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Lee J. Chinalai
chinalai@optonline.net

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Dragon Covers – Mysterious Aberrations of the Li

Lee J. Chinalai
P.O. Box 815
Shoreham, NY 11786
631-821-4272
chinalai@optonline.net
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The subject of my presentation is a textile mystery: a large hanging that looks imperial but is attributed to a tribal minority. Challenged by this apparent anomaly, my husband and I endeavored to uncover the truth about the dragon covers of the Li. Besides the fact that they are fascinating textiles with a fascinating history, they also - if what we discovered is true - exemplify the conference theme: appropriation, acculturation, transformation.



Fig. 1. Dragon cover, early Qing period (author's collection).

Several years ago when Vichai and I found the first dragon cover in a market on the Chinese mainland, we had no idea what it was or where it came from. We were told it was from Hainan and had been made by Li weavers during the Ming dynasty, 1368 to 1644. We knew about the Li because we had already collected a variety of their textiles, but none were anything like this embroidered hanging which looked more like it belonged to a Chinese *emperor* than a Chinese *minority*.

Historians believe the Li migrated south from Guangdong and Guangxi provinces in south China during the Neolithic Age, to become the original natives of Hainan, a large island of about 20,000 square miles in the South China Sea. The Li are the largest of thirty-eight minority groups on the island, and represent approximately sixteen percent of a total eight million people.¹ The vast majority of Hainan's population, the Han Chinese, resides mainly in the coastal cities. Li villages are predominantly in the mountains of the

¹ Xueping, p. 22.

island's interior. Nevertheless, the proximity of the Li to the Han Chinese becomes significant when discussing the dragon covers.

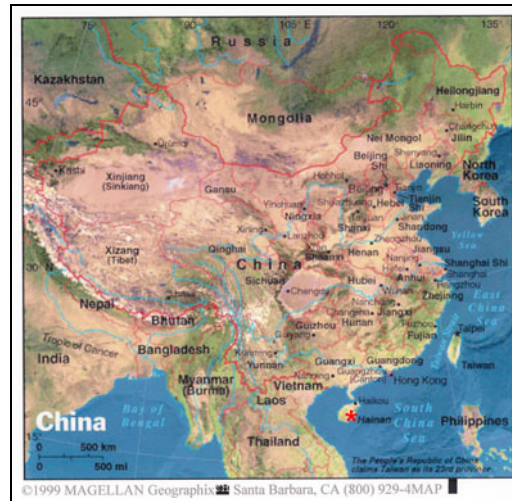


Fig. 2. Map.

There are five Li sub-tribes, currently called the Ha, Run, Meifu, Sai and Qi, named according to the dialects they speak. Each has its own style of dress, but Li costume and other textiles from all the sub-groups are clearly and deeply-rooted in Li culture and religion, as we shall see. Ethnolinguistically the Li are related to tribal groups in northern Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and Taiwan.² There is sometimes an astonishing similarity between the textiles of the Li and of these other areas, as well as from several groups in Indonesia. The dragon covers, however, are wholly unique to the Li of Hainan. The following examples of Li clothing are shown as a basis for comparison with the dragon covers.

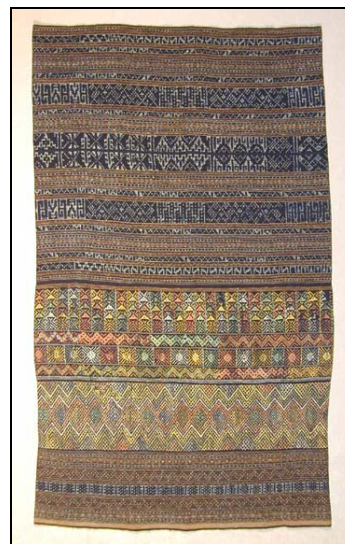


Fig. 3 (left). Meifu Li woman, 1930s (Hans Stubel, *Die Li-Stämme der Insel Hainan, Ein Beitrag zur Volkskunde Sudchinas*, Klinkhardt & Biermann, Berlin, 1937.

Fig. 4 (right). Meifu cotton warp ikat skirt with silk supplementary weft, circa 1900 (author's collection).

² Howard and Howard, pp. 4-11.

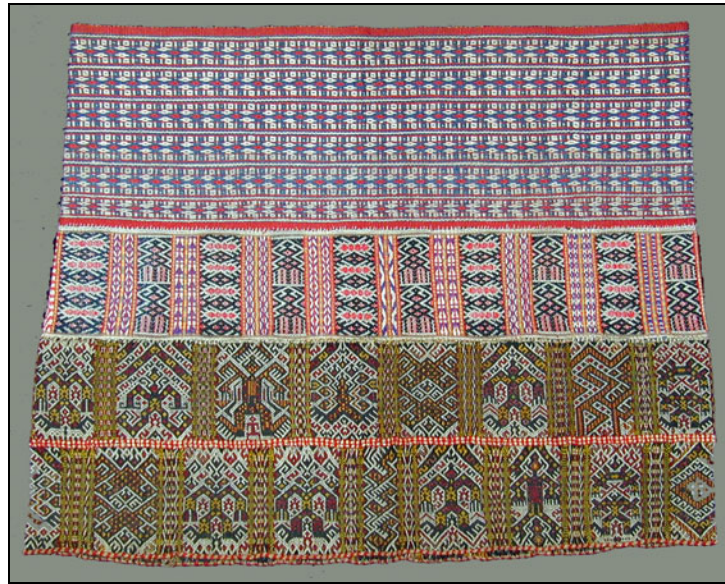


Fig. 5 (left) Run Li woman, 1930s (Stubel).

Fig. 6 (right) Run Li skirt, early 1900s (author's collection).



Fig. 7 (left). A Ha Li woman's jacket, early 1900s (author's collection).

Fig. 8 (right). A Ha Li woman's skirt, early 1900s (author's collection).

Intrigued by the disparity between traditional Li costume and textiles and the dragon covers, we searched for and found more, and we wondered: was it possible the textiles had strayed from Peking to Hainan? Or could a tribal people, living for centuries mainly in thatch-roofed huts on the mountainsides... on a remote island... far from the Palace..., could such a people have produced these sophisticated embroideries with imperial symbols and what appeared to be primarily Han Chinese iconography?



Fig. 9 (left). Li village; Fig. 10 (right). Mountain scenes (both Stubel, 1930s).

Sophisticated, yes... yet with some elusive tribal flavor.

For one thing, the dragon covers we had seen thus far, although measuring about five feet wide by seven or eight feet long, consisted of a set of three separate and fairly narrow, thick homespun cotton panels, quite obviously done on a foot-braced back-strap loom such as one would expect tribal groups to use, and such as we knew the Li themselves had used since ancient times.

Their deep indigo ground reflects the use of local dyestuffs, and the embroidered silk designs and colors often represent local vegetation. The embroidery has neither the refinement and detail of similar Court pieces, nor any of the metallic threads one might expect to find woven into the imperial robes, rank badges or hangings of the Ming period when the dragon covers were purported to have first been made. Still, they certainly looked more Han Chinese, and more imperial, than tribal. In short, if they were indeed produced by the Li, they were aberrations, and they were a mystery.



Fig. 11 (left). Dragon cover showing three distinct panels (author's collection).

Fig. 12 (right). Li woman weaving, 1930s (Stubel).

I decided to investigate further and went to Hainan. There I found several people who were knowledgeable about the dragon covers and confirmed that they were indeed produced by the Li. Hainan has ideal conditions for the cultivation of silk, hemp, ramie and cotton, all used by the Li in their textiles. From archaeological finds, we know that

they already had achieved a high standard of weaving during the Han Dynasty, around 2000 years ago. During that period, the Court began to collect tribute from throughout the region, demanding cloth from the Li that was so famous it was known as *silk* cotton. Historical documents reveal that the skill and reputation of the Li as master textile-producers grew throughout the centuries. Records from the Yuan Dynasty, 13th or 14th century, refer to the export of Li weavings to the mainland and indicate that Li weavers were so well-respected, some were brought to Peking to work directly under the auspices of Court officials. But all of this doesn't tell us about the origin of the dragon covers.

There is only one theory that seems plausible: some time during the Ming period the Imperial Palace in Peking sent prototype drawings or paintings to Hainan and commanded that the Li weavers copy them in silk embroidery; then these distinctive hangings, bearing symbols of the Court and of the Han Chinese, were sent back to the central government as tribute, probably under the aegis of local officials.³ The Palace may have used the dragon covers as gifts to the nobility, neighboring heads of State or visiting dignitaries, and this requires further investigation.

What happened next seems very human. Since the dragon covers contained symbols reserved only for the Emperor, like the four or five-clawed dragon, the Li were forbidden from owning or using them. This prohibition, and the esoteric symbols on the textiles, must have contrived to make the dragon covers exceedingly desirable in the eyes of their creators. Perhaps also the Li resented being compelled to devote so many months – or years – cultivating materials, spinning, dyeing, weaving and embroidering, only to be forced to relinquish the dragon covers afterward. Lastly, because the dragon was worshipped as a god by the Li, they may have perceived that the government was usurping one of their own fundamental symbols.

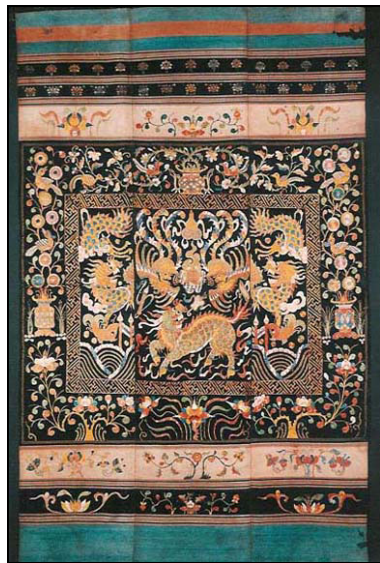


Fig. 13 (left). An early Qing dragon cover with four-clawed dragon (author's collection).

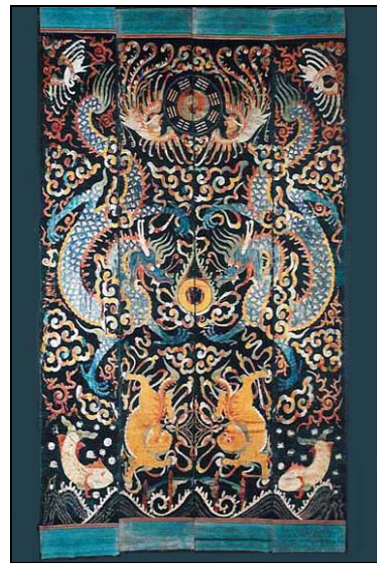


Fig. 14 (right). Rare four-panel dragon cover with four-clawed dragons possibly dating to the Ming period (author's collection).

³ From conversations with Cai Yu Liang and from his writings.

For all of these reasons, it appears that some Li clandestinely created dragon covers for themselves, in direct violation of the Court. The danger and subterfuge involved most likely added to the textiles' mystique; and since only the wealthiest families could afford the time and materials to produce them, this also would have enhanced their status and appeal. Eventually the covert production of the dragon covers became shrouded in ritual, and the dragon covers secretly entered Li ceremonies.

Textiles were spiritually significant to the Li. Early Li ceremonial textiles were hung during rituals and used as coffin covers or shrouds. Early clothing, though sparse and simple, still bore sacred symbols and patterns. Whether or not the iconography and designs on later more elaborate textiles were influenced by the dragon covers is difficult to ascertain. For one thing, not all Li people knew of their existence, or if they did, had ever seen one.⁴ This, however, does not preclude the general effect of Han iconography on Li culture and textiles; nor does it preclude the reverse: the influence of Li tradition and art on the elements in the dragon covers.

The dragon, for example, is a shared symbol. Often shown amid the clouds, it is associated in both cultures with life-giving rain. This predisposed the dragon covers to become fitting additions to Li rites to petition for rain. Also, according to legend the Li are descended from the dragon. It is not surprising, therefore, that the dragon would appear on a number of Li textiles. The following examples are shown not to determine if the dragon originated with the Han or the Li, but to indicate that as a Li symbol, shared not only with the Court and the Han people but with about fifty other minority tribes, the dragon belonged as much to the Li as to group before the advent of the dragon covers.



Fig. 15. "Ghost cover" (collection of Roger Hollander).

Woven on a backstrap loom like the dragon covers, this particular ghost cover is constructed of five separate cotton panels. The narrow central band has a long row of embellished diamonds woven in supplementary weft that is a geometric portrayal of lineage. The other four panels show rows of ancestors in what is called a "ghost pattern". The figures are female and appear to have given birth to small embryonic diamond-shaped offspring that also recur in later textiles, a further symbol of Li lineage. A Ha sub-tribe skirt from around 1900 has similar figures. Female figures on Li textiles may also refer to the original Li ancestor. We understand there is a connection between ancestors

⁴ From interviews with Li people on Hainan.

and dragons. According to legend, the mother of the Li people came out of an egg laid by a snake in the mountains. The snake might be considered an early form of dragon, just as the Li “mother” therefore might be considered a transformed version of the dragon, merging dragons and ancestors into one concept, if not into a single representation on Li textiles.

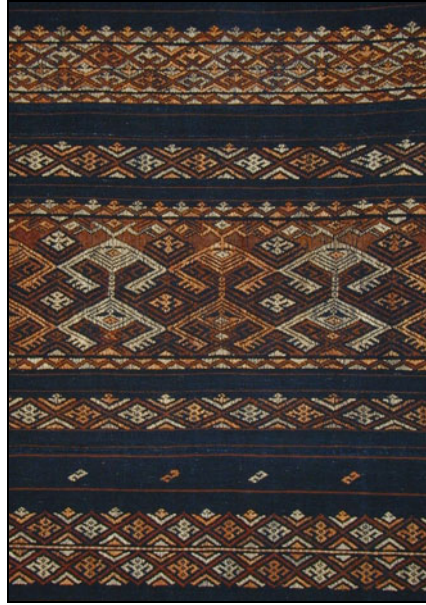


Fig. 16. Ha skirt, circa 1900, detail of ancestral figures (author's collection).

The frog is another meaningful symbol shared with the Han, but with special significance to the Li. Because of its transformation from tadpole to frog and its amphibious nature - in other words, its ability to move between worlds - the Li believe the frog is the transporter of souls. The raucous chorus of frogs and toads, like thunder, augurs rain, and in turn rain augurs a good harvest. So, like the dragon, the frog is a harbinger of rain and also considered a god. In the case of frogs and ancestors, however, their sacred union *does* extend to Li textile art.

Note in the following examples from the late 19th and early 20th century, how the figures of ancestral ghosts are often frog-like in appearance.



Fig. 17. Run skirt, detail of lineage showing figures within and around other figures (author's collection).



Fig. 18 The large horizontal frogs in the Meifu skirt are unusual because they look distinctly more like frogs than people. They flank small vertical human, yet frog-like, figures that also resemble the three figures on the skirt (author's collection).



Fig. 19 (left). Unless this is a literal version of the horned toad, more research is necessary to determine why many of the Ha figures, though frog-like in body, have horns.

Fig. 20 (right). On this Ha skirt the multiple small figures appear to be dancing. The Li dance during a number of rituals, including, not coincidentally, the petition for rain. (author's collection).

On the dragon covers, however, the frog is secondary to the dragon, phoenix and other Han icons like the gentle ch'ilin, lion and carp, crane, or ritual and symbolic objects such as the Tai Chi symbol within the Eight Trigrams (see four-panel dragon cover above) or the Chinese coin below.

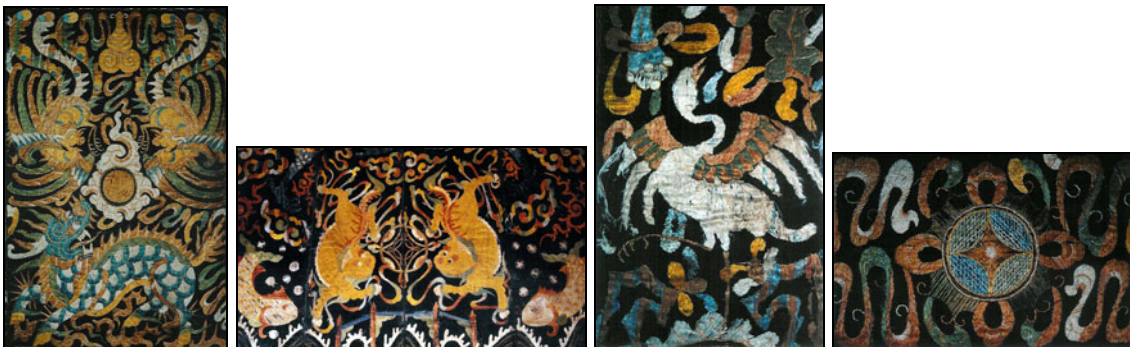


Fig. 21. Dragon covers, details (left to right): ch'ilin, lions and carp, crane, Chinese coin (author's collection).

Perhaps the frog did not hold an equal place of eminence in the Palace, so the Li embroiderers occasionally sought subtle ways to incorporate it, a vital part of their own culture, into the dragon covers, as in this small detail.

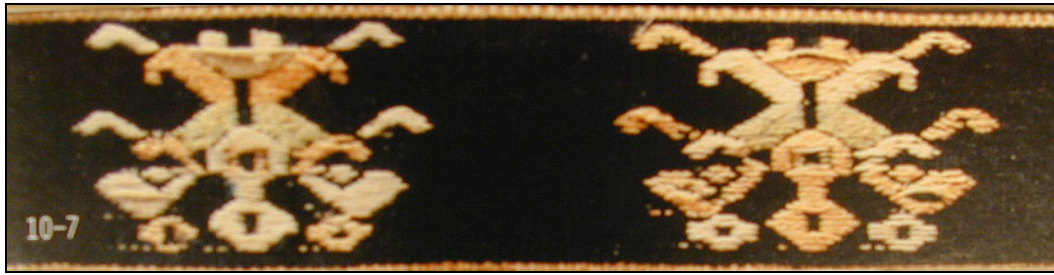


Fig. 22. By looking for the two small rectangular eyes at the top center of each figure and the mouth just below them, it will be easier to find the frogs' bodies. (Cai Lu Liang).

The ancestor-ghosts, dragon and frog all illustrate the interconnection of Han and Li cultures. There is one final example, however, that may demonstrate the influence of the *dragon covers* on a *Li* textile. Notice how the embroidered end of this turn-of-the-century Meifu Li ceremonial head cloth is divided into three sections within wide full borders, much like the three panels of a dragon cover.⁵



Fig. 23. In this detail of one embroidered end of a Meifu Li head cloth, the large ancestor-ghosts in the left and right sections are strongly from Li culture, but they appear within a miniature dragon cover format. (Collection of Mary Jane Leland).

The dragon covers underwent one final transformation. With the end of the Qing dynasty, the government ceased its demand for tribute. Although the Li may have been under less constraint to hide the dragon covers after that, perhaps they were used to keeping them a secret, because few people seemed to know of their existence until decades later. In 1966 the Red Guard ransacked the country to root out Chairman Mao's "Four Olds" - culture, customs, habits and thoughts - during the Cultural Revolution. In Li homes, dragon covers that were not well-hidden were seized and burned. That was how and when the dragon covers first came to the attention of people outside of Li society.

⁵ Mary Jane Leland was the first person to make this observation.

So let me summarize the history and meaning of the dragon covers in terms of this conference. In effect, the Imperial Palace appropriated the materials, skill and labor of the Li people to acquire the dragon covers as tribute. The Li turned around and surreptitiously adopted some of the imperial and Han designs, ideas and symbols to apply in their own secret production of dragon covers and perhaps in their own traditional textiles as well. In secret they also incorporated the dragon covers into their own ceremonies, thus transforming them into sacred objects. During the Cultural Revolution the dragon covers were exposed, and some were destroyed. The dragon covers that survived still represent the Li, but now also have become treasures of the world community.

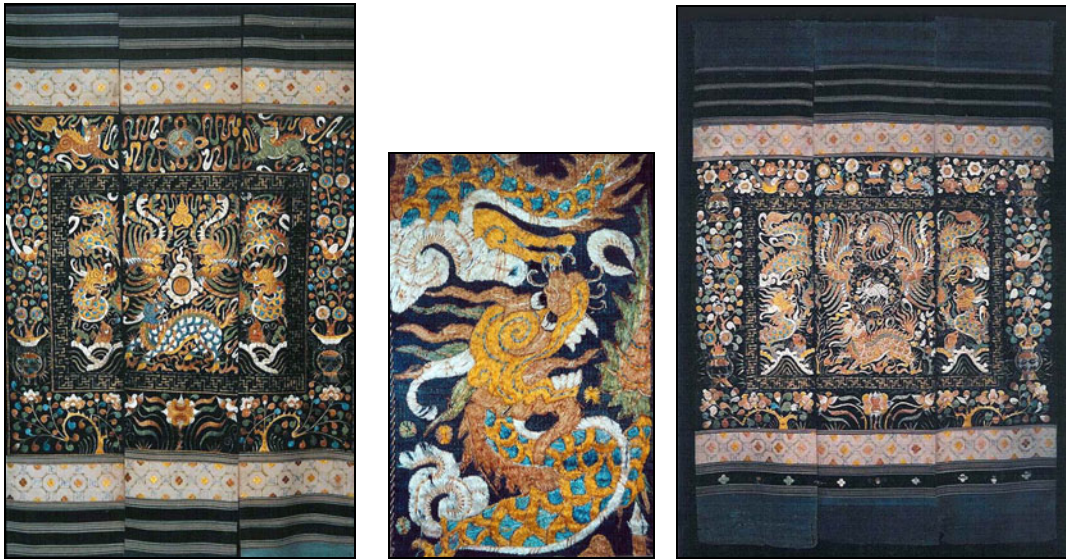


Fig. 24. The dragon covers(left and right) are full of flowers representing the four seasons and auspicious blessings; the one(right) is unusual for having a peacock and hare, which represent the sun and the moon, in the circles above the ch'ili (author's collection).

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