
**Suzanne Cahill**

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This visually stunning and well-researched catalogue records a special exhibition, featuring the minority costume collections of Huang Ying Feng and the Evergrand Museum in Taiwan, that appeared at several venues in the United States during 2008-2009. The book makes important contributions to the history of material culture, textile technology, and ethnic diversity in China. In illuminating introductory essays, eight authors cover a wide spectrum of theoretical and practical issues concerning the clothing and ornaments of ethnic minorities—mostly the Miao people—of Southwest China. The work is particularly welcome as most producers of the clothing were not literate, and the authors furnish us with tools that allow us to read the stories the fabricators incorporated in their designs, revealing their histories, cultures, values, and daily lives. The essays present textiles from a cross-disciplinary perspective, located at the juncture of anthropology, technology, material culture, art history, and history. They include surveys, cultural interpretation, and fieldwork as well as iconographical and technological analysis. The authors include a member of the Miao ethnic group as well as Han Chinese scholars, curators, and a collector. The authors hail from several disciplines: among their number are textile historians, anthropologists, an art historian, and scholars of
ethnic and gender studies. The resulting work challenges several persistent stereotypes that richly deserve to be retired from scholarly discourse. Among outmoded concepts convincingly laid to rest are the distinction between (high status) art and (low status) crafts, the idea of China as changeless, the belief that illiterate people are culturally or historically mute, and the image of southern minority peoples as simple, passive, and childlike.

The splendid opening essay by textile scholar and exhibition curator Angela Sheng, “Reading Costumes as ‘Texts’ and Decoding Ethnic Visual Culture of Southwest China,” sets forth the basic assumptions and hypotheses governing the book. Three assumptions underlie the interpretation of clothing as texts: (1) we learn from a young age how to read the meaning of clothing in our own culture; (2) visual identification is a culturally constructed process; and (3) we rapidly form our first impression of identity from visual cues in clothing, then look closely for details and interpret their meanings more slowly if we perceive ambiguities. These assumptions in turn lead to three hypotheses: (1) costumes function as ethnic cultural identifiers for specific purposes; (2) costumes document cultural interaction and adoption of designs from different peoples; and (3) simple design elements are the most readily spread from one group to another.

In a section on technology and intercultural integration, Sheng discusses the importance of complexity in ethnic clothing. Complexity enchants the beholder. The makers achieve enchantment in their garments by means of form and construction; dyed, woven, or embroidered ornamentation; and the design motifs themselves. Sheng investigates all these means in detail, pointing out the interrelations of Han and Miao design along the way.

Anthropologist Deng Qiyao contributes “The Other Writing of People without a Written Language.” This essay explores in vivid detail how clothing expresses the myths, history, rituals, religious beliefs, and cultural identity of its makers and wearers. Minority costumes play an essential role in transmitting and preserving cultural information that would otherwise be lost.

In the following essay, “Miao Marriage Symbols,” curator Xi Keding selects costumes associated with one important ritual, marriage, and investigates the relevant symbols, their meanings, and the way different Miao groups distinguish themselves from each other by differences in the design elements they choose and how they deploy these elements. Xi Keding also wrote another essay, “Miao Clothing Styles,” which catalogues the different styles of garments, and enumerates several subcategories within each major category. Xi notes that an aesthetic of “more is beautiful” governs both the garments and their ornamentation.
Moving on to Miao metalwork, and mixing myth and history, museum director and curator Li Qianbin writes “An Appreciation of Miao Silver Ornament Culture.” Li describes the history, meanings, and production techniques of one of the most distinctive forms of Miao dress, again noting the ways in which the over two hundred Miao subgroups differentiate themselves through differences in ornamentation.

Zheng Xiao, director and professor of minority and women’s studies at Guizhou University, herself a member of the Miao minority, provides a subtle and nuanced analysis in “Interpreting Needlework from a Gender Perspective: Femininity and Self-esteem—The Southeast Guizhou Miao.” Zheng’s essay provides one of the clearest expositions of a major argument of the catalogue: the cultural system embodied in clothing is a primary example of the way material objects serve as templates that both express and teach the beliefs and values, hopes and fears of a people. The author also cogently explicates the role of needlework in both defining women and providing them with a means of self-expression. Women’s textile work makes a gendered material contribution to family and society. It is, in Francesca Bray’s characterization, both woman’s work (work done by women) and womanly work (work appropriate to and expressing the virtue and discipline of women). Skill in textile production is one of the main criteria for judging a woman’s marriageability. And the minority women, in their textile “texts,” write not only the history of their peoples but also the specific history of women within the ethnic group. Needlework, as well, provides an outlet for women’s emotions. Textiles as a cultural system and their special importance to women are, Zheng asserts, globally universal themes. Her essay shows how the particular example of Miao textiles expresses the universal.

In “Reading Threads: Clothing, Ethnicity, and Place in Southwest China,” the anthropologist Stevan Harrell observes that, in contrast to the United States, race plays little if any role in ideas of ethnicity in China. In Southwest China, people associate ethnic groups with clothing. What a person wears indicates her ethnicity, gender, age, social status, kinship affiliation, and place of origin. Groups of people in Southwest China identify themselves using two-part “ethonyms,” or ethnic names. The second term gives the broad group identification, such as “Miao,” while the first, a descriptive term related to their clothing, is a modifier that specifies a narrower group within that group. This modifier may describe a dominant color, pattern, or fabrication technique (for example: Black Miao or Flowery Miao). The ethonyms in turn are associated with the current location, history, and migratory patterns of the people so named. Harrell also addresses the question of whether or not the minorities’ labor-intensive textile work can survive in the face of modernization and economic development. With so many young people moving to cities to
work in factories, will the traditional costumes survive only in museums, catalogues like this one, and the tourist trade? If future production of such costumes is imperiled, then the current catalogue is doubly valuable. Harrell speculates, optimistically, that as most women give up producing traditional clothing, specialists may emerge. Ethnic costumes will continue to be made but will occupy a narrower segment of a person’s wardrobe. They may be relegated exclusively to ritual use. He leaves us with the hope that there will still be threads to read among the southwestern minorities for a long time to come.

In “A Brief History of Ethnic Costume in Premodern China,” the art historian Kate A Lingley asks how dress functioned as a marker of identity in the past, directly challenging several of the stereotypes mentioned in the first paragraph of this review. The implications of her argument reach beyond the subject of minority textiles and allow the reader to question the notion of ethnicity and its relation to agency, identity, nation, biology, culture, history, myth, and territory. Writing their histories with thread, textile makers claim agency, revealing themselves as far from passive. In earlier eras, the groups we now call minorities were non-Chinese peoples living in the border regions. Early Chinese historians used clothing as a primary marker distinguishing self (assigned a positive value) and other or foreign (assigned a negative and even threatening value as “barbarian”). The imperial government authorities expressed deep concern with clearly distinguishing Han Chinese from others and separating the two. Making distinctions is an important part of identity-formation. Today, even within a single minority group such as the Miao, variations in clothing identify each subgroup and its relation to other subgroups, exposing the cultural rather than biological construction of ethnicity. Changes in design over time show textiles as historical rather than static or fixed things. They evolve in response to cultural transformations. Catalogues such as the one under review allow us to read minority clothing on its own terms, rather than through the lens of imperial Chinese systems of classification and control.

In the final essay, the collector Huang Ying Feng discusses his experiences collecting the striking minority costumes illustrated in this volume. We must all be grateful to this discerning collector for amassing and preserving valuable evidence of a fragile cultural heritage.

Entries pairing photographs with informational captions on costume ensembles and individual items in the exhibition make up the rest of the volume. This section, comprising over two thirds of the catalogue, features numerous, high-quality color illustrations, including close-ups of salient details, that amply illustrate the points made by the authors of the essays. The clear captions provide an abundance of technical data and explain each garment’s uses and the meanings of its decorations.
Let me close with a few brief comments and suggestions. Mark Hammond expertly translated several of the essays. The catalogue includes useful front and back matter such as distribution maps, charts breaking down ethnic subgroups, and a glossary of textile terms. The selected bibliography is representative and serviceable. The text would be greatly improved by the inclusion of Chinese characters for textile and other important terms; this is no longer prohibitively expensive. An index would have made the information in various sections retrievable. A note on the contributors would have been welcome. These are small quibbles that should not detract from the value of the work. *Writing with Thread* both documents an endangered cultural treasure and makes a significant contribution to the important and rapidly growing field that studies Chinese material culture as a primary historical source.