Chinese Blue and White Itajime (Jiaxie): Folk Tradition of Carved Board Clamp Resist Dyeing in Zenjiang Province

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Chinese jiaxie, pronounced “kyokechi” in Japanese and known as itajime shibori, is a type of carved board clamp resist dyeing. Different from wax or paste resist, jiaxie employs resists made of carved wooden boards. In this technique, cloth is sandwiched tightly between two boards in which hollowed channels have been carved into a pattern. The uncarved areas of the board act as the resist while the hollowed channels, and perforations along these channels, allow dye to penetrate the cloth.

According to historical documents, jiaxie was produced between the Qin Dynasty (778-206 BC) and the Han Dynasty (206 BC - AD 263). Early on, it enjoyed robust appeal, becoming a favorite of ancient Chinese people of all different social positions. Today, however, jiaxie production is nearly extinct. With changes in lifestyle and cheaper materials now widely available everywhere and produced quickly, this type of authentic material done by hand is more costly and has virtually no market. Despite some efforts by local government to preserve this vanishing practice, it simply cannot sustain itself without sufficient demand.

This is a report on field studies we took to identify and observe in China the process of jiaxie. The group was led by Dr. Sadae Torimaru and myself accompanied by Masanao Arai, Yoshiko I. Wada, Ana Lisa Hedstrom, and Jay Rich.

In 2003 and 2004, we traveled to Yishan, Cangnan, Zhejiang Province, and visited what is now officially designated “Zhongnuo Minjian Gongyi Jiaxie Zuofang,” or roughly 'Chinese People's Art Craft Jiaxie Studio'. The name suggests an effort by local government to preserve the area's folk craft traditions. There, we observed jiaxie master, Mr. Xunlang Xue. As a sign of the times, Mr. Xue performs his craft only on request as there is hardly any need nor much demand for him to sustain a regular practice.

Very little is known about the history of jiaxie; in China, not much attention is paid to their folk traditions. Through documentation and interviews, we were able to gather insightful information. For example, we learned jiaxie was produced in some quantity in the Jiangnan area and that fabrics were decorated with auspicious motifs and intended for interior home furnishings. Especially, it was very popular as a bridal coverlet. Production was virtually wiped out due to the Cultural Revolution (AD 1960-1970) and further compounded by changing lifestyles. In fact, production of jiaxie in Yishan halted for a period of more
than 20 years, then later experienced a bit of resuscitation in the 1990s through efforts by a Japanese woman, Ms. Masa Kubo.

One could extrapolate a certain parallel fate awaiting *lanyinhua*, a type of blue and white folk textile produced in Zhejiang's neighboring province of Jiangsu. There, decorative cotton fabrics are created using soybean flour mixed with lime chalk for resist stencil dyeing with indigo. During the Ming Dynasty (AD 1368-1644), active cultivation of cotton began in the delta of the Yangtze River (Cháng Jing) which provided fertile ground for the development of decorative processes using resist dyeing with indigo (this may have likely included *jiaxie*). Suffering a demise similar to *jiaxie*, production of *lanyinhua* dwindled considerably after the mid-1900s. Presently, only a very small market for *lanyinhua* remains due to continued promotion by Ms. Kubo. Still, it is unclear whether current *lanyinhua* or *jiaxie* are dyed in organic indigo as is traditionally done or rely on chemical dyes.

Traditional resist dye techniques – the core of "the Dyer's Art" – are facing uncertain futures worldwide. The growing scarcity of technical information in textile rich cultures like India, Afghanistan, Tibet and Japan demands our attention. This is especially true for esoteric carved board resist dyeing, including *jiaxie*. As scholars, we must take note.

**Observations on Jiaxie** (research conducted June 2002)

*Image 1, left.* Cloth is folded lengthwise then sandwiched between two boards carved with hollowed-out channels. Indigo penetrates cloth through the channels and perforations along the channels. To withstand repeated use, the boards are strengthened with lacquer.

*Image 2, right.* Normally, a blue and white design is symmetrical from the central fold line. However, a reverse pattern may occur if one of the boards is flipped top to bottom, or an asymmetrical design may result if right and left boards are different.

*Image 3.* Various traditional designs of *jiaxie*
Image 6. Sixteen different indigo dyed patterns are revealed on handwoven cotton cloth. The cloth used measures 47cm wide by 960cm long.

Image 7. A bridal coverlet is constructed from a typical length of dyed yardage, cut into four lengths then seamed together. This particular design – called “Bai Zi”, where “Bai” means “many” and “Zi” means “children” – depicts 96 children. In Confucianism, many children signifies prosperity.

How To Make Jiaxie

Images 8 – 10, below. Soak handwoven cotton cloth (47cmx960cm) in water then squeeze it. Fold it in half lengthwise and place it on a worktable. Next, fold it accordion style: at every 240cm interval, turn it down and fold that section into four layers. Next, determine spacing of the boards and mark with ink where they will be set. Note placement of large “gaps” (solid blue) after every fourth pattern (refer to image 6).

Images 11 – 13, above. Once all points are marked, roll up cloth for easier handling: starting at one end, wrap cloth’s edge over a thin stick and continue to roll along its full length.
Images 14 – 16, above. Prepare a metal (iron) frame that will be used to clamp the boards during the dyeing process. Place the frame on the floor in a flat, open position. Remove boards from the water in which they had been kept to prevent drying. (Board size: 38cm long by 16cm wide with 2.5cm thickness; first and last boards are 5cm thick)

Image 17, left. Set first board on open frame. This first board has only one carved surface; the other side is flat. Carved pattern faces up.

Image 18, right. Lay cloth on top of the first board so its folded edge is flush with the edge of the board.

Images 19 – 21. Set the second board down according to markings on the cloth. From the second board on, use a double-sided board (one with carved patterns on both sides). Once the board is placed correctly, temporarily place a thin stick at the board’s top edge to ensure an evenly aligned fold as you fold cloth over. Repeat these steps for the remaining length of the cloth. Note overhang (cloth that extends past the board) after every fourth board; these will be the “gaps” (refer to image 10). Finally, set the last board, carved side face down. For 16 symmetrical patterns, use a total of 17 carved boards: two one-sided boards (one to begin, one to end) and 15 double-sided boards.
Figure 3. Diagram of resulting patterns and corresponding board placement on finished coverlet. The original cloth begins as one long yardage that is then dyed, cut into four pieces, and seamed together to form a coverlet. Lengthwise dashes represent seam lines.

Figure 4. Pattern designs corresponding to boards
Images 22 – 24. Once all boards are in place, stand the metal frame upright. Tighten with a securing bolt so the boards and cloth do not move. Turn the entire frame onto its side so the edges of the boards are at the top (the edges that are flush with the cloth’s folded edge). The metal frame is attached to a type of hanger or carrier apparatus which itself is connected to one end of a lever (large stick). This hanger device plays a helpful role: it keeps in place the loose overhang cloth, which have been attached to it by hooks. This helps ensure even dyeing as the entire frame contraption is lowered steadily into the dye well. Note how the lever is tied to a stationary metal pole acting as a fulcrum to facilitate lowering and raising of the contraption (refer to image 25).

Images 25 – 27. Using the large stick (lever) for leverage and control, slowly lower the frame into an indigo well or vat. Submerge it completely in the dye and allow it to soak for 15 minutes.

Images 28 – 30. Push the lever downward to raise the boards. Keep the frame lifted out of the well by weighing down the lever. Allow cloth to stay exposed to the air and oxidize for about 15 minutes.
Image 31, left. Repeat: lower cloth into indigo and soak 15 minutes; then raise and oxidize 15 minutes. Fabric is dyed a total of 5 times.

Image 32, right. Lift the metal frame out after disconnecting it from the hanger apparatus.

Image 33, left. A view of the frame set-up after dyeing. Note the clearly carved channels visible at the edge of the boards. Indigo enters through these channels and travels through perforations along these channels to dye areas of cloth sandwiched in between. Image 34, right. To remove cloth and boards from metal frame, first loosen and remove the securing bolt.

Images 35, left and 36, center Remove the top board to reveal a clearly defined blue and white pattern. Continue to remove each board sequentially. Image 37, right. Unfold the cloth completely and rinse thoroughly with water before drying in the sun.
Observations on *Lanyinhua* (research conducted May 2002)

*Lanyinhua* is a type of blue and white folk textile produced in Zhejiang's neighboring province of Jiangsu. In this region, stencil dyeing with lime paste resist is used to create decorative, indigo dyed cotton fabric. *Lanyinhua* master, Mr. Yongpin Wang, allowed us to observe and learn his process at the studio where he works, Nangtong Lanxi Arts & Crafts Printing & Dyeing Co., Ltd, in Nangtong, Jiangsu Province.
How to Make *Lanyinhua*

**Image 42, left.** Typical example of lanyinhua from Jiangsu.

**Image 43, right.** Using a small knife, carve stencil paper along the outlines of the design. The paper is treated with a paint to reinforce it for repeated usage.

**Image 44, left.** Make a paste of soybean flour mixed with lime / chalk (calcium carbonate), which gives the paste greater tenacity or better adherence to cloth. This paste is also insoluble in water.

**Image 45, right.** To begin, place cotton cloth on a work surface.

**Images 46 – 48.** Set stencil across the width of the cloth and apply paste. To prevent any missed spots, apply twice. When finished with a section, remove stencil and continue until the entirety of cloth is painted with paste.
Hang cloth to allow paste to dry. Then, soak the paste-resisted cloth in water (this is unlike Japanese rice paste resist, which is water soluble). Once fully soaked, slowly lower into an indigo vat. The cloth will be dyed blue except for resisted areas where paste had been applied. After soaking in indigo, remove cloth from vat and hang in the air to oxidize. Repeat: soak in indigo and air-dry for oxidization. Fabric is dyed a total of 7 times.

Finally, allow the dyed cloth to dry completely under the sun. To remove paste, scrape cloth with a knife. Rinse entire cloth with water to reveal its beautiful blue and white pattern.

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REFERENCES