

outlook

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outlook@bangkokpost.net

From culture to



couture

Bangkok Fashion City project would do well to pay attention to its silk roots, building a future while preserving a past

Story by
USNISA SUKHSVASTI
Pictures by
YINGYONG
UN-ANONGRAK



Acharn Oratai Pholdee: "Ethnic textiles reflect local folk wisdom and beliefs. The patterns speak to us in a language of their own."



Thai textiles are in a healthy state at last. After witnessing a decline in the wearing and weaving of traditional fabrics almost half a century ago, they have reemerged with a vengeance, spurred mainly in the early days of rejuvenation by Her Majesty the Queen's personal interest, encouragement, and support, as well as her endorsement of the beautiful fabrics in her own wardrobe.

The state of ethnic fabrics, not only Thai but also — on a much broader cultural level — Tai, was brought into the spotlight with the recent exhibition called "Tai Textile Heritage Museum to Commemorate the 72nd Birthday Anniversary of Her Majesty the Queen" at the Exhibition Hall, Kasetsart University. Two days of talks on related topics, as well as fashion shows, accompanied the exhibition.

The exhibition showcased 96 outfits from the various Tai ethnic cultures around the region, from Thailand, China, Burma, Laos, Cambodia and Malaysia, that form part of the private collection of Acharn Oratai Pholdee, deputy director of the Agricultural Museum and Culture Office of Kasetsart University.

Acharn Oratai has always been a strong advocate of Thai dress, and drew inquisitive gazes from fellow lecturers and students when she insisted on wearing *pasin* (tube skirts) to work back in 1973. Though she taught Thai language, she felt that traditional dress was far more indicative of ethnic cultures than language, and it was this premise that led her to embark in 1993 on a lengthy research into Tai ethnic dress as a means to delve into the history of the Tais, and Thais.

"Ethnic textiles reflect local folk wisdom and beliefs. The patterns speak to us in a language of their own," she explained.

Over the years of travelling around the country, she gradually accumulated a collection of old traditional fabrics — most of which are over 72 years of age — ranging from handwoven *pasin* worn by simple village folk to elaborate silk brocade worn by members of the royal family in minority kingdoms. Some of them she paid for out of her own pocket, others were presented to her as a gift from the elders that she interviewed during the course of the research.

"They felt that I would cherish their fabrics as much as they did. Many of those pieces are now impossible to find since no one makes them any more. Some were given to me by collectors like Keosiri Everingham who did not want the rare pieces to be snatched up by overseas collectors."

Though some of the rarer items are in display cases, the rest are dotted around the exhibition hall accessible to close scrutiny by admirers of traditional textiles. Small signs indicate the origin and design in Thai. They are grouped according to region and ethnic group, ranging from Tai Lue of Xishuangpanna in China, Vietnam, and Thailand's Phayao, Chiang Rai and Nan provinces; Tai Dum, Tai Dang and Tai Khao in Thailand, Laos and Vietnam; Tai Yuan of the Lanna Kingdom in Chiang Mai, Phrae, Nan, Uttaradit, Lamphun and Chiang Mai provinces; Tai Lao, Tai Phuan, Phu Tai and Tai Moey of Lanxang; Tai Yai of Bang Luang; and southern Tai of the Srivijaya Kingdom in the south of Thailand.

Her research underlines the belief that the Tai ethnic tribe of Sezhuan province dating back to the Neolithic period were the first to practise *seri-culture*. The oldest known evidence of silk fabric was unearthed in Chien-shan-yang historic site in Xikiang province, which dates back 4,800 years.

Seri-culture travelled with the various ethnic Tai tribes that moved downstream along the different rivers from the Tibetan plateau. The Tai can categorically be divided into two lines: Tai Yai and Tai Noi.

The Tai Yai travelled southwest along the Salween and Ganges approximately 2,600 years ago. One group settled in Burma's Shan State, while the other went on to India's Assam province.

The Tai Noi, on the other hand, travelled down the Mekong River into various parts of Yunnan in about 137 BC, creating the great kingdoms of Chiang Rung, Xishuangpanna, Chiang Tung and Chiang Saen. When these fell to marauding troops, the people moved on and subsequently formed the kingdoms of Lanxang, Lanna and Sukhothai.

"Ethnic textiles are good indicators of how close the various tribes really are. Similar patterns appear on the fabrics from different areas, like the *Tapao long koh* [lost ship] pattern on the Tai Krung fabric, which looks like waves, while the interspersed floral motif is like a ship tossed by the waves. It's amazing how the local patterns

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ABOVE
Selections from the fashion show of Tai costumes.

ABOVE LEFT
Tai Krung tube skirts from Chainat and Uthai Thani showing the "tapai long koh" (lost ship) motif.

LEFT
Thai silk in contemporary design by Paothong's Private Collection.

BELOW
Part of the Tai ethnic costume exhibition.

