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Lee, Serena, "Redefining Borders and Identity: Ethnic Dress of the Lolo/Yi Across the Vietnam-China Border" (2014). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 907.

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Redefining Borders and Identity: Ethnic Dress of the Lolo/Yi Across the Vietnam-China Border

By Serena Lee



Figure 1. In remote northern Vietnam, Black Lolo women walk to their local market, dressed in their best ethnic garb. Although modern conveniences such as motorcycles, cell phones, and industrially produced cosmopolitan style garments are available, the Black Lolo continue to handcraft and wear their distinctive group dress daily. Identical ethnic dress worn across the border in China reveals clan connections otherwise difficult to discern. (Lee, 2006)

Minority Dress in a Majority World

Unknown to most of the world, over thirty ethnic groups in northern Vietnam and southwest China maintain ancient ways of living, unique belief systems, and distinctive group dress. These minorities live in remote, rugged mountain areas that have been inaccessible to outsiders until recent decades. While there is some documentation of the larger groups such as the Hmong/Miao, Dzao/Yao/Mien or the Tai/Dai, the existence of the smaller clans remains unknown, even to their fellow countrymen. Contrary to the worldwide trend towards adaptation to cosmopolitan dress or a national dress, these group outfits express first and foremost allegiance to one's clan, an unprecedented phenomenon that suggests the will and endurance of these people to maintain their distinct ancestry. Furthermore, similar group outfits worn on both sides of the Vietnam-China border is visual evidence of ancestral connections between these clan members, preserving cultural identity in times of conflict and change.

Based on multiple field studies conducted in 2005–2013 in the northern Vietnam provinces of Cao Bang and Ha Giang and the southwestern China provinces of Yunnan and Guangxi, this paper focuses on several small, related subgroups of the Lolo/Yi ethnic group who live along both sides of the Vietnam-China border. Many of these areas are restricted to outsiders and require special permits to enter. These related clan members are known as “Lolo” in Vietnam and “Yi” in China. Approximately 3,000 Lolo live in Vietnam. In 1953, the Lolo in China, along with many other ethnic groups of diverse languages and cultural traditions, were categorized into one large group known as Yi. The population of all the Yi in China numbers over 7 million, but it is unknown how many Yi in China are related to the Lolo in Vietnam. Although the Chinese government has declared “Lolo” to be a derogatory name, many in China near the Vietnam border continue to self-identify as Lolo. For the outsider, lack of documentation and the numerous names for the same subgroups make the identity and history of these people hard to discern.¹ However, similar ethnic dress maintained on both sides of the Vietnam-China border is tantalizing evidence of familial connections that are otherwise obscured by politics and a history of migration and marginalization.

Black Lolo – Caobang, Vietnam

In 2005 and 2006, I traveled to Caobang province in Vietnam to meet the Black Lolo, a very small subgroup living in three communes. A Black Lolo headman revealed that his ancestors had been living in the same place for seven generations, since 1730, and that the Lolo came from southern China 500 years ago to Ha Giang and Cao Bang. Although the ethnic minorities are technically citizens of either Vietnam or China, many, particularly the older people, speak only their group language and do not speak the national language. In order to interview the Black Lolo, two interpreters accompanied me to the village. One spoke Vietnamese, English and Tay, and the other spoke Tay and Black Lolo.

In 2006, all of the Black Lolo women in the village were wearing their complete ethnic outfits. (Fig. 1) A comparison of photos taken over hundred years ago by French colonialists in Tonkin² and photos taken by the author in 2005 and 2006³ reveals how the striking lack of change in the Black Lolo woman’s dress and substantiates the authenticity of this clan dress. The Black Lolo woman’s outfit is unique in that the short jacket exposes the midriff. Cloth fasteners and small metal buttons serve as closures down the center front opening. The back of the jacket features a vertical panel of squares with hand-embroidered and appliqued motifs. Bands of bright yellow, red, and green cloth and thin embroidered stripes decorate the sleeves. Large gussets under the arms of the jacket are a common element among all the Lolo outfits described in this paper. (Fig. 2) There is a slight sheen on the indigo-dyed cloth of these jackets, which is created by calendaring with a seashell. The indigo color pants feature loose-fitting legs that end above the ankles. A rectangular piece of indigo cloth serves as an overskirt that ties at the waist in the front and drapes around the hips to above the knees. A stack of old coins hangs from a chain wrapped around the waist. The headdress consists of black or black and white cloths wrapped in a turban

¹ The subjects of this paper, the Lolo/Yi who live along the China-Vietnam border, should not be confused with the

² Eduard Digue, *Les Montagnards du Tonkin*, 149, top photo; M. le Commandant Bonifacy, *Les Groupes Ethniques Du Bassin De La Riviere Claire (Haut Tonkin et Chine Meridionale)*, Planche XX, top photo.

³ Serena Lee Harrigan, *Dress of the Lolo, Pathen, Hmong and Yao of northern Vietnam in 2005-2006: Reflections of cultural continuity and change*, 5, Figs. 5,6

style. Today many women wear purchased t-shirts underneath the jackets. Other new items of women's dress purchased at the local market include manufactured cloth for the bands on their sleeves and gussets under the arms, plaid scarves, silver alloy hoop necklaces, strands of white beads, and canvas shoes.

Black Lolo males are among the few males who continue to wear a group dress. Although some males incorporate cosmopolitan-style sportswear into their daily wear, almost everybody dressed in the indigo-dyed cotton garments that are recognized as the Black Lolo male outfit. This outfit consists of a jacket with an asymmetrical opening and a stand-up collar, loose wide legged pants similar to the women's, and a wrapped turban-style headdress. The children dress like the adults, with the exception of caps decorated with streamers instead of turbans. While modern conveniences, such as motorbikes, cell phones, and mass-produced cosmopolitan-style clothing, have made their way into this area, these communities pick and choose what to adapt into their lives and which traditions to hold onto: clearly, ethnic dress--and all that it embodies—remains important to the Black Lolo way of life.



Figure 2 (left). Black Lolo women's jackets feature a center back panel with embroidered and applique motifs, and sleeves with colorful bands and stripes. The large gusset panels extending from under the arm to the waist is a common feature of all the jackets/tops of the various Lolo/Yi groups in this paper. (Lee, 2006)

Figure 3 (right). Jacket back of Red Yi in Guangxi, China. The ethnic dress of the Black Lolo in Caobang, Vietnam, is almost identical to the Red Yi. (Note: modern sleeve covers are worn only in China.) Even the manner in which the indigo pouch is worn on the lower back is similar. Although their group names are no longer the same, the ethnic dress of these two groups living across the Vietnam-China border are markers of identity that reveal their ancestral connections. (Lee, 2009)

Red Yi (Black Lolo) - Guangxi, China

During an online search, I discovered photos of women in China dressed in Black Lolo outfits. Taken in a remote market in Guangxi province in 2008, the subjects of these photos were identified as "Miao." In hopes of meeting some of these people wearing the Black Lolo outfit in China, I traveled to this market near the China-Vietnam border in 2009. Initially, I was

disappointed that I didn't see anyone dressed in Black Lolo attire. However, a man approached me and asked with curiosity why I was wearing the jacket of his clan. Although he himself was wearing cosmopolitan-style clothing, clearly he saw this jacket as a marker of his clan identity. When I explained my interest in the Black Lolo, he was flattered and offered to take us to his village. Only a few people were in the village at the time, as most people

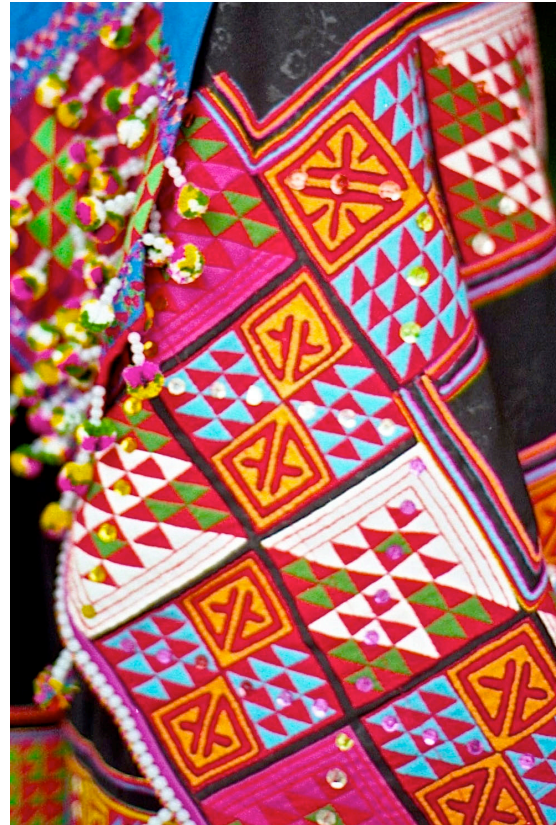


Figure 4 (left). Vietnam. Although most of the Flowery Lolo in Vietnam wear their ethnic dress only for special occasions, this woman was wearing the Flowery Lolo group outfit outside a government building near the Vietnam-China border. (Lee, 2012)

Figure 5 (right). Vietnam. Flowery Lolo handwork: piecework triangles, applique, pom-poms, sequins, beads. Note the motif resembling a labyrinth – this motif is found on both Flowery Lolo and Black Lolo garments. (Lee, 2005)

were working out in the fields. His wife was also wearing cosmopolitan-style clothing as daily wear, but a few older women were wearing outfits identical to the Black Lolo in Vietnam. (Fig. 3) The man's wife had a similar outfit stored for special occasions, which she was happy to put on for us. Other evidence of ongoing textile traditions was a floor loom on the deck of a home and a woman sitting in the sun outside her house, hand-sewing a new group jacket. When I showed the man and his wife photos of Black Lolo in Vietnam, they acknowledged their connection as kin. They also informed us that they lived not far from their Black Lolo relatives across the border. However, when asked their group name, they gave the perplexing answer that they were "Red Yi." Since the Chinese government has categorized the Lolo into the Yi ethnic

group, it is understandable that their name is Yi, but puzzling why the color is Red instead of Black.

In 2010, I returned to this same market in Guangxi, China, still hoping to find people wearing the Black Lolo or Red Yi outfit. I was once again disappointed. But again someone in cosmopolitan-style dress approached me, asking why I was wearing the jacket of her clan. In the ensuing conversation with this Red Yi woman, she told me that she stopped wearing her group dress on a daily basis about five years ago, because she wanted to be more fashionable. In her lifetime, she had made over thirty to forty Red Yi outfits. In a final gesture easily understood by those of us who make clothing, her eyes drifted over the details of my Black Lolo jacket, and as she buttoned the top button, she commented on how much better her handwork was than what had been done on the jacket I was wearing.

In further discussions with other minorities along the China-Vietnam border, I was surprised to learn that the borders are much more porous than imagined. During my fieldwork in 2008, I met two Black Lolo women in the Guangxi countryside. They had come across the border to work for a couple of weeks before returning to Vietnam. The older woman was easily recognizable as Black Lolo or Red Yi, as she was wearing her complete group outfit. The younger woman was dressed in a more generic outfit – a shirt and pants set typically worn by Vietnamese women working in the fields or doing physical labor in the towns. As another example of what a small world this is: when I showed them photos of the Black Lolo taken during my fieldwork in Vietnam, they recognized some of the individuals. In fact, one was a cousin of the younger woman.

While there is only one China-Vietnam border crossing for foreign nationals, there are several “open entrances” for residents in the area, who are allowed to cross for short visits. Several minorities described the ease with which they cross the border and stated that visits to their relatives took no more than a couple of hours. This explains how similarities in ethnic dress across the border have continued, despite changes such as the adaptation of purchased fabrics and notions. On a broader level, this also challenges assumptions about the borders being high-security zones that are strictly patrolled. Assumptions about the difficulty of marginalized people to travel across borders because of government restrictions, national security issues, lack of money, or difficulty in obtaining passports or visas may not apply in this situation. These “open entrances” also suggest surprising concessions on the part of the respective governments towards their ethnic minorities. As recently as 1979, this region was the battleground for a dispute and bloodshed between the two nations. However, during my fieldwork in 2007-2013, there seem to be relative calm in this area, with the borders remaining open for business.

Flowery Lolo – Ha Giang, Vietnam

The Flowery Lolo live in Ha Giang, Vietnam. Most Flowery Lolo in Vietnam wear their ethnic dress only for festivals and special events.⁴ However, in 2013, I was pleasantly surprised to run into a woman wearing the colorful Flowery Lolo outfit at an isolated viewing point in Ha Giang Province near the China border. (Fig. 4) She was wearing an identity badge and standing outside a government building, so it is likely that she was a government representative, dressed to greet the occasional outsider to this area. At a glance, the Black Lolo and Flowery Lolo outfits show little resemblance, given their color palettes and the more extensive decoration on the Flowery Lolo pants and overskirt. However, other than the shorter length of the Black Lolo jacket, the shape of the garment pieces of the two subgroups is very similar, reflecting their clan connection. Also linking the Black Lolo and Flowery Lolo is a mysterious motif resembling a labyrinth, which is applied on the center back of many Black Lolo jackets and on Flowery Lolo jackets, headdresses, and sashes. (Fig. 5)

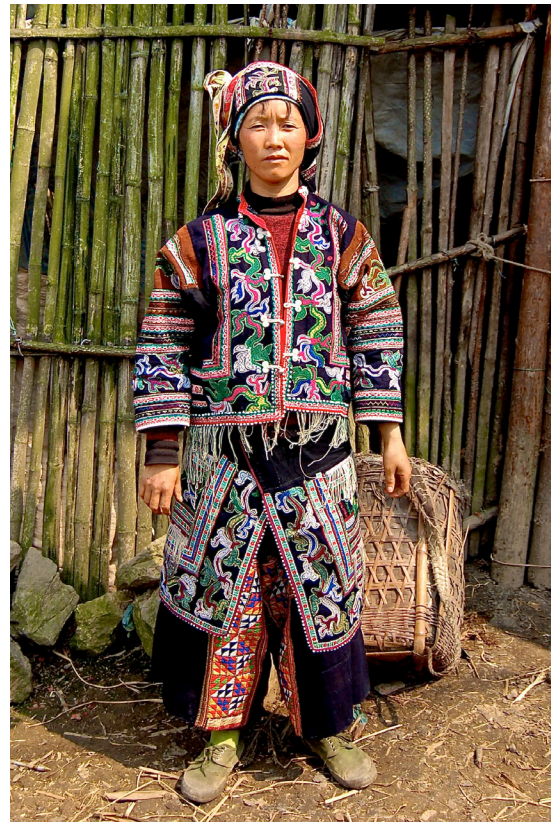


Figure 6 (left). Flowery Lolo in China. This outfit is similar in garment shapes to the Vietnamese Flowery Lolo outfit in Fig. 4. The decorative motifs on the outfits of this Flowery Lolo village are a combination of geometric shapes, stars, and arabesque forms. (Lee, 2010)

Figure 7 (right). Flowery Lolo or Red Lolo in China. While the garment shapes and placement of decorative panels are similar to the Flowery Lolo in Fig. 6 and Fig. 4, the decorative motifs on this group dress are predominantly arabesque forms, representative of dragons. (Lee, 2008)

⁴ See Harrigan, *Dress of the Lolo, Pathen, Hmong and Yao of northern Vietnam in 2005-2006: Reflections of cultural continuity and change*, for photos of the everyday dress and a close-up of the decorative headdress of the Flowery Lolo in Vietnam, 5, Figs. 3,4.

Flowery Lolo – China

In Yunnan Province, China, I met several women whose group attire was similar in garment shapes to the Flowery Lolo in Vietnam. One such group of women acknowledged their kinship to the Flowery Lolo in Vietnam and self-identified as “Flowery Lolo,” despite the Chinese government’s proclamation that “Lolo” is a derogatory name. The jackets in this village have center front openings, cloth frog-style button closures, and large gussets under the arms that extend from the elbow to the waist. Inverted L-shaped panels in the front and an upside-down T-shaped panel in the back are decorated with embroidered geometric motifs, star shapes, or arabesque forms done in chain stitch. The arabesque forms were identified as representations of dragons.⁵ The sleeves are constructed of bands of contrasting color cloth. Rows of embroidered patterns, including dragon shapes, decorate the sleeves. Some of the jackets are made in hand-spun and hand-woven natural cotton cloth combined with purchased cloth used for the gusset area. Seed beads decorate the hem of the jacket and the overskirt, which is elaborately embroidered with dramatic geometric designs. The pants are similar in shape and length to that of the other Lolo/Yi groups discussed thus far. However, curiously enough, some of the pants do not retain the continuity of motifs and color throughout the outfit – instead, the decorative inverted L-shape panel of the pants is filled with the colorful piecework triangles of the Flowery Lolo dress in Ha Giang, Vietnam. (Fig. 6)

In another small village in Yunnan near the Guangxi border, I showed photos of the Flowery Lolo in Vietnam to a woman. She acknowledged her kinship to them. However, when asked the name of her group, she answered “Red Lolo,” but later nodded with some uncertainty when asked if she was Flowery Lolo. As she was dressed in contemporary-style dress (a loose blazer style jacket, sweater, and slacks), I asked to see her ethnic outfit. A younger relative obliged and put on their clan dress. The embroidered designs on both the jacket and overskirt are the arabesque dragon forms. However, the pants, like the ones in the previous village, were also decorated with the piecework triangles used by the Flowery Lolo in Vietnam. (Fig. 7) Two different sources show this outfit with the predominance of dragon shapes as also worn in Vietnam. However, the group is identified as “White Lolo” in *The Lolo in Vietnam*,⁶ and as “Black Lolo” in *Textiles of the Highland Peoples of Vietnam Mon-Khmer, Hmong-Mien, and Tibeto-Burman*.⁷

⁵ Ms. Pan Li Jiang, a Zhuang minority who works at the Ministry of Culture in Funning, 2009, identified these arabesque forms as representations of dragons. The same dragon motifs appear on the skirts and baby-carriers of the White Lolo, another Lolo subgroup in the area.

⁶ Vũ Khánh, *The Lolo in Vietnam*, 66-68

⁷ Michael C. Howard & Kim Be Howard, *Textiles of the Highland Peoples of Vietnam Mon-Khmer, Hmong-Mien, and Tibeto-Burman*, 79, Fig.6.5



Fig. 8. Flowery Yi in Malipo area, Yunnan, China. This ethnic dress is worn by women of several villages in China and of at least one village in Vietnam. Different names have been attributed to this group. However, similarities in their ethnic dress clearly signify their kinship to one another and highlight the important role ethnic dress plays in cultural preservation. (Lee, 2012)

Black Lolo in Vietnam/Flowery Lolo, Red Lolo, Flowery Yi, or Geluoluo in China

Confusion over different names emerged again with the study of another Lolo/Yi group along the China-Vietnam border. In 2008, Ms. Pan Li Jiang of the Ministry of Culture in Funing, Yunnan showed me photos of women wearing an unusual ethnic dress and identified them as Flowery Lolo or Red Lolo from Yunnan, China. In 2009, fellow researcher Cai Hua⁸, a professor of Religion and Social Sciences at Southwest University of Nationalities in Sichuan, China, sent me photos of a group of women wearing a similar dress, whom she identified as Black Lolo from Ha Giang, Vietnam. This group's attire is quite different from that of the Black Lolo in Cao Bang, Vietnam or of any of the Lolo/Yi subgroups previously discussed. (See Fig. 8) In 2010, at a local market near Funing, Yunnan province, I met a woman wearing this outfit and she identified herself as Flowery Lolo.

⁸ Cai Hua is herself a Yi minority from Sichuan. She confirms that, while the Yi in Sichuan are well documented, there is very little known about the Lolo/Yi groups along the China-Vietnam border.

The following day we headed up the mountain to a village with this group dress. None of the villagers were wearing their ethnic outfits, but a young woman took her group dress out of storage to show us. Most of her contemporary ethnic garments - a top, overskirt, sashes, skirt, a belt of streamers, and pieces of the headscarf - were constructed in purchased synthetic fabrics in shiny, bold colors. Although initially reticent to show us her garments, this young woman was proud of her handwork. Unlike the front-opening jacket of the other Lolo/Yi groups described in this paper, the top of this Lolo/Yi group is a pullover with a small square neckline. Wide bell sleeves extend several inches past the fingertips. In the lower half of the bodice front and back are rectangles of embroidered geometric motifs. Similar to the other Lolo/Yi tops are the gusset panels under the arms and its short length. Instead of wide legged pants, a mid-calf length, three-tiered skirt is worn. The bottom tier is gathered with many fine pleats that flounce out with the movement of the wearer. Older skirts are made of hand-woven indigo-dyed cotton cloth, while new versions are made in purchased blue cotton fabric. Similar to the previously mentioned Lolo/Yi outfits, an overskirt wraps at the waist and falls open in the front, draping over the hips to the knees. A belt of ribbon streamers is worn around the waist that cascades over the entire lower half of the body. This group's unique headdress consists of an indigo cloth decorated with buttons and embroidery, folded and arranged on top of a terry cloth that drapes down the sides of the woman's face to the shoulders. A few women bought out older ethnic tops, which were made in darker shades of red and black, some in satins and velvets. An older woman, who was wearing a traditional skirt underneath her cosmopolitan-style garments, explained that the women in this village had stopped wearing their ethnic outfits about five years ago. She acknowledged that they were related to the Ha Giang Lolo in Prof. Cai Hua's photos and that these relatives lived not far away.

Following my visit to this Lolo village near Funing, Yunnan, I came upon a photo of an outfit closely resembling this group's dress in *Writing with Threads, Traditional Textiles of Southwest Chinese Minorities*. While the outfit in the book is predominately indigo rather than the brightly colored garments now worn in Ha Giang, Vietnam and Yunnan, China, the garment shapes and design placements are very similar. Puzzlingly, the outfit is attributed to the Gelao in Malipo, Yunnan (early 20th century).⁹ Research indicates that the Gelao are an old ethnic minority group in China with a recorded history of over 2,000 years. Further dialogue with my interpreter and our local driver in the Funing area revealed that the Funing Lolo group self-identifies by a variety of names, including Red Lolo, Flowery Lolo, or Geluoluo. It is possible that Geluoluo may be a corruption of Gelao, but it is a mystery how this name came to be attached to the Lolo. Both Professor Cai Hua and Chinese interpreter Yang commented that these groups "may be confused about their own name." Yang, a 38 year-old man from the Dong minority group in Guangxi, China suggests the following explanation for how this might have happened: Some of the minorities migrated together during wartimes. Although the groups maintained their respective ethnic outfits, over the years of living together, outsiders confused the two groups' names with one another, and eventually some of the descendants also became confused about their own clan names. While this may seem hard to believe, it is plausible—particularly if there was a need to remain anonymous at some point during the history of one's ancestry. With so many contradictions in the names of these clans, it is apparent that ethnic dress plays a significant role as an identity marker and, ultimately, in the preservation of familial ties and history.

⁹ Tom Klobe, *Writing with Threads Traditional Textiles of Southwest Chinese Minorities*, 391, 2009.

In hopes of solving this name conundrum, in 2012, I set out to the Malipo in search of the group described in *Writing with Threads*. Cai Hua had given me a name of a village that she visited but, because of its proximity to the China-Vietnam border, foreigners are denied access. Instead we were kindly redirected to another village with the same group dress. In this nevertheless still remote village, several women put on their ethnic dress for us. Similar to the Funing and the Ha Giang groups, this Malipo group's version of their ethnic dress looked like a glamourized version of the earlier indigo style. Apart from an older woman who was wearing the group indigo skirt and top along with two cosmopolitan-style shirts and pants as daily wear, most of the group outfits were made in purchased fabrics in bright pinks, yellow, oranges, reds, greens and blues. Perhaps a recent adaptation, dark colored, narrow pants with bright accents were worn underneath the skirts. However, these ethnic outfits also retain many of their traditional features, reflecting their kinship to the other Lolo/Yi groups. As discussed earlier, large gussets under the arms are common to all the Lolo/Yi groups in this paper. Despite the adaptation of commercial fabric and notions, common elements reflect the connection of the three villages and their pride in their clan identity. Similarities of dress specific to these Ha Giang, Funing, and Malipo clans include: the shapes and lengths of the garments; embroidered geometric designs in the center panel of the top; red or bright pink satin sleeves with rows of batik motifs resembling "x's" within squares and rows of embroidered star-like motifs; headdresses consisting of terry cloth and embroidered indigo cloth with buttons in a set pattern and manner of wearing.

Conclusion

Recent studies by anthropologist Jean Michaud¹⁰ and political economist James C. Scott¹¹ define this area as part of the Southeast Asian Massif or Zomia, and its inhabitants as highland communities who choose ways of living so as to resist incorporation into a nation-state or domination by a central government. These communities are masters at "the art of not being governed," as the title of James C. Scott's book so aptly expresses. My observations as seen through the lens of Clothing Study collaborates these ideas. Using group dress as a basis to study the people and ways of living in northern Vietnam and southwestern China, intriguing insights that challenge commonly accepted ways of looking at identity, borders, and motivation and change among these communities were uncovered. Ethnic dress represents unique values and aesthetics. The ability to continue group dress traditions reflects the will and surprising strength of these minority peoples to resist unwanted change and infringement by outside forces. While the cultural identities of many of these Lolo/Yi groups are obscured by politics and name changes, many of these minorities continue to see their distinctive ethnic dress as markers of clan identity. A remembrance of ancestral connections lingers through this group attire and perpetuates oral histories. In an evolving world where politics may change the boundaries of nations, redefine one's physical home, and alter one's group name, ethnic dress connects the individual to a familial home, ancient beliefs, and a unique world-view that affirms one's place in the world--assurances that are crucial to the wellbeing of the individual, the society and, ultimately, to humanity itself.

¹⁰ Jean Michaud, 'A Historical Panorama of the Montagnards in Northern Vietnam under French Rule', in Jean Michaud (ed) *Turbulent Times and Enduring Peoples*, 2000, 51-76.

¹¹ James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, 2009.

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Yang, in conversation with author, 2010

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