

# A New Method of Classification for Tai Textiles

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Textiles, as part of Southeast Asian traditional clothing and material culture, feature as ethnic identification markers in anthropological studies. Textile scholars struggle with the extremely complex variety of textiles of the Tai peoples and presume that each Tai ethnic group has its own unique dress and textile style. This method of classification assumes what Leach calls “an academic fiction … that in a normal ethnographic situation one ordinarily finds distinct tribes distributed about the map in an orderly fashion with clear-cut boundaries between them” (Leach 1964: 290). Instead, we find different ethnic Tai groups living in the same region wearing the same clothing and the same ethnic group in different regions wearing different clothing. For example: the textiles of the Tai Phuan peoples in Vientiane are different to those of the Tai Phuan in Xiang Khoang or Nam Nguem or Sukhothai. At the same time, the Lao and Tai Lue living in the same region in northern Vietnam weave and wear the same textiles. Some may try to explain the phenomena by calling it “stylistic influence”, but the reality is much more profound. The complete repertoire of a people’s style of dress can be exchanged for another and the common element is geography, not ethnicity.

The subject of this paper is to bring to light forty years of in-depth research on Tai textiles and clothing in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Laos), Thailand and Vietnam to demonstrate that clothing and the historical transformation of practices of social production of textiles are best classified not by ethnicity, but by geographical provenance. The pervading factor in provenance is the social structure of communities of each region.

In Tai traditional culture, the organisation of society and management of populations was achieved through a system called “*muang*”.<sup>1</sup> The finding of this

<sup>1</sup> *Muang* is the traditional governing system for Tai communities and involved interdependent units of population arranged in villages (*baan*), whether Tai or not, that combined to make a *muang* (Wyatt 1984: 7-8). Five *muang* made a *muang kuang*, which was headed by a chief called *chao muang* (*phia tao* in Vietnam). Multiple *muang kuang* came under a capital called *muang luang*, which was headed by a king, prince or chief called *chao muang luang*. Each *muang*, having

research is that textiles from regions governed by the *muang* system, prior to the introduction of the Western nation-state system and the drawing up of international borders, exhibit unique styles that can be documented and classified according to their *muang*. The uniformity of data gathered in each region has enabled this author to identify several main *muang* styles (and subsequent sub-styles that exhibit their tributary relationship to the main *muang*) regardless of the multi-ethnic status of the population. Thus, the identification of Tai textiles using the *muang* system incorporates historical and ethnic overlapping and, at the same time, illustrates the tributary relations between political centres of Tai peoples in the past.

The 14<sup>th</sup> century saw the establishment of a number of large and politically powerful Tai *muang* in areas of present-day Laos, north-west Vietnam, southern China, northern Myanmar and Thailand (see map). From the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries Sipsong Chao Tai (Twelve Tai Chiefs) administered a huge population along the Red, Black and Ma rivers with tributary *muang* in present-day southern China, north-west Vietnam and north-east Laos. The kingdom of Lan Xang was founded in the 14<sup>th</sup> century by the Lao and held sway in the Mekong river basin while the Siamese established the kingdoms of Sukhothai in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and Ayutthaya in the 14<sup>th</sup> century in the Chao Phraya river region. A small kingdom called Muang Phuan controlled the trade route between the Lan Xang capital of Luang Phabang and the kingdom of Hué on the coast of Vietnam (Snit and Breazeale 1988: 4-5).

The Siamese and Vietnamese were continuously fighting for power over the *muang* that fell geographically between them. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Siamese claimed suzerainty over Lan Xang, which in turn claimed suzerainty over Sipsong Chao Tai and Muang Phuan, placing the latter two *muang* theoretically under the indirect jurisdiction of the Siamese (Snit and Breazeale 1988: 71). At the same time, the Vietnamese mandarins of Annam received tribute from Sipsong Chao Tai and Muang Phuan, symbolising their suzerainty over those *muang* (Evans 2002: 32). These complex relationships were far from stable and the political power of a chief or king was measured against the size of the population he controlled. Slaves had

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collected tribute from their *baan*, paid annual tribute to their *chao muang* who in turn paid tribute to the *chao muang luang*. The greater the population controlled by the *chao muang luang*, the greater the income he received. The total area of habitation of all the people under the *chao muang luang* was also called *muang*, which was a chiefdom, a confederation of chiefs or a kingdom. *Muang* expanded and contracted continuously, overlapped and could have multiple suzerainties, paying tribute to several overlords, but at the same time maintaining their independence and receiving tribute themselves from less politically powerful *muang/baan* within their region. *Muang* covers all aspects of political, social, geographic and administrative systems of the Tai prior to outside influence, in a single word. In its most intact form, documented in north-west Vietnam, land was not privately owned, but distributed by the chiefs according to family and community needs, which were re-evaluated annually. Social, cultural and labouring activities were communal and rulers gave security, leadership and identity to the people in their jurisdiction. (Cam Trong 1998: 12-26) The editorial of *Tai Culture* 3, 2 (1998) also gives numerous further references for this complex subject. (Raendchen and Raendchen 1998: 5-11).

been part of the tributes sent between *muang* over centuries to secure peace and independence for the lesser *muang*, but in the 18<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Siamese physically relocated tens of thousands of people from Vientiane to the west side of the Mekong river and to the Chaophraya valley to boost their populations (Evans 2002: 25-33). Furthermore, Muang Phuan was depopulated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in an attempt to create a no-man's land in the region between Siam and the Vietnamese (Snit and Breazeale 1988: 7-8).

Most Tai self-appointed names relate to their region or *muang* of origin, such as the Tai Nuea from Muang Xam Nuea and the Tai Phuan from Muang Phuan in Laos; and the Tai Daeng from Muang Daeng in Vietnam etc. These names are used as ethnic classification names in anthropological studies, presuming that people maintain them wherever they live. This is not a traditional method of self-identity but one supposed for them. According to Tai culture, in cases of intermarriage, the children of parents from two different ethnic groups take the identity of their geographic location. In the case of the matriarchal Tai Phuan peoples, men moved to the women's homes and kept their original (ethnic) identity, but the children became part of the Phuan community of their mothers. For the patriarchal Tai Daeng, the opposite is true; a woman moved to the man's house at marriage, and both she and her children took the identity of the man's community.

Prior to the Western nation-state system of government and the drawing up of international borders at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, my research shows that Tai peoples used textiles and clothing to express their desire to belong to certain communities (*muang*). The concept of uniforms and dress as outward expressions of group identity is common to many cultures and applied to the Tai, who identified with their region of origin, not their ethnicity, which was a concept brought much later by Europeans (Evans 2000: 7). By wearing the same style of clothing, the inhabitants of a community were identified as belonging to that *muang*, regardless of their ethnicity, and outsiders could easily be recognised. This was a useful security system as well as a community binder. Any person wishing to join the community would have to be accepted by the chief and show allegiance to him by adapting to the norms of the region, which included certain dress codes. The main *muang* evolved different dress and textile styles, with sub-styles in the lesser and vassal *muang* that could be recognised as part of that main *muang* style. Clothing was an outward expression of allegiance to the chief and his family, who would wear the style of their *muang* in the appropriate materials of their rank at official occasions when the population could keep in touch with the latest fashions of the hierarchy and emulate them, albeit with less valuable local materials. However, many communities were isolated, cut off by high mountains without modern transport and communications. As a result, the evolution of *muang* styles was slow and reflected the regional climate and vegetation, as well as any geographical features that brought trade and imported goods into some areas and not others. Historical events that shaped

the *muang* themselves and caused mass movements of people must be studied to understand the dress and textiles found in different regions. The historical outlines given in this paper are necessarily over-simplified as space will allow, and are only examples of the complex tributary relations between various Tai *muang* to illustrate my hypothesis.

During the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, war and slavery brought about the relocation of large numbers of Tai peoples. When people fled their homes or were relocated and placed under a new chief, they changed their clothing and textiles accordingly. These changes were sometimes very sudden, as in the case of the Tai Khang and Tai Phuan who fled Muang Phuan, escaping slavery by the Siamese. It would have been necessary for them to blend immediately into their new locations to avoid detection while those captured and relocated near Bangkok took on the clothing styles of their Siamese overlords.

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, large numbers of Tai Daeng migrated to Muang Xam Nuea to escape political persecution in their home region of Muang Daeng in Vietnam (Howard and Howard 2002: 107). They did not need to change their clothing and textiles styles because both Muang Daeng and Muang Xam Nuea were tributaries to Sipsong Chao Tai, and followed the same dress code.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the French established Indochina and international borders for Vietnam and Laos. Thailand drew up borders to protect the kingdom from colonisation, and began to modernise.<sup>2</sup> This brought an end to the *muang* system in these countries and the *muang* dress codes that it dictated. Prior to this period, there was no concept among the Tai people of nation (or geography) as we know it today (Winichakul 1994). The new international borders and provincial divisions re-organised the areas once controlled by *muang* rulers. The power of the chiefs in the smaller *muang* was given to government officials, who often came from other regions, and nationalism was promoted for self-identity in the place of *muang* identity. My research shows that after this period, Tai people did not change their method of dress if they moved their location, and the logical reason is that they were no longer required to show allegiance to regional chiefs.

In the case of large Tai communities that moved into areas outside or on the periphery of existing Tai *muang* prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it has been found that they have usually maintained their original style of dress in their new location. This is true of the Tai Lue, who were invited by King Rama I (r. 1782-1809) to move from Sipsong Panna to northern Thailand, and the Phutai, who migrated to southern Laos.

For textiles that date prior to the breakdown of the *muang* system, it is possible to identify and classify them with great accuracy according to *muang* styles. After the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and for a period of fifty years, this method can still be applied, but the styles became less distinct, particularly in areas with good

<sup>2</sup> Some international borders established at that time have since changed and disputes still continue.

communications, whereas in isolated regions traditional textiles and methods of dress were still followed. By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the commercialisation of traditional textiles brought about a mixture of styles, some of which can still be analysed using this method.

The styles classified by the *muang* system that follow are not complete, but it is hoped that this classification system will be used for further research into regions as yet unclassified. More detailed information is available in my publication, “Lao-Tai Textiles: The Textiles of Xam Nuea and Muang Phuan” (Cheesman 2004). The textiles with the most distinct styles are the clothing items of Tai women. Women stayed at home while men travelled for trade and treaty, thus it was the women who wove, displayed and conserved the identity of their community and *muang* style. Men’s clothing and textiles in all the *muang* styles were very similar, probably to enhance anonymity, equality and practicality in travel. For this reason, the textiles discussed here are mainly women’s clothing.

### **Sipsong Chao Tai style**

Sipsong Chao Tai (Twelve Tai Chiefs) was a confederation of Tai chiefs and one of the first documented ancient *muang* of the Tai people, commencing in the 6<sup>th</sup> century with White Tai rulers in Muang Lo (Cam 1998: 23). The auspicious number twelve was applied, even though at one time there were at least sixteen chiefs of the major *muang* that ruled over a hundred smaller *muang*; and early Vietnamese accounts referred to it as Siphok Chao Tai (Sixteen Tai Chiefs). Muang Thanh, now known as Dien Bien Phu, was the capital for many decades, with Black Tai rulers; as was Muang Moei, now known as Tuan Chau in Son La province, which had White Tai rulers. By the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Sipsong Chao Tai governed a huge area, including the upper Red and Black rivers in Vietnam and parts of southern China, northern Laos from the Ou River to Muang Xam Nuea and east across the current border with Vietnam into Thanh Hoa province.

Although little remains of the original Sipsong Chao Tai style in Vietnam today due to the marketing of Chinese fabric into the region for centuries, evidence of the early dress code can be seen in the clothing of a Tai Dam (Black Tai) noble woman from Son La province, Vietnam, collected by the Musée de l’Homme (now the Musée de Quay Branly) in 1931 (Hemmet 1995: 49). It is a long tube-skirt worn above the breast with a short, long-sleeved blouse and a decorative head cloth. This method of dress is still known today as *sin luea suea bo po*, which translates as “too much skirt and not enough blouse,” in Xam Nuea district, Houa Phan province, Laos, and several provinces in Vietnam. As Muang Xam Nuea was a tributary to Sipsong Chao Tai (Chamberlain 1992: 20), it is possible to study the textiles of the Tai groups from Houa Phan province in Laos to shed light on the once rich heritage of Sipsong Chao Tai textiles. The French further encouraged the market economy

in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the availability of commercial fabric and household goods brought the decline of hand weaving in this region of Vietnam.

However, in some areas of Vietnam that were once governed by Sipsong Chao Tai there are still small communities that maintain the *sin luea suea bo po* dress code and some of their original textile traditions. These communities include the Lao Noi in Lai Chau province, the Tai Khao in Hoa Binh province and the Tai Dam<sup>3</sup> in Thanh Hoa province. The Tai Thanh and Tai Moei in Nghe An province also wear this method of dress and, under the theory of this classification system, would have migrated from Muang Thanh and Muang Moei (in the Sipsong Chao Tai region) respectively. Cam Trong reiterates this theory by placing the migration of the Tai Thanh to Nghe An province from Muang Thanh (Cam 1998: 20). It is most likely that their textiles reflect the style from their original *muang* in Sipsong Chao Tai, which gives us a glimpse into the past.

The communities of Tai Waat in Sonla province in Vietnam, Houa Phan and Xiang Khoang province in Laos and Petchaburi province in Thailand still weave some textiles in the original Sipsong Chao Tai style.

### Xam Nuea style

Muang Xam Nuea was in the approximate area of today's Houa Phan province in Laos, with settlements on the Xam, Et and Ma rivers. It was in the path of some of the earliest migrations of Tai people into Laos and Thailand from Vietnam that began over a thousand years ago (Cam 1998: 20). Houa Phan province is home to one of the richest textile cultures in Southeast Asia and holds more examples of Tai textile types than any other region/*muang*. It is likely that these textiles were once woven in the other *muang*, but many textiles were discontinued due to their arduous weaving techniques while others were adapted to warmer climates and different economic, social, political and geographical conditions. Xam Nuea style textiles were thick and woven in materials suitable for the cold mountain climate. The main decorative techniques were supplementary warp and discontinuous supplementary weft using combinations of heavy silk and large hand-spun cotton yarns dyed with natural dyes.

Four major ethnic groups of Tai peoples live in this region: the Tai Nuea, Tai Daeng, Tai Moei and Tai Khang. The Tai Dam and Tai Waat came much later and did not adopt the Xam Nuea style. The Tai Nuea<sup>4</sup> are the oldest Tai inhabitants of Muang Xam Nuea while the Tai Daeng came from Muang Daeng in Vietnam in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. When Laos became part of Indochina at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century,

<sup>3</sup> They call themselves Tai Dam in Vietnam, but when visiting their relatives in Houa Phan province of Laos they call themselves Tai Daeng. The textiles of Muang Daeng in Thanh Hoa province were recorded by Robert (Robert 1941). For political reasons, many Tai Daeng fled Muang Daeng to settle in Muang Xam Nuea in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>4</sup> The Tai Nuea are also known as the Lao Phut.

the French replaced the Tai Nuea chiefs with a Tai Daeng administration.<sup>5</sup> Some converted to Christianity from shamanism, but the Tai Nuea were not willing to give up their Buddhist beliefs and consequently many families moved to Buddhist towns in the Mekong river basin, where they adopted the Lan Xang style of clothing of that region. The Tai Khang came from Muang Khang in Muang Phuan<sup>6</sup> to escape slavery and the Tai Moei, who originated in Muang Moei, north-west Vietnam, settled on the Nam Noen river that flows between Houa Phan and Xiang Khoang provinces, once the regions of Muang Xam Nuea and Muang Phuan respectively.

The method of dress for women in the Xam Nuea style is called *sin luea suea bo po* (long skirts and short blouses). The tube-skirts had wide waistbands made from one to three textiles to enable the skirt to be tied above the breast. The waistband was the only part of the dress that displayed the original *muang* of the different ethnic groups, who all wove and wore the same types of textiles. The blouses were short, showing off the waistband and the thick cotton belt known as *aeng*.

Variations in sub-styles can be identified by colour preferences, density of weaves and evidence of trade materials. Four sub-styles have been identified: Upper Xam Nuea, Xam Tai, Muang Vaen, and Nam Noen. Upper Xam Nuea and Xam Tai textiles had thick supplementary yarns, but can be distinguished by their different colour preferences, while those from Muang Vaen can be identified by the use of finer yarns and imported cotton. The Nam Noen style was known for its bright chemical colours traded along the Noen river in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the pale turquoise blue acquired from fresh indigo leaves. The Tai Moei and Tai Khang share the upper reaches of the river, both groups wearing the same style of dress in this region.

The Nam Noen sub-style can also be seen in Bolikhambay province of Laos, south of the Noen river area, where some Tai Moei and Tai Thanh live today. Their textile style is the same, and it is likely that they lived in the Nam Noen region prior to their move to Bolikhambay, as evidenced by their clothing. These two groups migrated more recently and did not change their dress style after their move to Bolikhambay. Interestingly, the Tai Thanh in Nghe An province, Vietnam, living away from the Noen river, do not use the bright imported colours of the Nam Noen style but wear a distinctive style, maintaining the *sin luea suea bo po* dress code,

<sup>5</sup> This information was gained from two unpublished histories of the Tai Daeng peoples written in Lao by Lung Bao Phuang Nanthavongduangsi and Thao Khampaeng of Nong Bua Thong village, Vientiane, Laos.

<sup>6</sup> Chamberlain sites Dang Nghiêm Van's 1974 book in Vietnamese as listing the Tai Khang from Muang Khang in Laos without mentioning the location (Chamberlain 1991: 122). I have found three villages on the ruins of an ancient city that boasted three tall *chedis* near Xiang Kham in Xiang Khoang province (previously known as Muang Phuan) where the Tai Khang language is widely spoken that I think was the location of Muang Khang. The Tai Khang dialect is very distinct and is still spoken in various other locations in Laos where the Tai Khang fled and areas of Thailand where the Tai Khang (also called Lao Khrang) were re-located (Cheesman 2004: 283). Furthermore, the style of Tai Khang textiles is the Muang Phuan style.

which is possibly the original style from their homeland of Muang Thanh in Sipsong Chao Tai.

## **Muang Phuan style**

The Muang Phuan style of dress was very different to that of Sipsong Chao Tai and Xam Nuea. The women's blouse was long and the tube-skirt worn at the waist, with only a single narrow red waistband and worn without a belt. A white head cloth was worn in contrast to the dark indigo and decorative head cloths of the Xam Nuea style and a shoulder cloth was worn on special occasions. The main techniques in Muang Phuan were weft ikat and continuous supplementary weft. The colour preference was for orange, green and yellow decorative motifs on red or purple grounds. The skill of the weavers from this region was employed by the royal court of Lan Xang to produce weft ikat long cloths for men in the structure of the double-ikat patola sari that was traded into Southeast Asia from India and regarded as a magic cloth. The Muang Phuan style of textiles are medium thick, with hand-spun cotton and fine silk, dyed with natural dyes.

Muang Phuan was roughly in the region of present-day Xiang Khoang province, Laos, and lay on the trade route between Luang Phabang and the coast of Vietnam. Its rich natural resources made it a prize for kings and bandits alike and the history of Muang Phuan is filled with war. The people fled many times and returned again to their beloved homelands. The massive re-location of the population by the Siamese from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century left Muang Phuan with a small population, and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the region received an unprecedented concentration of bomb attacks by the U.S. military in the Second Indochina War (Vietnam War). As a result of their tragic history, traditional Muang Phuan style textiles are difficult to locate and study. Three sub-styles have been identified: Muang Ngan, Muang Khang and Baan Thamla/Nakhang.

Two large ethnic groups living in Muang Phuan were the Tai Phuan and the Tai Khang. In Thailand, they are known as the Lao Phuan and Lao Khrang respectively. The textiles from the regions of Thailand and Laos where the people of Muang Phuan and Muang Khang were relocated, or fled, show the adaptability of these people to change their original style to that of their new homes. In Laos, they fled to Muang Xam Tai, a tributary of Muang Xam Nuea, where they adopted all the local textile types and structures but used the favourite colours of their original homeland. In the Noen river region, they adopted the Nam Noen style completely. Those who fled north-west to Muang Hun, Udomxay province, adopted the Sipsong Panna style of that region, and their textiles have been consequently misidentified by some researchers as Tai Lue textiles.

In Thailand, the Tai Phuan, who were relocated in Laplae and Haat Siou districts in Sukhothai province, followed the style of early Lanna but emphasised

green, red and other favourite colours of their homeland. In Phichit, Suphanburi and Chainat provinces, the Tai Khang wove their original red ikat skirts, but added Lanna style hem pieces, called *tiin chok*, made in discontinuous supplementary weft. It is possible that these were inspired by the dress of Princess Dara Rasami, a Lanna princess who was consort to King Rama V (r. 1868-1910) of Siam.<sup>7</sup> In Isan, the Tai Phuan were similarly dispersed and examples of their excellent ikat tube-skirts can be identified by the Muang Phuan style red waist bands with supplementary weft banding in the favourite colours of Muang Phuan.

The textiles of the Phutai peoples in Laos and Thailand are in the Muang Phuan style. This, together with the linguistic link between Phutai and Phuan languages (Chamberlain 1975: 63), is evidence, according to my analysis of *muang* styles, that the Phutai lived in the area of Muang Phuan or were vassals to Muang Phuan at some point in their history. As researchers continue to speculate the origin of the Phutai, their dress code should be taken into consideration as well as an interesting comment by Winichakul: “Khamkoet and Khammuan … were twin towns in the sphere of the Phuan.” (Winichakul 1994: 105). Today, the Phutai live in Khammouan and Savannakhet provinces in Laos, and many were relocated to Sakon Nakhon, Kalasin, Nakhon Phanom, Mukdahan, Ubol Ratchathani and Amnat Charoen provinces in Thailand.

### Sipsong Panna style

Sipsong Panna was a large *muang* with its capital in Chiang Rung, southern China, governing areas in present-day southern Yunnan, north-west Laos on the upper Ou river and the eastern reaches of the Shan States in Myanmar. The ruling classes and majority were the Tai Lue. Today, areas that display the Sipsong Panna style of textiles are more extensive, reaching down the Ou River as far as Luang Phabang and covering the provinces of Phongsali, Udomxai, Luang Namtha, Bo Keo and Sayabouli in Laos. To the west it is seen along the Mekong river in Chiang Rai, Phayao and Nan provinces in Thailand. The Tai people displaying the Sipsong Panna style are the Tai Lue, Lao, Tai Phuan, Tai Hun, Tai Yuan, Tai Yai and Tai Khuen. To the east there are settlements of Tai Lue and Lao people in Lai Chau province in Vietnam who also wear the Sipsong Panna style of dress (Howard and Howard 2002: 280-289).

The Sipsong Panna style of dress for women is a waist-length blouse with cross-breast fastening in the Chinese fashion and a tube-skirt fastened at the waist with one waistband. The patterning of the tube-skirts is horizontal when worn, requiring two side-seams, as the patterns are in the weft. The separate hem pieces are

<sup>7</sup> Princess Dara Rasami wore Lanna style hem pieces in the court of King Rama V and was the first member of the royal court to bring hand-woven provincial textiles to the Siamese court, where normally only foreign imported textiles were worn.

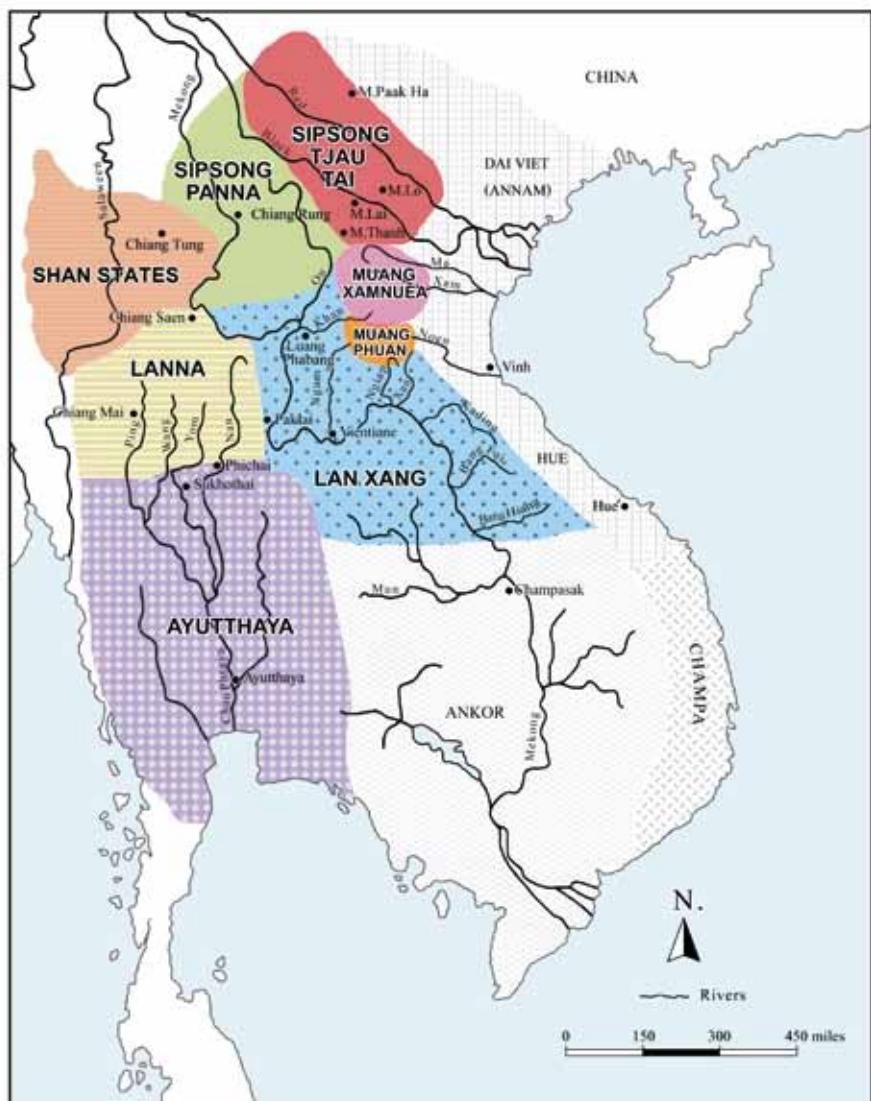


Figure 1. Map of the approximate location of *Tai muang* and other socio-political structures of the 14th century in mainland Southeast Asia.

Figure 2 (opposite page). Comparative study of Tai *muang* dress styles. Other groups of Tai wearing the same style are noted. (left to right, from the top)

Sipsong Chao Tai style: Lao Nai woman from Ma Sang, Muang Thanh, Lai Chau province, Vietnam. Other groups: Tai Thanh, Tai Khao, Tai Moei, Tai Dam/Daeng

Xam Nuea style: Tai Daeng woman from Xam Tai district, Houa Phan province, Laos. Other groups: Tai Nuea, Tai Moei, Tai Khang.

Muang Phuan style: Tai Phuan woman from Muang Ngan, Xiang Khoang province, Laos. Other groups: Tai Phuan, Tai Thamla/Nakhang, Tai Khang, Phutai

Muang Phuan style: Phutai woman from Ban Namahii, Angkham district, Savannakhet province, Laos.

Lan Xang style: Lao women from Luang Phabang, Laos. Other groups: Tai Phuan, Tai Nuea.

Sipsong Panna style: Tai Lue women from Ban Pat, Chiang Kham district, Payao province, Thailand. Other groups: Tai Khuen, Lao, Tai Phuan, Tai Hun, Tai Yuan.





Figure 3. Comparative study of Tai women's blouse styles (left to right, from the top): Xam Nuea and Sipsong Chao Tai styles, Sipsong Panna style, Muang Phuan style, Lan Xang style



Figure 4. Comparative study of Tai women's tube-skirt styles (left to right, from the top): Xam Nuea and Sipsong Chao Tai styles, Muang Phuan style, Lan Xang style, Sipsong Panna style.



Figure 5. *Sin tiin nyai* tube-skirts in Xam Nuea style showing little variation between groups except for the different waist bands. It is rare to find complete examples with the correct waist band. (left to right, from the top): Tai Daeng, Tai Khang, Tai Moei, Tai Nuea (The Tai Nuea example has been re-constructed according to historical photographs and personal interviews).

usually plain indigo or green. Materials include hand-spun and commercial cotton, imported Chinese satin and ribbon, silk, synthetic yarns, gold and silver threads, sequins and buttons. Weaving techniques include continuous and discontinuous supplementary wefts, weft ikat and tapestry technique, which is unusual in other *muang* styles but quite common in the Sipsong Panna style. The many sub-styles relate to the geographical location of the small *muang* and display an enormous variation in colour and fabric quality, but the structure of the blouses and skirts are the same (Prangwatanakun 2008). The women usually wear plain head cloths in dark indigo or pastel colours depending on the sub-style.

There are too many sub-styles to discuss here, but an example of how the *muang* classification system can be used for identification of both textiles and peoples can be demonstrated in the Muang Hun sub-style. The people call themselves Tai Hun and weave a distinct colour and patterning in their Sipsong Panna style tube-skirts. However, their origins in Muang Phuan can be seen in their white head cloths, the language of their ancient songs and their heirloom shaman skirts. The weft ikat shaman's skirts in the Muang Phuan style that they made for their own ceremonies are very different to those they wove for sale to the shamans of the Khmu people, which had extraordinary tapestry designs in the Sipsong Panna style. Furthermore, the women's blouses have the shape and length of the Muang Phuan style, which is dissimilar to the Sipsong Panna style. With this information, it is possible to identify the Tai Hun as descendants of Tai Phuan, who would have fled into this region over 180 years ago.

### **Lan Xang style**

The kingdom of Lan Xang in Laos governed the arable land in the Mekong river basin from Luang Phabang in the north to Champassak in the south. The area of north-east Thailand known as Isan was also part of Lan Xang until the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Lan Xang kingdom was established in the 14<sup>th</sup> century with its capital in Luang Phabang, and administered a great number of different Tai people, with the Lao as the majority group and ruling class. Lan Xang was a tributary to Siam and court styles followed those of the Siamese court, but instead of imported textiles, most Lan Xang textiles were made inside the kingdom. Royalty and the upper classes were privileged to the use of expensive imported metallic threads and silk yarns while less valuable materials, such as gold and silver yarns made from laminated paper, were used by the majority of the population.

The Lan Xang style of dress was a cross-breasted blouse with a tube-skirt worn at the waist with a metal belt. The tube-skirts had narrow hem pieces made from metallic/shiny threads and the popular technique for the main body of the skirt was weft ikat with small motifs. Materials were fine cotton or silk, rendering them thin and cool to wear. Preferred colours to enhance gold and silver threads were

dark, while chemical dyes, available since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, were applied in bright monochromes. Head cloths were not worn, but decorative shoulder cloths for attending Buddhist ceremonies were made to match the tube-skirts. Blouses were made from Chinese satin fabric and decorated around the collar by embroidery and couching. In the warmer climates to the south, breast-cloths were worn instead of blouses.

## Conclusion

The style of Tai textiles and their dress codes were not a sign of ethnicity, but the result of socio-political interests that related directly to their communities and geographical locations. Tai textile motifs that are woven in all regions testify to a common origin for the Tai groups, who also share cultural traditions and most weaving techniques. As they migrated away from their original communities and established new ones, the Tai prioritised certain elements in their textiles and clothing that became particular to each community, which was called *muang*. The extraordinary homogeneous quality of the textiles from certain regions, correlating with the locations of ancient Tai *muang*, has been the focus point of this research and the basis of the hypothesis that textiles can be studied as community markers in the Tai world.

Due to the complexity of ethnic integration of Tai textiles, a new method of classification is necessary to incorporate stylistic changes relating to geographic location rather than the existing classification system based on ethnicity. This research suggests the identification of textiles by *muang* styles and provenance, particularly in cases where antique textiles cannot be given ethnic identities due to the lack of historical records or certain elements that are specific to an ethnic group, especially the waist bands of the tube-skirts. The benefit of this research is not only a comprehensive method of identification of antique textiles and clothing useful to museums and collectors; it can also be used as a material lexicon of tributary relations of the Tai peoples. Furthermore the *muang* method of Tai textile identification can be used for tracing original homelands and migrations of peoples through their textile styles.

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