. These panels form parts of costumes used for ceremonial occasions. In Figures 9 and 10 the Miao craftswoman is preparing wax resist patterns on T-shirts that are commercially available to tourists and visitors to

the area. The patterns are much simpler, with less white space, making them much quicker to complete. As a result they are accessible and the craftspeople are able to make a living by producing more labour efficient designs for people who want something to show they have been to the area but aren't prepared to pay for the labour involved in creating the traditional patterns. They function almost like postcards, but with less emotional depth. With postcards the writer needs to take time to think about their experience a little in order to convey the feeling of the area to their friends.

The opening-up and industrialisation of China has had a huge impact on the traditions and livelihoods of the Miao and Dong peoples. Many of the centuries-old craft techniques are becoming rarer and in danger of dying out as younger generations are leaving their rural homes in search of relatively unskilled but often better paid work in the many restaurants, karaoke bars and, of course, the factories of China's cities. These jobs can be learnt in one day, as opposed to practising and studying embroidery for many years. However, the money and ease of work are not the only thing drawing the youth to the cities. Young people want to 'go out' and see the world. In *Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China* (2009), Leslie Chang talks about the desire, of young women especially, to experience more and see the world. There is huge optimism in the general perception of what can be achieved if they move to the city. Seeing cities, urban life and overseas culture portrayed on television and in films exerts a huge influence, and now they want to experience it for themselves. This mass rural-to-urban migration is by far the largest ever seen in history.

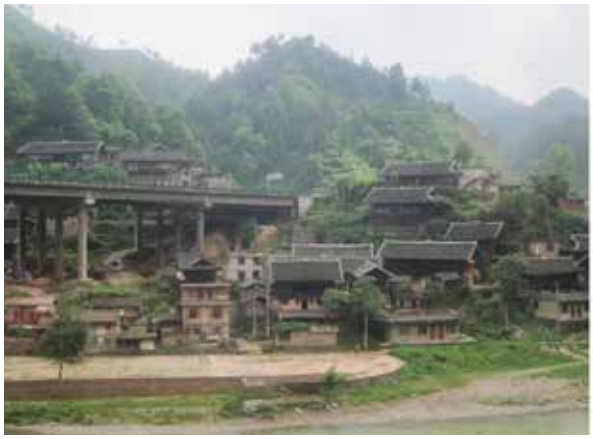

Fig. 11 (left). Highway cutting through Miao village in Guizhou.
Fig. 12 (right). Traditional and adapted bird cages.

As Figure 11 shows, the development of infrastructure has also made previously difficult to access mountainous regions open for development and tourism, and this in turn is affecting the local customs and traditions in Miao villages. As I mentioned previously, the influx of tourists creates new revenue for the Miao and Dong craftspeople, but this comes with compromise, and the traditional designs and patterns are affected. The visitors to the area value the local craft and want a piece for themselves but aren't prepared to pay for the time it takes to create the authentic works of art. And how do the craftspeople know what value to put on these textiles? For centuries they have been creating costumes for use in ceremonial occasions that they work on over years and wear for a lifetime. How do you put a monetary value on something that has never been sold and only ever made for personal use? In one village an elderly woman stated the price of ¥100RMB (around €12) for an embroidered top as this was the highest-value banknote she had seen. This kind of value would make creating new pieces as detailed as the old totally unsustainable.

Outside influence can also encourage innovation, like the birdcage in Figure 12. Here an upturned plastic wastepaper bin has been converted into a makeshift birdcage, and hangs alongside its handmade wooden neighbour. It illustrates how the outside world influences craft, where a traditional part of Chinese culture has been adapted to use cheaper products from outside.

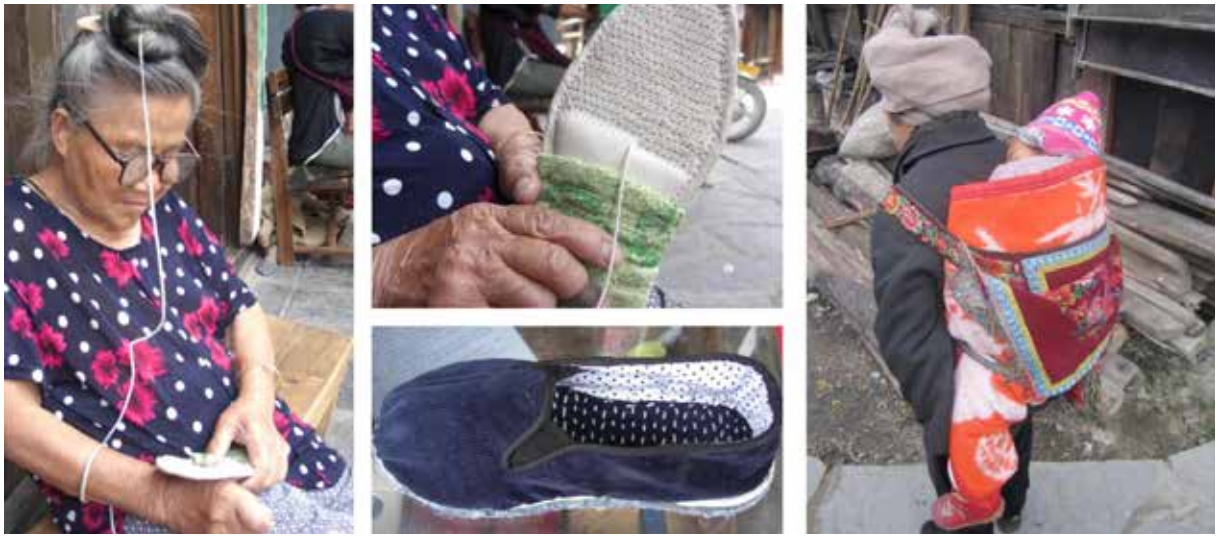

Fig. 13 (left and centre). A grandmother sewing shoes for her grandson.
Fig. 14 (right). An elderly woman carrying a baby in a baby carrier.

Traditionally, embroidery is used in simple everyday clothes, like the stitched shoes to the right where the grandmother in Figure 13 is sewing them for her grandson. But with the shamanistic religion of the Miao, embroidery is also used on special garments like baby carriers, ceremonial jackets and burial clothes. In his study 'The Hmong Cross: A Cosmic Symbol in Hmong (Meo) Textile Designs' (1987) Erik Cohen suggests that the various interpretations of the cross pattern used in most of the Miao embroidery are protective symbols, blocking the dangerous spirits from moving freely between this world and the spirit world. This would explain why the embroidery is used on garments or objects of importance, to protect weak babies and spirits of the departed travelling to the next world.

The idea that a craftsperson would spend a large portion of their life creating beautiful works of art in which they are later buried brings the creation of the garments in line with the life-cycle of the maker. Working for years to complete clothing that you will then be buried in also speaks of another kind of value. It is a luxury, not in the way that many in the West use to show status or wealth in material value but a private kind that they believe will protect and take them through to an afterlife. In 'More Than a Pretty Cloth: Teaching Hmong History and Culture through Textile Art' (1997), Ava L. McCall explains that the amount of effort put into the burial garments showed the personality and social status of the deceased. If they had the patience to create such beautiful clothes they must have been a reliable person and much loved in their former life.

When seen from this perspective, the pieces made for tourists lose all their meaning. Mass-produced fabric would not have the same significance or connotations as the traditionally handcrafted garments. As well as burial clothes, the Miao and Dong peoples also pass down handmade ceremonial garments as family heirlooms, placing real value on the craftsmanship. Many elderly women wish to teach the younger generations the skills they have, as they believe they are passing on the culture and heritage of their ancestors. Each of the embroideries and wax resist textile pieces convey a story and the history of their clan.

For the Miao, value is in the making, in your community, who you are, what you do and your cultural language. It is not what market you are in, what commodities you exchange and what you can consume. The artisan economy of the Miao and Dong is traditionally about making, not consumption.

I would like to use the process of creating the shiny indigo cloth as an example of one of the techniques that is extremely labour-intensive, and in danger of being lost unless more incentives are created to keep younger generations interested in learning the skills that their parents and grandparents have used before them.

In her study 'Pleated Skirts of Miao in Guizhou Province, China' (2004), Tomoko Torimaru states that when egg white is used as a glaze on the indigo fabric, 'The key ingredient, a liquor of two types of medicinal herbs that is also sometimes ingested as a healthy elixir, is added to the beaten egg whites'

(Torimaru 2004: 56). The creation of this shiny fabric for ceremonial wear is also related to the medicines and foods eaten in the area, which is something that cannot be replicated by a cheaper, more convenient chemical substitute that is used to create a similar surface on the textiles. It is part of a way of life.

Figure 15 illustrates examples of some of the textiles I have collected, showing natural colours and effects that can be achieved through the techniques that Tomoko Torimaru mentions in her study. The quality, colour range, sheen and feel of the fabrics is much more intense and, I believe, superior to the synthetic coating used in the textile in Figure16. The use of natural ingredients rather than chemicals has environmental benefits. But of course natural techniques require a great deal more time, patience and skill.

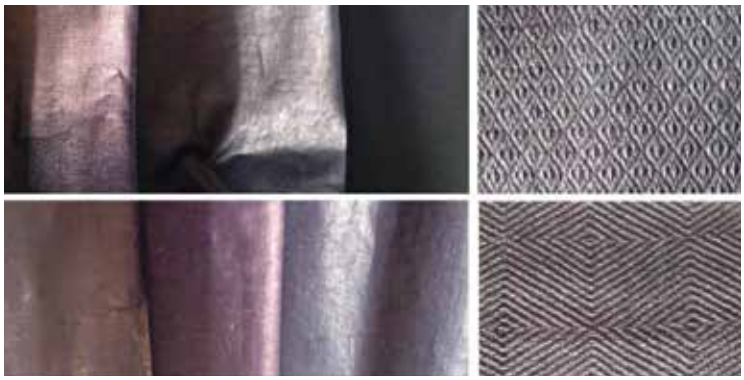

Fig. 15. Various coated shiny cloths from Guizhou.

Fig. 16. Shiny cloth with synthetic coating from Guizhou

Fig. 17. Coffins lying underneath a grain store.

Another example of where the life-cycles of the craft and the maker are intertwined is found in the burial rituals of the Dong people. During a visit to the Dong village of Dimen in Guizhou I came across these handmade coffins preserved underneath the grain stores on the outskirts of the village. As the Dong, like the Miao, are farming peoples, the grain collected at the end of their harvest acts as a deposit in a bank account as it is their livelihood and sustenance for the coming winter. The specially designed grain stores are built on stilts above pools of water to protect them from fire and to deter mice. They are built on the outskirts of the village so that if a fire starts in one of the many wooden houses, they are a safe distance away. Underneath these 'bank accounts' lay the coffins already created for members of the family. A local resident explained that in Dong culture a tree is planted when a person is born; when this person reaches the age of fifty, the tree is felled and a coffin crafted from the wood. At the end of the coffin a design is carved that signifies which family the deceased belongs to, almost as crests are used in the West. The coffins varied in shape and size dependent on whether they were for men or women, and were custom-made to fit.

To me this signifies a luxury, not in terms of commercial or monetary value but that of rarity. The ingredient of 'excess' in this kind of luxury is an excess of care, of respect, of time and attention: it takes fifty years to grow a tree before the crafting of the coffin can even begin; its rarity is that of skilled craftsmanship (each one is handmade specifically for the user); and, lastly, luxury in terms of meaning and cultural significance (the shamanistic religion of the Dong includes a belief in the afterlife and a cycle of crafting and creation in one life that is carried over to the next).

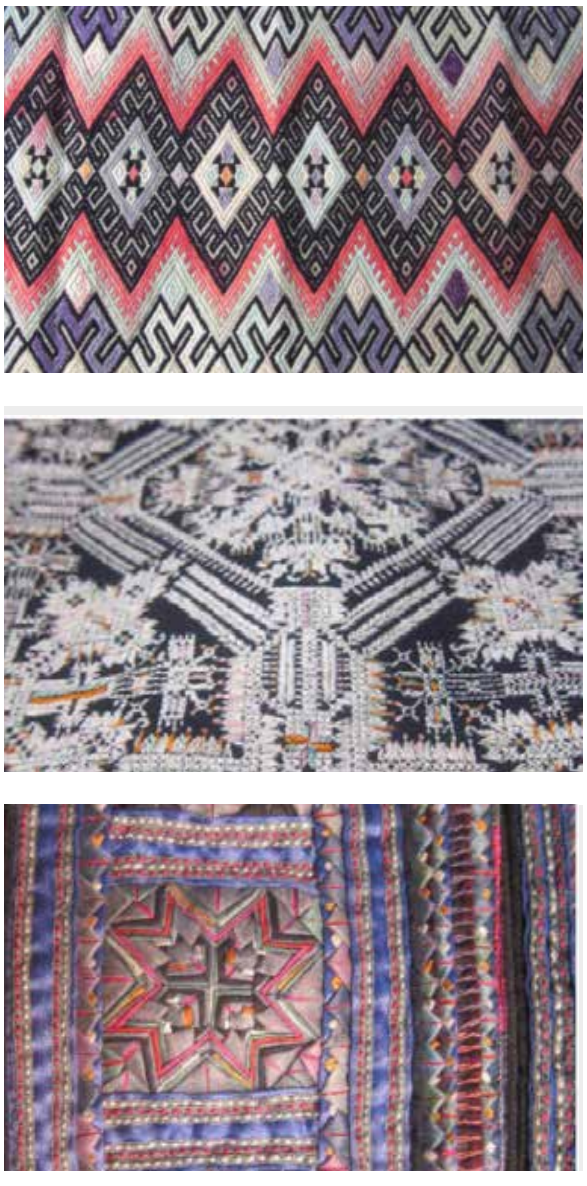

Fig. 18. Embroidery from Guizhou

What we witness in the textile cultures of the Miao and Dong peoples might well count as retail luxury in a Shanghai or Paris boutique. But in its native culture what is important in artisanal tradition has to do with careful craft: costly in time and skill and understanding; refined and rife with meaning and significance; and indispensable in an afterlife. All this is lost in cheap tourist fakeries of the real thing.

It seems that there are three directions in which the crafts traditions of groups like the Dong and the Miao can be sustained and developed for future generations. Firstly, as we have seen, there is the option to develop cheaper, simpler versions using synthetic machine-made fabrics that are then embroidered and sold easily to tourists as souvenirs. This preserves some elements of the craftsmanship but also means that many of the techniques are likely to die out. Secondly, the women of villages like Xijiang could develop simpler everyday items such as the stitched shoes or belts. These are smaller and more labour-efficient but the traditional techniques remain the same. They are at the same time useful for the villagers and suitable for selling at a reasonably cheap price to visitors of the area. Thirdly, the traditional techniques can be continued and developed using innovative designs, but in order to keep this sustainable they will need to be sold at a high price, reflecting the amount of time and skill that has gone into making them, and making it worthwhile for younger generations to stay at home to learn and innovate the craft.

This is where the luxury market comes in. The intricate, graphic patterns used in the traditional Miao and Dong weaving, wax resist, dying, embroidery and appliqué are hundreds of years old, yet their designs remain relevant and suitable for contemporary brands and designers. The three photos above (Fig. 18) show details of embroidery and appliqué techniques found in a museum of Miao and Dong textiles near Kaili, Guizhou. The painstakingly small cross-stitch in the middle photo is timeless as well as culturally significant. The layers of folded silk triangles appliquéd to create the panel in the photograph on the right could easily be seen in an *haute couture* collection of a major fashion house, or adapted to be used in contemporary garments.

As an example to show how the luxury industry could help preserve traditional crafts like that of the Miao and Dong peoples I have chosen three different craft specialities that Shang Xia has worked with. These artisans have chosen high quality over quantity and worked with designers to innovate products rather than sticking to traditional designs and methods. This makes them more relevant for contemporary living. It is important to create a balance between traditional techniques and the contemporary finished product.

Fig. 19. The making of a felt scarf. Photo ©Shang Xia 2011

The first of these techniques is felted cashmere. The goats from which the best quality cashmere comes are found on the Mongolian plateau. Collecting the cashmere is a difficult job as each goat has to be combed by hand during springtime when they start to shed their winter fleece. The finest cashmere from these goats is then cleaned and carded into a light, fluffy, even texture so that it can be felted in layers without lumps and impurities. These fluffy layers are then sprinkled with water and soap and rubbed by hand until they felt together as one fabric. The felt is rolled in a towel to rid it of any excess water. To create three-dimensional garments, the felt is rubbed and sculpted into shape on a mannequin so the finished piece can be made without the need for seams.

Traditionally the nomads living on the Mongolian plateau would use wool from sheep or yak to felt fabric for tents as well as clothes. The felt they used was extremely hard-wearing and multi-functional. For example, some of the coats they made would be so dense that they could be used to transport water when not being worn.

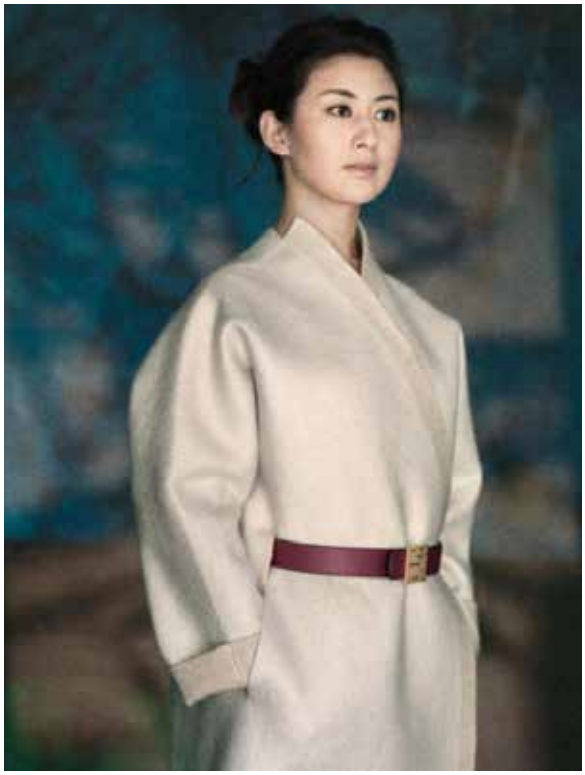

Fig. 20. Shang Xia hand-felted scarf and coat. Photo ©Shang Xia 2012

This hardwearing fabric is extremely useful for life on the steppe, but not so comfortable or necessary in urban life. Combining this traditional technique with cashmere, an exquisite fibre found in the same area, the design is updated and made relevant to contemporary life. Using the know-how to inform the construction of the garments – buttons and pockets felted into the garment, colour blocks, seamless shapes – combined with the cashmere hand-feel makes it smoother and more appealing to wear. The cashmere adds another level to the clothes and accessories: not only are they warmer but amazingly soft.

Training craftspeople in Shanghai and learning from masters in Mongolia enables the designer, artisan and producer to work and learn together.
Cashmere is traditionally felted on the Mongolian plateau because of the lifestyle requirements of the area, but it can also be woven. For that it is sent to Nepal where the weaving tradition is stronger. The spinning, weaving and finishing is all done by hand.

Fig. 21. The making of a hand-woven cashmere shawl. Photo ©Shang Xia 2011

Highest quality weaving craftsmanship has always taken place in Nepal. Rural Nepalese used to make all of their clothes themselves. This allowed them creative flexibility. It encouraged competition and innovation and distinguished each person from others in their village. Once industrialisation is introduced, it becomes more about making sales and pricing that compromises on quality. People care less about what they are making.

One hundred years ago high quality products were handmade 'inside' Nepal for Nepalis. Meanwhile, within the context of globalisation, opening up and development, 'outside' in the West mass production was growing. Now, as Nepal is open and becoming more globalised, mass production from 'outside' is becoming popular inside Nepal, and high quality handcrafted products are being sent outside.
The Tibetan apron is an example. Worn by many mountain-dwelling Nepali women, it used to be that even the wealthiest women in the village might have only two handcrafted aprons to wear for their whole lives, where now even the average women will have five aprons to choose from, but these have been mass produced.

The luxury sector has the freedom to pay higher wages to the artisans, meaning that they can spend more time and take more care over each product to achieve a higher quality and a more beautiful, refined outcome. The craftsperson is valued for the quality of their craftsmanship rather than being a cog in a machine to produce as many products as possible for the lowest price. This in turn makes the craft more sustainable.

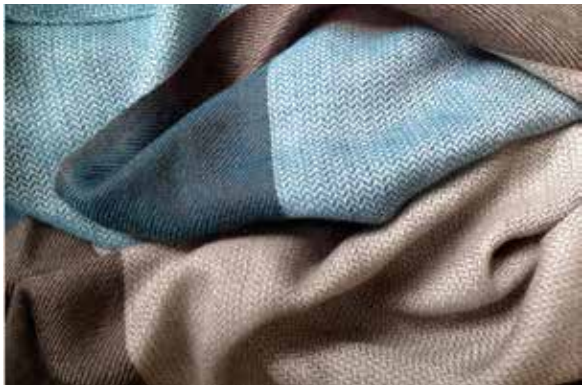

Fig. 22. A hand-woven cashmere scarf from Shang Xia

But not everyone can afford to buy everything handmade. It is important to strike a balance between readily accessible, innovative, mass-produced products and special items that you can use for a lifetime, in your daily routine, that bring some emotional enjoyment. If you have a few products that you are very happy with and enhance your day, the thirst to buy and consume more is quenched. William Morris was criticised for making things that people could not afford to buy. But if your relationship with the product is through making and not through buying, if you cannot afford to buy an item you might be able to afford to make it. This value in making is crucial for the survival of craft and for encouraging the continuation of craft heritage.

Note: All photographs by Ruth Brewerton unless otherwise stated.

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