

# Textiles Asia

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# Inheritance & Innovation

By Brenda Lin

My mother and I are in a storage room behind her gallery, its lights shut off so as not to damage the displayed textiles with over-exposure to light. The temperature in the storage room is chilly, somehow made more noticeable by the constant double whirring of the air-conditioner and dehumidifier which are always on at full blast because the textile pieces need to be in a temperature-controlled room, like wine. We are surrounded by shelves of clear plastic bins labeled “hats,” “bibs,” “shoes,” “tops,” “baby carriers.” Large reams of fabric on rollers line one side of the room, and in the aisles between the shelves are garment racks with children’s clothes hanging from them—modern re-interpretations of traditional children’s wear from Taiwan, China and Southeast Asia.

We are sitting at the desk and my mother is talking to me about a child’s jacket made of yellow silk, padded with cotton and adorned with traditional Chinese button knots. My mother flips it around to reveal a drawing of a tiger in black ink. It’s not a particularly old article of clothing, nor is it decorated with the intricate embroideries or



Child's jacket in yellow silk with brush painting of tiger, grass and flowers. c. 1900–1930.

appliques of many of the other pieces in her collection that always elicit gasps of disbelief from viewers when they look closely at the handiwork. But there’s something in the freedom of its design and the wantonness of drawing directly on the silk with a calligraphy brush that spoke to my mother. This particular jacket is from the northern region of China; my mother acquired it in Beijing years ago.

“Maybe this mother was just very good at brush painting. But she didn’t care whether or not painting directly on fabric was ‘right.’ That takes a sense of courage. To me, this is innovation.” I simultaneously am taking notes as my mother speaks and recording her voice. I’m not sure what I will do with these notes, but I recently have come to feel an urgency in collecting them.

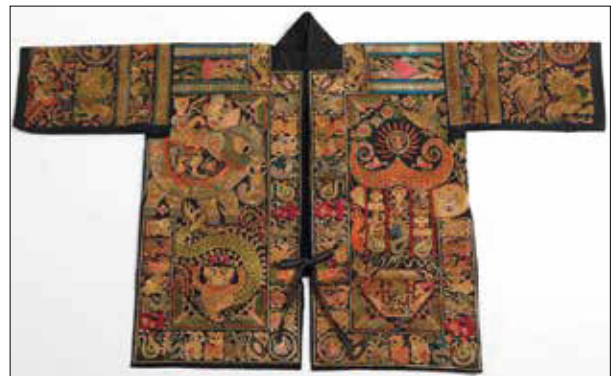
My mother always has been a collector of East Asian art, ceramics, lacquerware and handicrafts. Because our family business in Taiwan is in children’s apparel, about 25 years ago she started to focus her collection on century-old children’s wear from Taiwan, China and Southeast Asia. A large portion of her collection is from the indigenous cultures of these regions, and because most do not have a written language the stories told through these textiles are all the more emotionally wrought and culturally significant.

My mother tells me about another jacket. This one is large, from the Shi Dong Miao tribe, sold to my mother by a Miao woman named Pan Yuzhen. Pan has been anointed “Inheritor of the National Intangible Cultural Heritage” in China and often travels the world to speak about the traditional Miao art of embroidery. This jacket looks dirty with age, and both front and back are filled to the edges with embroidered beasts—the twelve zodiac animals but also an elephant-looking beast, perhaps the dog-beast, Pan Hu, who is considered one of the ancestors of the Miao people, a horse-like animal, lions, dragons and butterflies. Embroidered on the front there is a gate under which sits a figure holding a pipe. This is likely the shaman whom the Miao believe is responsible



for guiding the dead back home.

"Actually," my mother says, "this jacket is from the 1990s. It was merely made to look old." I look closely at the darkened parts of the jacket and its sootiness does look suspiciously uniform. I am reminded of a middle school history project I once did, staining paper with tea and searing the edges with a stick of incense to make it appear like an ancient scroll. "You know," my mother continues, "it's possible this was made to look older to sell to collectors who aren't as aware, for a higher price or something. But I know what's going on and it's part of the charm. I've made friends over the years and have never felt swindled. Plus," she fingers the embroidery, "look at this work. And look at the stories that fill this jacket. See how this beast is carrying this young boy? In Miao culture there is no difference between the real and the fantastical." She tells me this often, reminding me not to allow the gravity of our earthly and ever-more technologically-shackled way of being to close off our view and understanding of the spiritual world. For many indigenous tribes and peoples whose lives are intertwined with nature, the membrane between the physical and spiritual world is thin or even nonexistent. Precisely because they live so close to the earth they do not—as we do, living and depending upon modern technology—forget the magic that surrounds us. The portal to the spiritual world is open for them; for us, it is closed. This fluidity between the worlds is expressed through stories and recorded on textile in intricate detail. It amazes me that embroidery, a craft which requires so



Miao black jacket with front opening and embroidery of 12 zodiac signs and other mythical animals. c.1970–2000.

much time, repetition and patience can produce imagery that is playful and light.

It is not uncommon for my mother's eyes to well up when she talks about the artistry of the pieces she has collected. Every single piece—there are about 2,000—has a story. Not just the story of its making, but also the story of how she came to collect it. I often wonder, "how does a woman decide to part with her things?" My mother has told me that in some tribes, before selling a baby carrier she no longer uses, the mother will cut off the straps that once held her baby close to her as she worked in the fields. Some mothers perform rituals—burning or burying the straps—as a way to protect the child's soul which they believe to be embedded within the fibers of the baby carrier because their little bodies spent so much time wrapped up in the cloths. In



Miao baby carrier with embroidered butterflies, birds, flowers, chickens, ducks, geese and “two dragons fighting for a pearl.”

fact, “memory” is the technical term textile conservators use to describe the permanent imprints on clothing from frequent and repeated wear.

Inheritance can be an awkward thing. My mother and I are at such a transition right now. This collection is being passed down to me but is not quite mine yet. It requires a letting go on my mother’s part as much as it also requires an openness on my part to fully receive it. Our conversations in her storage room are a part of her ritual of letting go. This ritual is a transference of stories and of my mother’s memories.

I have been working with my mother on her collection for the past twenty years. It began when I was living in New York and going to graduate school for creative writing. She was writing a book on her collection of baby carriers and sent me manila envelopes from Taiwan filled with photocopied pages of her writing in Chinese which she wanted me to translate into English. In part because of the physical distance between me and my mother at the time, I had no relation to the images of the textiles and their accompanying descriptions. I found them academic and technical; the words were merely information. Admittedly, I resisted the work that I felt was pushed on me. I was in my early twenties and too self-involved with forging my own work and my own identity, as apart from my roots. I could not feel any

of the joy my mother clearly felt about the pieces in her collection. To me, they were just things.

But, then, time passed. I continued to work with my mother remotely on two more books and meanwhile got married, left New York and kept inching closer to home—first to Singapore, then to Hong Kong and finally, six years ago, I returned home to Taiwan. In between I gave birth to three children. And only recently am I very slowly beginning the process of understanding what my mother was seeing all these years.

In terms of understanding the types of textiles my mother collects, I am a layperson, or, at best, I am like someone who is just starting to learn a new language, grasping basic sentences and beginning to recognize patterns but still weak in my breadth of vocabulary and confidence. But beyond the information I am gathering from the papers and books that used to take up my mother’s bookshelves in my childhood home and now are finding their way onto my office desk and shelves, I have begun to feel something stir within me.

One of the categories in my mother’s collection is “everyday items” which includes glasses cases, sewing kits, picture frames, calligraphy brush holders, herb sachets and little purses all of which, despite their very practical, functional uses, nevertheless are embroidered with symbols and stories and totems of good luck in

heart-breaking detail. In her book on her purse collection, she writes about *cheng lu nang*, translated literally as “purse for morning dew.” Once upon a time, during the Southern and Northern Dynasties (AD 220–589), a popular practice was to gather the morning dew from cypress trees, collecting the dew drops into a purse and using the liquid as an eye drop to sharpen one’s eyesight. It’s poetic to think that one could collect such a thing for such a purpose. But I now see that this poetic notion is exactly what my mother has been searching for and collecting—something as primal and intangible and deeply felt as the essence of a mother’s love, expressed through women’s handicraft.

It is a platitude to say that you cannot truly understand something until you are immersed in it yourself, but nowhere does this ring more true than in the experience of becoming a parent. At the different stages of my own experience of motherhood, I constantly recall things my mother once said or did, particular expressions she had on her face which were cryptic to me when I was a young child but have since come to mean something I understand on a visceral level. This ranges from understanding why she sometimes looked at me, her eyes softening, and saying, apropos of nothing, “You are my joy,” to knowing why, in her forties, she took French and Japanese classes, became a docent at the National Palace Museum, and read tomes of art history, engaging in a multitude of activities to enrich her life—full as it already was as a mother and career woman. Perhaps most astonishingly, I have come to see all the little things my mother did in silence, without any



Cicada-shaped sachet for fragrant incense c.1930–1960.



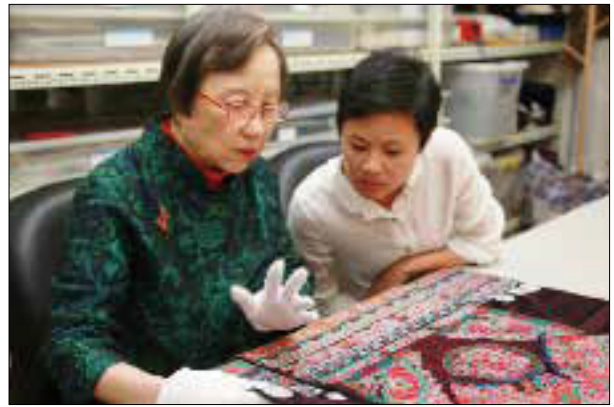
Miao cotton, silk and gold foil baby carrier with motifs of butterfly, eight-petaled flower and whirlpools.

of our knowledge, to keep our home together—because those are the very things I do now. They are mundane things like keeping the pantry stocked with my children’s favorite foods, calling the plumber when there is a leak in the bathroom, knowing at any given moment, which child’s finger and toenails need to be trimmed. But they are also a collection of small moments like changing a sick child out of soiled clothes in the middle of the night, or collecting their artwork, writing and handmade cards into piles for the future. All of this requires a quiet and almost stubborn patience.

In her book *Women’s Work—The First 20,000 Years*, Elizabeth Barber writes about the history of weaving and the inordinate amount of time it took to spin and make cloths for the family. She reminds us of the difficulty in studying this history—dating as far back as 15,000 BC—because textile fibers so easily disintegrate over time. In many ways “women’s work”—weaving, embroidery—is a beautiful metaphor for mother’s work. It requires time, patience and a complete surrendering—I think of the long, quiet hours my children used to nurse. But mother’s work is also effervescent, as textile is—none of my children remember being thus tied to me and in fact find it embarrassing when we talk of it.

In March, I helped my mother organize an exhibit of a portion of her collection at the Beitou Museum in Taipei titled *Stories Told Through Mother’s Hands—Children’s Textile and Embroidery Arts*. It’s a very streamlined

show, beginning with examples of the four “female arts”—weaving, dyeing, embroidery and patchwork—moving into the meaning of signs and symbols, and woven folktales. Finally—and this is what the show crescendos toward—there is a room full of traditional clothing from my mother’s collection, paired with modern clothing from our children’s wear company. In the hallway next to that, there are canvases of art by a digital photography artist who was inspired by the children’s shoes in my mother’s collection and created pieces by digitally altering photographs of the shoes into kaleidoscopic images. These are examples of the innovation my mother is talking about. I now can clearly see the



The author with her mother in the storeroom.



Traditional Miao embroidered child’s vest in indigo fabric with cross-stitch pattern (c.1970–2000), paired with pink sweatshirt and navy tulle skirt.



Traditional Yi wax-resist dyed, patchwork skirt (c.1970–2000), paired with black leggings and gray, sequined sweatshirt.

narrative arc of a history—one that transcends culture—the idea that what propels us forward is innovation that must first come from a deep respect for tradition.

At the opening of the exhibit, during a simple press event a journalist asked my mother which one of her pieces is her favorite. She joked that it was like asking which of her children was her favorite—it’s impossible to answer. The reporter, not wanting to give up, turned toward me to ask the same question. My answer—and this is the honest truth—is that my favorite thing about my mother’s collection is the time we spend together when she tells me about the stories of each piece, how things came to be, the people she’s met and where she journeyed to acquire those pieces. Mothers do so many things that their children don’t see or ever know about. I have a rare opportunity to be a part of my mother’s ritual of transference and inheritance. We are at an inflection point, holding onto one another before my mother lets go completely, when I will finish writing this story, in my own way.

*Stories Told Through Mother’s Hands—Children’s Textile and Embroidery Arts* will be on exhibit at the Beitou Museum from March 1, 2019 to September 22, 2019.

#32, Youya Road, Beitou, Taipei, Taiwan

[www.beitoumuseum.org.tw](http://www.beitoumuseum.org.tw)

[www.lesenphantstextile.com](http://www.lesenphantstextile.com)

*Brenda Lin grew up among the myriad of antique children’s textile that her mother collected. She received her MFA in creative writing from Columbia University. Her first book, “Wealth Ribbon: Taiwan Bound, America Bound,” was a collection of interconnected personal essays on family and cultural identity. Lately she has been writing about the intersection between text and textile. She lives in Taipei and is the head of Corporate Social Responsibility at les elephants Co. Ltd.*