

Mental Template: The Case of the Tai Lao *Pha Sin*

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INTRODUCTION

Anthropologists and archaeologists try to study and analyze the pattern of human behavior in a society. It is believed that the pattern of human behavior is governed by the culture of that society. In every culture, there are conventions which dictate the form of artifacts which are man-made. It is assumed that by studying and analyzing the pattern of human behavior as seen from the attributes of the artifacts or the material (concrete) culture of a society, one can understand some of their shared cultural norms and thus come to know their mental template, which is abstract (DEETZ 1967; LECHTMEN and MERILL 1977).

The case that this paper addresses applying the above assumption, is one of Tai Lao material culture, namely textile, using the *pha sin* (*pha*=cloth; *sin*=tubular skirt) as an example. The objective is to illustrate that from the concrete aspects of the Tai Lao weaving technology, one can obtain an insight into the abstract part of their culture, especially that of their ideas, or mental template. The ideas are expressed through different attributes such as forms, motifs, symbols, and designs used in the weaving technology. By knowing the mental template of the makers one may understand why a particular type of artifact looks the way it does and why it is different from other types.

The word Tai used here refers to a particular linguistic group which is found throughout the Southeast Asian mainland from as far west as Assam in India to as far south as the Malay peninsula. It is not to be confused with the word Thai which refers to citizens of Thailand.

The term Lao is apparently of Siamese origin, referring to Tai speakers to the north and northeast of the central Chao Phraya plain, distinguished by their preference for glutinous rice; by certain dif-

ferences in the style of their Buddhist architecture, religious script, and terminology; and by an historical tradition common to the various middle Mekong principalities which persisted up to the intervention of the French and Siamese Tai (LEBAR et al. 1964, 188). When the French extended their political control to the banks of the Mekong, they took over this Siamese term for the Tai-speaking inhabitants and adopted the term Laos for the protectorate they created (MCGILVARY 1912, 13). In this sense the term Lao is practically synonymous with the Tai-speaking population of what was once the old kingdom of Lan Xang, founded by Fa Ngoun in the mid-fourteenth century. Thus, the term Tai Lao used here refers to the Tai-speaking groups living in Thailand and Laos who display the Lao characteristics as described above. Examples of the Tai Lao groups are Tai Nuea, Tai Puan or Lao Khrang, Tai Daeng, Tai Dum, and Pu Tai.

TAI LAO TEXTILE

Despite the fact that clothing's basic utilitarian function is to protect the body against climate and environment, people have gone beyond this basic requirement. This is seen from the different material, style, color and design used by both men and women of each culture. Due to this cultural phenomenon one will often see what is described as the national costume of a particular country.

The Tai Lao speaking groups have been known for their fine weaving technology (CHEESMEN 1982, 1988; KRUG and DUBOFF 1982; LISUWAN et al. 1987; PRANGWATTANAKUN and CHEESMEN 1987). Examples of their rich and elaborate textiles are the Tai Nuea long shawl (*pha biang*) and long skirt (*pha sin*) worn on special occasions (CHEESMAN 1982: 120-125). The *pha biang* is woven with different symbols and designs in supplementary weft reflecting their beliefs and values. The products they create are for both daily use and for ceremonial use. The interesting point is that among the different Tai Lao groups one way they differentiate themselves is according to the style of skirts they wear. These skirts are worn by the Tai Lao women and are called *pha sin*.

Pha sin is a common woman's tube shape skirt found throughout Thailand and neighboring countries. It is similar to a sarong which is more widely known. The *pha sin* is usually worn from the waist down to knee level, or further down to the ankle. The length depends on the width of the weft in the loom, although if the loom has a narrow weft the short length *pha sin* can be extended by adding the waist band and hem pieces. The *pha sin* when worn can be folded or tucked at the waist. Sometimes, belts (silver or copper alloy) are used but they are not common among the rural people for everyday wear. The *pha*

sin design structure is composed of three basic parts: the waistband, the main body, and the hem piece (see Fig. 1). These three parts can be woven all-in-one piece. Then the piece is sewn only in one side seam to create a tube shape skirt. Or, the three parts could be woven separately then sewn together as one long piece. This is common especially when expensive silver or gold thread is used in the elaborate hem design.

In general, people from different regions or ethnic sub-groups can recognize the details of the design structure and decorative motifs from their own *pha sin*. The specific shared characteristics of a *pha sin* tend to identify the location and people who produced them. In Thailand, *pha sin* or textiles from different locations are well recognized such as Khok Yor in the south, Hat Sieo in the north, and the Esarn *mat mi* (ikat) silk or the *lai kit* cotton design and technique in the northeast.

The Kamthieng House Ethnological Museum of the Siam Society in Bangkok has a collection of late 19th century *pha sin* that is called *tin chok*. The term *tin chok* is derived literally from *tin*, an old Thai word for “base or foot,” and *chok*, which in the dialect of the Northeast and Laos, means to “insert” or “slip” something in and out. *Tin chok* is actually a strip of cloth with patterns made by slipping threads of different colors in and out on the loom. The common colors used are red, yellow, green, black and white.

KRUG and DUBOFF describe the process of making a *tin chok* or *teenjok* as follows (KRUG and DUBOFF 1982, 66):

These intricate borders are generally from five to ten inches wide and six to seven feet long. They are simultaneously woven on narrow looms and worked with designs using brightly colored threads and porcupine-quill needles. The quill “needle” has no hole or “eye” and so cannot be threaded. It is used as a pick to insert threads into the cloth as it is woven. *Teenjok* is worn only on special occasions at which time it is attached to a cotton skirt, *pasin*. One *teenjok* may last its wearer a lifetime.

There are no patterns or instructions. The weavers carry the designs in their heads, and there are nine possible patterns. While the designs on the sides are fairly similar, the geometric design in the center may vary considerably. It is said that a skilled worker with good eyesight working an average of seven hours a day can produce a *teenjok* in twenty days, while an older woman whose eyesight is not so sharp can finish one in a month working five hours a day.

The examples of *pha sin* from the Kamthieng House's collection that the author would like to elaborate further upon are those belonging to three Tai Lao groups, namely Lao Phuan, Lao Khrang and Tai Lue.

The Lao Phuan and Lao Khrang groups living in Lan Na (Northern Thailand) are in fact various Tai groups that have emigrated from Laos (PRANGWATTANAKUN and CHEESMAN 1987, 71). The groups at Hat Sieo in Sukhothai province, Tron and Laplae in Uttaradit province are Lao Phuan (or Tai Phuan) originally from Xieng Khouang, Laos. Their *pha sin* display the Tai Phuan skills of supplementary warp and heavily decorative supplementary weft *tin chok*. The three parts of their *pha sin* are easily recognized with white connected with red cotton waist-band, sprites or patterned main body, and a connected *tin chok* decorative hem piece which runs all the way down to the edge of the *pha sin*.

The other Tai Lao group in northern Thailand is the Lao Khrang, who live in Uttaradit and Pichitr provinces. Their distinctive *pha sin* have a main body part woven in the style of the Tai Nuea (an ethnic Tai sub-group living in the Sam Nuea province, Laos) using alternating bands of supplementary weft and ikat (*mat mi*) technique and incorporating the Tai Yuan *tin chok* hem piece. The difference between the Lao Phuan and Lao Khrang *pha sin* is that the Lao Khrang *tin chok* is located way above the edge leaving a wide plain space below which is below a narrower decorated hem piece, whereas the Lao Phuan *tin chok*, about six to twelve inches wide is located at the edge of the *pha sin*.

The third group is the Tai Lue in Chiang district, Phayao province; Chiang Khong district, Chiang Rai province; and Nan province. The *pha sin* of the Tai Lue group is distinctive in style whereby the decoration is completely plain. The decorations are horizontal stripes made in the weft when woven.

An example of a Tai Lue *pha sin* from Chiang Kham shows a tapestry weaving technique. The minimal use of this technique is seen in the thin half-inch stripe using *lai dok pak waen* (small flower) as its decorative feature. This is called the *sin* Muang Lin, named after a town in Sipsong Pan Na in Yunnan (KRUG and DUBOFF 1982, 75). These *pha sin* always have a plain indigo cotton *tin* and waist-band. It is known that since 1975 Lao silk has been unavailable and the Chiang Kham weavers have been using synthetic yarns, weaving the *pha sin* without separate *tin* and waist-band, but still maintaining the two side seams.

The Tai Lue *pha sin* from Chiang Khong district is similar to that from Chiang Kham but the former has a stronger geometric pattern in



FIG. 1. Examples of Tai Lao *pha sin* from the collection of the Kamthieng House Ethnological Museum, the Siam Society, Bangkok. Photo shows from left to right: Lao Phuan's with *tin chok* hem piece; Tai Lue's one piece cotton; Lao Khrang's *mat mi* in silk with cotton *tin chok* in the upper middle section; Lao Phuan's with *muk* patterned main body design and *tin chok* hem piece. (The four samples shown are folded in half lengthwise. The scale is 12 inches)

the main body. The Tai Lue *pha sin* from Nan province is rather distinctive by its use of ikat design and technique. The two main *pha sin* design structures used by this group are *sin man* and *sin pong*. The *sin man* is a series of unevenly spaced stripes, each space having a name and standard dimension. The *sin pong*, on the other hand, uses evenly spaced stripes and is very similar to the Tai Yuan *pha sin*. Another technique which has developed only recently in Nan province is a tapestry weave (*ko*) which has become very well known as Nan style in the *pha sin* woven in the *lai nam lai* (flowing water) design.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The examples of *pha sin* from Lao Phuan, Lao Khrang and Tai Lue show how each group differentiates its attributes in creating the "proper" or "right" form of *pha sin*. The Lao Phuan *pha sin* can be analyzed in terms of its attributes, discrete features which in their combination give the *pha sin* its distinctive form or group identity. The obvious attributes are as follows:

1. waist-band of connected pieces of white and red cotton;
2. striped or patterned main body in cotton;
3. *tin chok* sewn to decorative hem piece located at the lower section; and
4. one side seam.

Each of these attributes contributes to the form of the Lao Phuan *pha sin*, is commonly found in the Lao Phuan *pha sin* and is an attribute to the mental template which produced it for a certain reason. These reasons may not be all the same in every case. Some attributes could be a matter of technology, function, innovation or tradition. The *tin chok* decorative hem piece at the lower section of the *pha sin* is present because it is a part of the decorative tradition of the Lao Phuan group. As the term *tin* implies it means that the *tin chok* must be located at the "foot" or lower part of the *pha sin*. The reason why the *tin chok* is sewn to the main body part may be due to matters of technology. The technique of weaving the *tin chok* hem piece is different from weaving the main body part which is done in a much simpler technique different from the elaborate supplementary weft *tin chok*. This reason appears to apply also to the waist-band part which is sewn to the top part of the main body. The plain red and white bands of heavier yarn have no design. They are woven with a technique different from the main body which is woven with a striped or flower pattern design (*muk*). The reason for the preference of a striped or patterned design for the main body may be due to the tradition of

the Lao Phuan culture.

Another functional reason, according to the makers, for connecting the four pieces of cloth together to form a *pha sin* is because when the waist band or the hem piece wears down, it may be replaced with a new piece for further use. This applies also to the main body part. Thus, the life of a Lao Phuan *pha sin* will have a different span for each of the different connected parts if some part has been changed.

The *pha sin* of the Lao Khrang group in Uttaradit and Pichit provinces in northern Thailand clearly exhibits its distinctive attributes when compared to that of the Lao Phuan group. The general attributes of the Lao Khrang's *pha sin* from Uttaradit and Pichit are as follows:

1. waist-band of connected pieces of white and red cotton;
2. main body part in silk woven in Tai style using *ikat* technique with alternating bands or rows of supplementary weft;
3. below the silk follows a Tai Yuan style *tin chok* in cotton forming the lower middle section;
4. the lower section is a wide plain hem piece bordered by small decorated bands of supplementary weft; and
5. a seam on one side.

The *pha sin* of the Lao Khrang group here shows an interesting combination of silk *ikat* with cotton supplementary weft. Since the body of the *pha sin* is in silk and the decorative hem piece in cotton, the two parts seem to be an attempt at integrating the Lao and Lan Na (northern Thai) styles, but at the same time show a distinct individuality (PRANGWATTANAKUN and CHEESMAN 1987, 71). The decision for the Lao Khrang women of Uttaradit and Pichit to choose their hem piece to be located not at the very bottom part of the *pha sin* is the result of their shared ideas or mental template. The reason may be due to tradition or be a matter of function. The functional advantage for not putting the elaborate decorated hem piece at the lower part of the *pha sin* is to save it from quickly wearing off especially while moving or sitting on the floor. In this case the contact part would be the plain hem piece bordered by some small band or bands of supplementary weft. Perhaps it was this reason why the Lao Khrang women followed the described attributes which became an established fact shared by women of the Lao Khrang culture. Similarities exist with the *pha sin* of the Tai Nuea in Sam Nuea, Laos. The original style may have derived from the Tai Nuea which were adopted by other groups of the Tai Lao speaking group such as the weavers at Nam Pat, Uttaradit province (CHEESMAN 1988, 130–131).

The Tai Lue women, for example at Chiang Kham district, Payao province, have completely different attributes for their *pha sin* when compared to those of the Lao Phuan or Lao Khrang in general. The general attributes for the Chiang Kham Tai Lue's *pha sin* are as follows:

1. The decorative part falls in the main body part;
2. the use of decorative horizontal stripes, some with supplementary weft;
3. plain wide hem piece with some small decorative bands;
4. a one piece *pha sin* in cotton after 1975;
5. the use of two side seams; and
6. the common use of black color in addition to red, white, yellow and violet.

The distinctive attributes when put together create a unique form of *pha sin* worn by the Tai Lue women at Chiang Kham district. The attribute of using two side seams for their *pha sin* may be explained by the technological limitation of the traditional Tai Lue loom which does not permit the use of a longer cloth beam. The attribute of using a one continuous whole piece of *pha sin* differentiates this particular Tai Lue group from those at Chiang Khong who prefer to add a separate waist-band and hem piece to their *pha sin*. Prior to 1975 most of the Tai Lue *pha sin* at Chiang Kham were woven in silk. But since then silk was not available locally so the weavers turned to use cotton instead. The shared idea of using predominantly horizontal stripes of different colors becomes the mental template for weaving a Tai Lue *pha sin*. The products from each weaver here appear to display a shared unique style of *pha sin* that identifies this cultural group from the others.

Variations do exist among the different Tai Lue groups living in different areas. For example, the Tai Lue at Chiang Khong district, Chiang Rai province, use a tapestry weave as their decorative technique but have a string geometric pattern which dominates the patterning of the cotton *pha sin*. The hem and waist-bands are added separately in a plain indigo cotton fabric.

Another group of Tai Lue is located at Thung Chang district, Nan province. This group, recently migrated from Muang Ngoen in Laos, has the distinctive characteristic to use *ikat* which is a technique not known to other Tai Lue groups (PRANGWATTANAKUN and CHEESMAN 1987, 71-74). It is believed that they learned this technique from the Tai Nuea. Another technique which has developed only recently in Nan province is a tapestry weave (*ko*) which has become very well known as Nan style particularly in the *pha sin* woven in the *lai nam*

lhai (flowing water) design (PRANGWATTANAKUN and CHEESMAN 1987, 73). The attribute of using this flowing water design may be explained by the innovative factor that was recently acquired and shared by the weavers here.

What has been shown here are the different mental templates among the Tai Lue groups living in different provinces. Each has its own distinctive characteristics or attributes for its *pha sin*. The reason for such distinctive characteristics may be their strong group identity, thus, by displaying their unique attributes they differentiate themselves from other groups in that region.

CONCLUSION

The Tai Lao speaking groups found in Thailand today had repeatedly migrated from Laos over the centuries. Evidence of these migrations has been recorded in Thai political and social history and also through the oral history of the Tai Lao themselves. Wherever these groups of people settled, they took with them their culture and tradition which they have learned and cherished from generation to generation. They speak with a distinct dialect, eat glutinous rice, engage in rice farming, adore the fertility cult of the Bun Bung Fai tradition, practice Theravada Buddhism, and the women weave and wear a folded tubular skirt called *pha sin*.

The study of the Tai Lao *pha sin* as an example of a concrete form of material culture can lead us to understand some of the shared ideas or mental template of the makers recognized by the members of their society. In order to understand this abstract part of Tai Lao culture the different attributes of a certain style of *pha sin* can be analyzed. The mental template for a Tai Lao group is a combination of a number of shared attributes. These attributes are present for reasons which are either functional, technological, traditional (beliefs and values), or just a matter of recently acquired innovation. The Lao Phuan group has a distinctive style of *pha sin* that is easily recognized when compared to those of the Lao Khrang or Tai Lue group. The reason why the Lao Phuan women have to connect the *tin chok* hem piece to the main body of the *pha sin* is due to technological limitation. The *tin chok* hem piece is woven with a different technique from that of the main body. It has a decorative function which when worn down can be easily replaced with a new one without having to change the main body part. If the main body part wears down due to over use, it can be replaced with a new one while retaining the waist bands and the hem piece. This applies also to the waist-bands. Any part of the connected pieces of a *pha sin* is replacable. However, the advantage

of this type of *pha sin* is not generally made use of by the Tai Lue group who appears to favor a *pha sin* of one whole piece. If it is old and torn from over use, they will make a new one to replace it.

Through the course of cultural process with modernization and innovation knocking at the Tai Lao's door one expects to see some changes in the weaving technology. Imported commercial yarns and the use of easily available chemical dyes have appealed to the Tai Lao weavers today. Borrowed urban designs have also been adopted by some of the local weavers especially those using the *ikat* technique. New motifs may be introduced and accepted, for example, the flowing water design used by the Tai Lue of Nan province. However, many Tai Lao weavers still retain their traditional motifs and designs on their *pha sin*. Although the reasons for the selection of attributes varied, the product of the mental template is a distinctive concrete artifact, e.g. *pha sin*, which is very similar to others produced by similar templates. The mental template is therefore shown as being a set of abstract ideas shared by members of the Lao Puan, Lao Khrang or Tai Lue culture. These people have tried to retain their old tradition and need not to break with their past as some groups do. They tried their best to remember and to maintain the threads existing between their ancestors and themselves. Changes in their art came through unsought acculturation as seen by the wide spread of Western style clothing. The use of the *pha sin* is diminishing especially among the younger generation. Blue jeans and factory printed sarongs have replaced the traditional hand made *pha sin* in many villages in Thailand. This innovation has led to an unfortunate loss of cultural group identity. However, there is a revival trend supported by most of the urban Thai elites to save and promote the use of local and traditional arts and crafts in Thailand.

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