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Pleated Skirts of Miao in Guizhou Province, China

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The Miao people have an obscure history, owing to a lack of written scripts though they do have a spoken language. “Of their pre-history only one thing is certain, that is that the Miao were in China before the Chinese, for it is the latter themselves who indicate the presence of the Miao in the land, which they, the Chinese, were gradually infiltrating, and which was to become their own country,” wrote the author Jean Mottin.¹ Despite the lack of written records, Miao textile traditions have survived many years of migration, separation, and dislocation. To this day the traditions remain integral to their culture, practiced now as before. These customs were able to persevere largely because, without written scripts, textiles became the primary communication tool from generation to generation, serving as a record of cultural history and a source of ethnic identity.



Fig 1. Map of China; see Guizhou at center. Reprinted with permission from *Imprints on Cloth*.

The Miao are scattered all across Guizhou with each geographical area having adopted its own unique traditional dress (fig. 1). There is a saying: “If you meet one hundred

¹ Mottin, Jean. (orig. 1980; e-text 1997) *History of the Hmong*. Bangkok: Odeon Store. Published as electronic text by Hmong Tribe Educational Resources Project:
<http://www.hmongtribe.com/modules.php?op=modload&name=Sections&file=index&req=viewarticle&artid=23&page=1>.

Miao, you will see one hundred different costumes.” Although this is true, there is a common piece worn by almost all women: the indigo dyed pleated skirt.



Fig. 2. A traditional Miao costume.

Among the skirts that are dyed solid or resist patterned in indigo blue or embroidered, the most popular pleated skirts are made of dark blue fabric that has a distinctive, remarkably glossy surface (fig. 2). How the Miao achieved this look was determined by each group's acclimatization to their new surroundings: appropriating newly available materials and adapting methods, from the type of indigo seeds planted to finishing techniques to skirt construction, while preserving as much of their traditional customs. It is a subtle acculturation graded over many years, illustrated by a visual transformation of the same material and form while remaining true to the culture's esthetics.

Glossy fabric begins with seeds from bast fiber plants and the cultivation of indigo plants. This leads to making indigo paste, preparing a dye vat, and dyeing a piece of fabric in indigo. This is followed by one of a variety of finishing processes used to achieve a distinctive glossy sheen. Miao groups from differing regions use their own particular techniques to make cloth shiny, adapting to what resources were and were not available: basic dye, egg whites and medicinal herbs, or water buffalo skin extract to name a few. Incredibly, the entire procedure of dyeing and finishing can sometimes take 20 or 30 stages. Such dedication and effort illustrates the Miao sense of beauty and serves as a clear example of their attitude towards beauty in life.

Migration throughout China posed challenges to the Miao for whom indigo cultivation is very important. Changing of environments required an understanding of new climates and new flora. Three species of indigo plant are currently found in Guizhou. Each has

adapted well to the province's various climates and landscapes ranging from dry soils in highland areas in the north, to subtropical conditions in the south. All Miao cultivate at least two of the three species in case of unexpected climate changes such as too much rain, a cold late spring, or harsh sun.

Making Indigo Paste

In May, indigo seeds are planted and by the end of July, leaves are fully grown (fig. 3). The leaves are harvested from the bottom of the plant stem and taken home where they are rinsed and placed in a water-filled container. After one or two days, they turn a transparent brownish color. All leaves are removed from the container, leaving behind an indigo rich liquid. White slacked lime is added to the liquid and mixed vigorously to create a thick layer of pale blue foam at the surface. After one or two days, the foam disappears and the indigo and lime residue have settled to the bottom. A clear liquid nearer the surface is poured away. The following day, a mud-like dark blue indigo paste sits at the bottom of the container (fig. 4).



*Fig. 3 (left). Indigo plants grow on hillside.
Fig. 4 (right). Indigo paste, mud-like and viscous.*

Preparing Indigo Vat

Indigo paste, mud-like in consistency, is mixed with distilled rice wine and slowly added to lye water made from wood ash and hot water. This mixture is stirred vigorously. The same process is repeated the next day. From Day 3 to Day 7, the dye vat is stirred. Afterwards, it is left to stand and rest for a week. By Day 14, the indigo vat is fully active.

Making Indigo-dyed Glossy Cloth

In the town of Shidong in southeastern Guizhou, plant and water buffalo skin extracts are used to create a glossy fabric. First, cloth is indigo dyed and sun dried repeatedly five times. Afterwards, it is soaked in bean juice with red chili peppers to impart a beautiful red color. Once it has dried under the sun, the cloth is pounded carefully and evenly with a large wooden mallet (fig. 5). This action deepens its blue color. The cloth is steamed for 30 minutes then soaked in a hot, wild walnut extract before drying again under the sun. This process of soaking and drying is repeated three more times.

Water buffalo skin is boiled to obtain an extract (fig. 6). Cloth is soaked in the hot liquid then sun dried. This is repeated four times until the desired color and texture is achieved. A nearby river is used for a final rinse. At its final stage of pounding, the cloth

is a rich indigo color with a high gloss surface. The visual transformation of a cloth's color and texture is impressive, from its original state to the finished glossy cloth (fig. 7).



*Fig. 5 (left). Pounding cloth with mallet.
Fig. 6 (right). Water buffalo skins are used as an extract.*



*Fig. 7 (left). A cloth's transformation from original state (left) to final glossy state (right).
Fig. 8 (right). Coating with fresh pig's blood.*

In Rongjiang in southeastern Guizhou, women use basic dye to create the desired glossy sheen. Women here capitalize on their knowledge of basic dye characteristics, which turns to a high gloss when applied to cloth as a surface paste. Basic dye undergoes a chemical reaction with methyl violet. In the middle of the reaction, treated cloth takes on a yellow color. Once the reaction is complete and the cloth has been smoked over a fire of burning Chinese juniper, or *biaxiangye*, its second color emerges: the desired deep violet blue.

Dyers in Tingdong in southeastern Guizhou glaze indigo fabric with egg whites. The key ingredient, a liquor of two types of medicinal herbs that is also sometimes ingested as a healthy elixir, is added to the beaten egg whites. This mixture is used to coat indigo dyed fabric. After drying in the sun and pounding with a mallet, the result is a beautiful shade of deep blue.

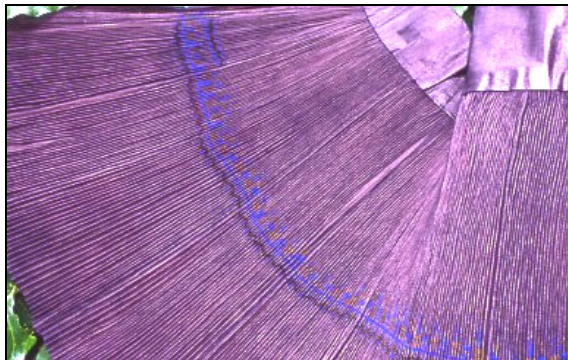
Still another method for achieving a cloth's glossy sheen involves the use of fresh pig's blood. Some dyers in Danzhai village in southeastern Guizhou use the blood as a surface glaze, generously coating a cloth with fresh blood much in the same way that egg whites and herbs are used in Tingdong, then drying and pounding to produce a glossy surface (fig. 8).

Where in some regions, cloth is pounded with wooden mallets, other groups have devised especially effective tools for the same job. In Huishui in southern Guizhou, indigo cloth is placed under a giant arc-shaped stone while it is rocked back and forth with one's feet. This produces a brilliantly glossy surface not attainable with simple pounding.

Constructing a pleated skirt

There are several ways the Miao make a pleated skirt; methods vary from region to region. In our many years of observation, we noticed the skirt garment was made to fit the body's contours without darts or gussets. This is a testament to the Miaos' vast experience in doing this process, knowledge that has been learned and passed on through generations.

In Gedong in northeastern Guizhou, a pleating platform consists of a thin bamboo mat placed over a bundle of straws. Cloth is placed face down on a platform and dampened with a brush dipped in water. Pleating begins by pinching the end of the cloth from center to sides using one's toes to pinch and anchor (fig. 9). A heavy stone is laid atop the pleated cloth overnight to firmly set the pleats. Peaks of the pleats are stitched together. To complete the skirt, a self belt is placed under the pleated section and the two pieces are sewn together (fig. 10).

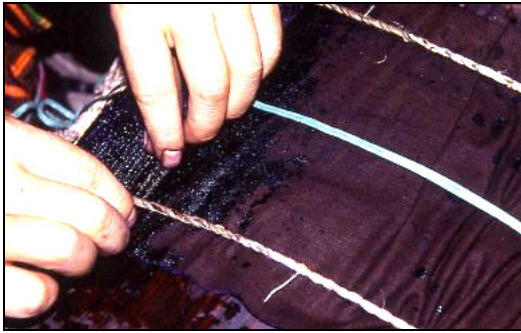


*Fig. 9 (left). Anchoring with toes while pleating.
Fig. 10 (right). A glossy pleated skirt, finished.*

Variations in the style of pleated skirts depend on the region and can be divided into two categories: practical and fashionable. A typical example of the latter could be seen in Datang village in southeastern Guizho where “mini” skirts are layered over trousers (fig. 2). In formal dress, young women don many layers of finely pleated “mini” skirts as a sign of prosperity and wealth.

In Datang, a barrel is used as a pleating platform. Cloth is wrapped around a barrel, secured with a rope, and then dampened with water using a straw brush. Pleats are made by pinching the cloth with one's fingertips (fig. 11). Once all pleats are made, ropes are firmly tied around the barrel to secure the pleats in place. The cloth is left to dry for ten days before the ropes are removed and the fabric is unwound. A waist part is stitched onto the skirt fabric by meticulously picking up the peaks of each fold. A self belt is machine stitched onto the skirt for added security. As a final step, the skirt is rolled up tightly and bound with a cloth rope, setting the pleats firmly in place (fig. 12).

In Basha village, a board placed on the lap serves as a simple pleating platform..Using one's fingers to pinch and tuck, pleats are made. The peaks of the folds are stitched across the skirt to help keep pleats in place. Afterwards, the fabric is stretched on a frame to set the pleats (fig. 13). Wedges are inserted into the vertical side posts adding more tension.



*Fig. 11 (left). Pleating: pinching cloth with fingers.
Fig. 12 (right). A pleated skirt, rolled and bound.*

A different pleating method had been adopted in Dongshan village. Women here pleat ramie fabric on their platform – a simple wooden board set upon the lap. Two rows are stitched at the top edge of the skirt fabric before the belt fabric piece is attached. Fabric rope is secured at one end. The skirt is rolled up against this rope core (fig. 14). Rope is firmly wound around the rolled skirt to gather up the pleats. All creases are tightly gathered and bound with fabric tape (fig. 15).



*Fig. 13 (left). Pleated fabric stretched on a frame.
Fig. 14 (right). Wrapping skirt around a rope core.*



Fig. 15 Skirt is bound tightly to set pleats wehuweh.

The approaches to the different processes involved in creating pleated glossy skirts – dyeing, treating, pleating, and constructing vary with the particular region. Variations in the final product – in its color of blue, the degree and type of sheen, or subtle differences in surface texture, can be seen from region to region and group to group. It is a reflection of the necessary adaptations that arose in response to some change whether brought on by migration, climate, or time. For the Miao, these textile traditions provide a visual record of their history where no written one exists. They are a people who have managed to preserve their cultural identity and customs despite years of change and movement.

Note: All photographs by Sadae and Tomoko Torimaru.

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