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## The Costume of the Tai Sai Women (Xinping County, Yunnan Province, P. R. of China)

The Tai Sai are undoubtedly among the smallest and the least known of the Tai groups living in the People's Republic of China. In 2000 they were about 15,000, located in Jiasa and Shuitang towns of the Xinping Yi and Dai Autonomous County (Yuxi Prefecture, Yunnan Province) (fig. 1). Their endonym, *tai sai*, was corrupted to *dai sa* by the Han. These latter also use the expression Hua Yao Dai ("Flower Waist" Tai) to designate them, together with the Tai Ya and Tai Kha, two neighbouring and closely related groups. Other Chinese appellations, pejorative and fallen into abeyance under the pressure of the Communists, should be mentioned. According to the Presbyterian missionary W. Clifton Dodd (1996: 86), who visited them in 1913, Tai Sai were called at the time Shui Pa Yi ("Water Barbarians"), an expression which echoes the ethnonym Tai Sai ("Tai of the Sand"), owing to their being settled on the banks of the Red River and its main tributaries. The

Tai Ya, on the other hand, were named K'aw Pa Yi ("Striped Barbarians"), because of the striped skirts of their women.

Such denominations as "Striped Barbarians" or "Flower Waist" Tai refer to glittering costumes worn by women of these three groups during calendar festivals and major events of the life cycle (marriages, funerals). Actually the "Hua Yao Dai" are outstanding among Tai peoples because of the colourful and delicate embroideries they make to adorn their ceremonial dresses. Whereas Tai are known generally in Peninsular Southeast Asia for their weaving and *ikat* techniques, the Tai Ya, Tai Sai and Tai Kha of Xinping county favour embroidery and *appliqués*, preference revealing a deep influence of the Tibeto-Burman, more specifically of the Yi with whom they have shared the same habitat for centuries. Nevertheless the patterns they have elaborated express some beliefs and prophylactic devices typical of the Tai.

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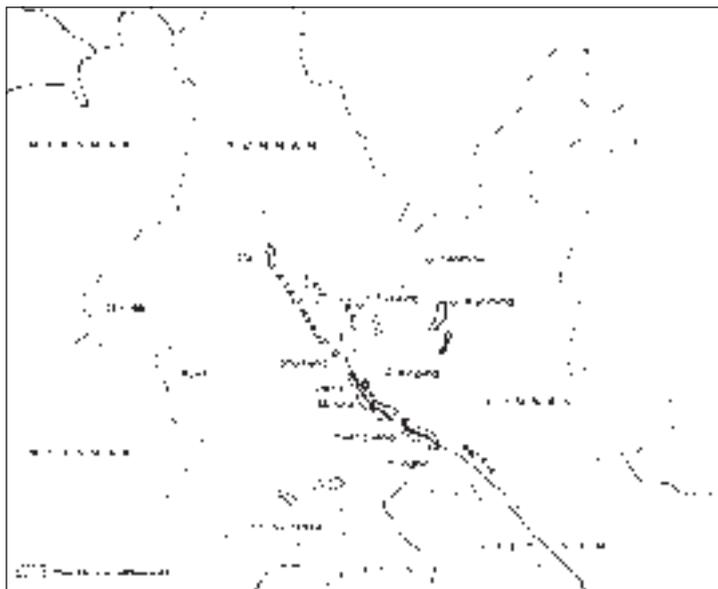


Fig. 1—Map of the Red River Basin, and of the location of Hua Yao Dai

In the following pages, I analyze the symbolic structure of the costumes Tai Sai women wear to bring to the fore these common features, as well as more specific ideas. The data of this ethnographic study derives from two short field visits to the Jiasa area, in 1999 and 2001.

We know a few things about the history, language, social organisation and religious beliefs of the so called “Hua Yao Dai”. The linguistic classifications of Li Fang Kwei (1960), P.K. Benedict (1966), and A.G. Haudricourt (1968) ignore them. More recently the Summer Institute of Linguistic classification locates their language in the south-western cluster of the Be-Sek branch of the Kam-Tai division of the Tai-Kadai family. Within this frame, they belong to a group of “unclassified” idioms, along with the Tai Hang Tang and the Tai Hong Jin of Viet Nam. The same source, and before it the account of W. Clifton Dodd (1996: 82), suggest that they are linguistically close to the Tai Nüa, “the upstream Tai”, who live eastwards of the Salween River, mainly in Dehong and Lincang districts, near the border with Burma.

This hypothesis leads us to the question of their origins. According to Pankuankat (1991: 1), Liu (1999: 84-87), and Shi (2001), the Tai Ya were first settled in Chuxiong and Yanmou, north-west of Kunming (fig. 1) where more than 20 thousand Tai peoples still live today. But most of them were expelled from there at the end of the Ming dynasty (17<sup>th</sup> century), because of their involvement in a local rebellion. As a consequence, they fled southward, settling along the Luzhi and Lishe rivers up to their present location (fig. 1). During their migrations they seem to have remained in close contact with Yi peoples.

In Xinping the Tai Ya and Tai Kha live mainly on the slopes of the Ailao Mountains, below 1000 m. of elevation, and share with the Nisu Yi an economy based on terraced paddy fields that complement cash crops of maize, sugarcane and tobacco. The Tai Sai, on their hand, exploit lowlands corresponding to the watershed of the Lishe, Luzhi and Dachun Rivers, whose confluence flows into the Red River. Taking advantage of these favourable hydraulic conditions, they grow paddy and sugarcane



intensively. The three branches of “Hua Yao Dai” share common habitations, influenced architecturally by the local Yi. Their terraced houses, mud-made and cubical in form, evoke the Indian Pueblos’ pattern. The orientation of these houses is determined by the Ailao Range, since the ridges of the roofs should be parallel to it. The sleepers’ head must be perpendicular to this axis, whereas the head of the dead must be turned toward the Red River downstream.

The Tai Sai are organized into patrilineal, exogamous and non localized lineages. After marriage, the wife alternates sojourns with her kins and with her in-laws. Virilocality or neolocality replaces this bilocality after the birth of the first child. There are no more traces of a social stratification differentiating aristocrats from commoners and slaves. However, in the past the upper reaches of the Red River were divided into *mueng* (muang), or principalities headed by nobles. For instance, the primitive tai name for Mosha Town was Mueng Ya, “the *mueng* of the [Tai] Ya”.

The religious system of the Tai Sai was not acculturated by Buddhism and thus remains exclusively based on the belief in *pi*, the well known spirits of the Tai world. The main figures of their pantheon are *Pi te tong fa*, the “god of the sky”, and creator of the world, *Pi liao*, the “god of the [Ailao] mountain”, *Pi lin*, the “earth god”, and *Pi wan*, the “spirit of the village” whose symbol is a stone or a big tree located in a wood between village and rice fields. Moreover, two dragon gods (*long*) inhabiting trees at the gates of the village protect it against the attack of malevolent ghosts. In close correspondence with Chinese symbolism, one is concerned with marriage, and the “red affairs” of the living, whereas the other is involved in funerals and the “white affairs” of the dead (Liu, 1999: 84). Offerings of chickens and pigs are made to ancestors and guardian spirits as part of the New Year celebrations. Another ritual specifically propitiates the dragon as God of water. Yang (2002: 40) rightly considers this ritual, the *hit soe* (“rite of the dress”), as the main Tai Sai

festival. It is organized in February, on the first Ox day of the new lunar year. A big tree is then selected between the village and the next river to become the “dragon tree”. In front of it, each household head presents his ceremonial jacket. The man whose dress is the heaviest becomes *pu mu*, or ritual head of the village, for one year. During the festival, mediums ask also good harvests and good fortune for the whole community.

To conclude these remarks, let us add that the Tai Sai, like the rest of the Tai people, believe in the plurality of “souls” (*ran*), whose number may vary from 30 to 90 depending on the age of the person. These souls are unstable. When a person has a sudden fright, an unexpected illness, or frequent nightmares, it means that one of them has left the body, and a ritual to recall it becomes necessary. This ritual is called *raw ran*, “[to make] re-enter the souls”, and is commonly practised by the household head or an elder of his lineage. Exorcisms, called *hiat*, are, on the contrary, charges of specialists called *ya bot*, who are in the main women.

### The hat as landscape

In a previous article (Formoso, 2000: 97) I suggested that in the Chinese World there is a constant and close interaction between the human body as micro cosmos and an encompassing sociocosmic level, which refers to an anthropomorphized nature. The cone-shaped hat that the Tai Sai women wear in their daily life, perfectly illustrates this proposition, since it represents typical elements of the local landscape, and comprises in miniature the same devices which protect the house or the village against malevolent spirits.

Zheng (2002: 455-456) has judiciously noted that the Hua Yao Dai women are particular among Tai peoples in that they wear bamboo-made hats, not only as a handy protection against sun rays or rains when working in the fields, but also as an integral and an essential part of their costume. In the case of the Tai Sai, local craftsmen weave these hats with bamboo

splints to form two superposed frames. The external one is made of thin splints, called *mai wan* (“narrow [bamboo] lines”), and weaved so as to draw vertical embedded lozenges. The frame divides into two parts: a large red stripe, *mai leng*, called “red line”, surrounds the yellow centre of the cone: *mai luang*, or “yellow line”. According to informants, the red stripe symbolizes the Red River, while the yellow cone represents mountains and sandbanks along it. Following the Chinese symbolism, red and yellow colours are auspicious, since the quality of the former is life and happiness, while that of the latter is wealth<sup>1</sup>. The two parts are separated by a line, the *tien lam* (“black ink”), painted in black (fig. 2). It comprises three

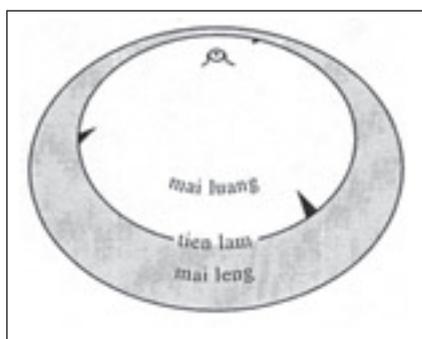


Fig. 2—The *ko* hat

arrowheads disposed at regular intervals and pointed toward the hat's summit. They represent the three tributaries (Lishe, Luzhi, and Dachun) which join at Shuitang Town to flow down into the Red River.

The external frame is coated with lacquer as a protection against rains. For the same purpose, a paraffin paper is interposed between it and the internal bamboo structure. The latter is made of parallel embedded splints whose ordered arrangement reproduces in miniature *ta lew*, or “eagle eyes”. Consequently, Tai Sai women call this frame: *ta lew ko*, “hat's eagle eyes”.

Specialists of the Tai are familiar with *ta lew*, since it is the most typical protective device this people use to prevent the intrusion of

malevolent spirits into the house or the village. Among the Tai Sai, such an artefact, made of twelve intertwined bamboo splints, is hung above the house door, along with auspicious stanzas written in Chinese on red and yellow paper, as well as cactus branches, and various repellent herbs, the whole stuff being renewed at the occasion of the New Year festival, or when the household falls victim of misfortune.

On the individual level, *ta lew* not only protects the women's heads, but is also tattooed on the back of one of their palms (the right or the left), under the form of a twelve-tailed star, called *ta lew moe* (“*ta lew* of the hand”). Informants explain that: “there are as much tails in *ta lew* than months in the year” and that this

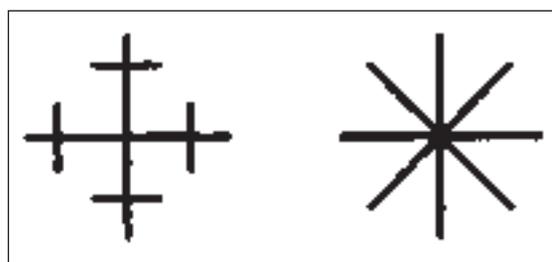


Fig. 3—Motifs tattooed on back of the hands of the women

pattern is usually associated with a second one – an eight tailed star called *hua fa* (“sky flower”) – which is tattooed on the back of the other palm, and “protects in the eight directions” (fig. 3). Such a spatiotemporal combination is reproduced at the level of the head. Actually, the hat's rear is indicated by a pair of pendants hung to it through a small circular headrest. Each pendant is made of a metal grid whose shape evokes the *ta lew*, but which is called *mwoe wu ka* (“head's pillow”). To this grid are linked three bamboo cylinders coated with cotton threads. These threads are embroidered to form eight tailed stars, named “sky flowers”. The colours used to draw the stars are three in number: green, red, and black. The pendant's ends are threads of the same colour, which are called “tails” (*hang*).



Finally, the upper part of the women's body, from the head to the hands, where most of *ran*, or "souls", are concentrated, is demarcated and isolated from outside by a spatiotemporal combination of protective devices. These observations match up with the arrangement of tattooing among other Tai peoples, including Siamese and Lao. Tattoos among these groups always cover or enclose the upper part of the body, even when the lower "fence" goes from the waist to the knees and is made of a large stripe of zoomorphic symbols densely drawn. Let us add that despite this cultural continuity, the Hua Yao Dai and more generally the Tai of the Red River, practice women tattooing, whereas among the Tai of the Mekong Basin<sup>2</sup> it is an exclusive male practice .

Actually, tattooing and wearing of the *ko* hat are reserved for pubescent girls and adult women. In daily life this *ko* is fixed to the chignon with a hat's spin, or sometimes on a Mao cap, while during festivals the married women fasten it to a ceremonial headdress. This coif is named *kaw*, and is the mark of their marital status, the mothers-in-law having offered their first one when they solemnly entered their husband's houses as new brides.

Although each woman makes it a point of honour to adorn her headdress richly with silver bulbs and leaves, or with many-coloured pompoms and artificial flowers, the basic structure of the *kaw* is a black cylinder which hugs tightly the chignon. This cylinder consists of a cotton strip lacquered to make it stiff and whose width corresponds to that of the right hand of the woman wearing it. The cylinder is bound with a red-and-green ribbon whose length is equivalent to the head measurement of the husband plus the width of his left hand, the left being the male and honour side, according to Chinese symbolism<sup>3</sup>. More precisely, the ribbon is made of two stripes sewn together: the red one surrounding the green: "just like the husband protecting his wife", explain some informants. The whole device symbolizes marriage, not only because it is offered by the mother-in-law during the wedding ceremony, but

also because the ribbon is thrown away in case of divorce. It ends with two flaps turned up in the back of the *kaw*. They are embroidered with black and gold silk threads, and put together to form alternate crosses, a common metaphor for abundant offspring and the continuity of generations.

The *kaw* and the above described ribbon are covered by a woven cloth alternating red, yellow, and blue lines on black background. The elder people we interviewed explicitly gave prophylactic values to these three colours: red being a carrier of happiness, yellow of wealth, and blue of health. The cloth is pulled up on the front side of the *kaw*, and covers the chignon with transversal multi-coloured stripes, ten in numbers which are named *fa wu* ("sky-head"), and symbolize a double rainbow<sup>4</sup>.

### A ternary prophylaxis

By analyzing the symbolism of the women hat, we have seen that some motifs and symbols were declined on a ternary mode. It was the case of the "arrow-heads" representing the Red River tributaries, of the "sky flowers" hung to the hat back, or of the auspicious colours adorning the *kaw*'s external ribbon. This trend will be confirmed by the description of other parts of the Tai Sai costume. But before going ahead, we should question such numerology. At least three explanations, complementary rather than competing, may be put forward.

Firstly, among Tai people, odd numbers are identified with the living and are auspicious, contrary to even ones associated with dead and spirits of the otherworld. Secondly, the figure three in the Chinese world inevitably calls to mind the propitiatory trinity *fu-lu-shou* (happiness - wealth - longevity), which is expressed through a prolific iconography and the combination of specific colours (usually red, yellow and green). However, these arguments do not suffice to explain the emphasis that the Hua Yao Dai, and particularly the Tai Sai, place on this number. Actually, the main reason for such an emphasis lies in the close symbolic



association of these Tai with the upper reaches of the Red River. For instance Tai Sai name themselves: “people of the three rivers”, while Tai Ya women explain that their ceremonial costume comprises three superposed skirts, named “three water layers”, because they consider these confluent and fertile rivers are their emblem (Wang, 2001: 20). It is not a coincidence if in the Tai Ya case such consideration applies to a part of the body protected by skirts and which is the core of the woman’s fecundity. We can suggest that the three rivers are thought of, under the influence of Chinese geomancy, as the mainstream of rice fields’ and women’s fertility. The fact that, in the Tai Sai case, this numerology emphatically applies to dresses covering breasts and womb substantiates this hypothesis.

Thus, the Tai Sai woman’s chest is covered by three superposed short jackets. The inner one, the *soe kwam*, or “short garment”, has no sleeves. It is richly adorned with appliqués and embroideries on its left edge and on the lower part of its outer back. The main stripes of motifs it presents are the following: 1) embroidered lozenges and converging angles which are mysteriously called *shiao ra liem*, “tiptop legs embroidered”; 2) Greek crosses of different colours, which are named *shiao fong ho khaw him*, “hairs embroidered with nine needles”, because nine needles are needed to embroider the pattern; 3) multi-coloured small triangles which fit together and are embedded with a dotted line. This line is called *shiao yam long roe*, “embroidered wave”, while the triangles represent gourd seeds (*kima tchang*), and are the symbol of an abundant offspring. 4) We find again the pattern which was disposed on the top of the headdress, and whose characteristic was a “double rainbow” of ten coloured silk threads. In the present case it is called *tin soe kwam* (“foot of the short garment”).

Once again the head and the waist share a common symbolism, and while *ta lew* unites the inner frame of the hat with the back of the hands, the ideas of numerous offspring and of generations’ continuity link together the top of the

headdress with the back of the inner jacket, corresponding to the waist. Moreover, the combination blue – red – yellow which was woven on the outer ribbon of the headdress, is reproduced at the inner jacket level, through three pairs of laces on each side. Knotted together, they fasten the jacket and display these colours. Finally, this series of correspondences between the head and the waist confirms our hypothesis of the specific and more valorised status of the upper half of the body.

The symbolism of the second garment is simpler, although it is called *soe long*, or “great jacket”, suggesting that it is the main one. It consists of a blue indigo central part and of two long sleeves made of pink cotton. The sleeves end with stripes alternating three colours: pink (or red), yellow and blue indigo (or black), while the central part is trimmed with red or blue flowered appliqués, and with a motif embroidered with cross-stitches. This motif is called *kan san*, which means “pair of scales”, as a symbol of equilibrium between the couple.

The third and outer jacket is named *soe fi*, “silk jacket”, because the women are proud to make it with the finest pieces of manufactured satin available in local markets. This jacket shares with the *soe long* four features: it is shorter than the *soe kwam* because it just wraps the breasts; it has long sleeves whose extremities end with coloured stripes; and it remains opened with no fastener being provided. In the case of the married women this outer jacket has two dominant colours: the red which is the symbol of men, and the green associated with women. As for the sleeves’ stripes, they alternate five colours (yellow, red, and black being the most recurrent). Lastly, the *soe fi* and *soe long* have in common a very specific cut, lozenge shaped, that informants metaphorically name butterfly (*hu die*). In both cases, the jacket is made of two triangular pieces of cloth sewn together at the level of the spinal column.

With the *soe kwam*, or inner jacket, the *soe fi* shares a unique feature: it is trimmed with an embroidered pattern, called *shiao ru soe*

(“embroidered – neck – garment”), which alternates lozenges and converging triangles just like the *shiao ra liem* motif.

The reference to butterfly to characterize the jackets’ cuts may seem surprising; since most of the Tai believe that this animal brings misfortune, because of its close identification with ghosts (for instance in Siamese and Lao languages the word for butterfly, *phi soea*, means “tiger ghost”). Actually, the Tai Sai seem to have forgotten these ideas, whereas under the Yi or Han influence they adopted the Chinese word for butterfly, *hu die*, and the antithetic notions it covers. Let us recall with Myers (1984) and Maxwell (1990: 275) that for the Han and the Yi, butterfly suggests innocence, lightness, joy, summer and marital bliss.

With the hat and the jackets, the skirt is the third main element of the costume. Compared with the richly embroidered skirts of the Tai Ya and Tai Kha, those of the Tai Sai look very simple, though the Hua Yao Dai custom to wear three skirts superimposed at the occasion of festivals is equally respected in the Jiasa and Shuitang areas.

The Tai Sai skirts are made of four rectangular pieces of black cotton sewn together vertically to form a tube that the women slip on through its “head”. Indeed, like the skirts of the other Tai peoples, the present one, which ends on the knees, is divided into three parts: the “head of the skirt” (*wu soen*), the middle part (*kang soen*), and the “foot” (*tin soen*). Whereas the “head” and the “middle” are not pointed out by specific marks, the “foot” is indicated by an embroidered stripe, the *soen soe mai ha* (“line of skirt”) which is sewn on the lower edge of the garment. The two superimposed series of patterns drawn on this stripe are prosaically called *shiao soen soe mai ha* (“lines of skirt’s embroidery”). They consist of multiple-coloured Greek crosses inclined to an angle of 45° and cross stitched. Each Greek cross encompasses a red square, which is itself internally framed by diagonals and medians radiating from a lozenge shaped centre (fig. 4). The whole pattern seems to put together the properties of the “sky flower”

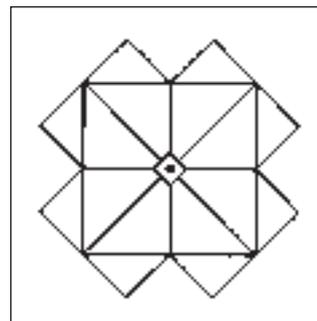


Fig. 4—The geometric pattern adorning the “foot” of the skirt

and of the *ta lew* motifs. Like the former, the Greek cross has eight angles, but the fitting of the square into the cross makes twelve angles, thus calling to mind *ta lew*. Informants do not confirm such a hypothesis. However, they admit that the pattern both serves aesthetic and defensive purposes: protection against malevolent spirits.

With the bamboo hat, the skirt is another basic element of the female daily costume. Although the “head” of the skirt is not marked directly on the garment, it is however signified through the superimposition of belts holding it to the waist. These belts, made of woven cotton and silk, are ideally three in number, although in daily life women wear only one.

The widest and inner belt is worn only by married women, on festival occasions and other great events. Called *sai tap long*, “great belt”, it is traditionally 5 centimetres in width and 3.45 metres in length, its measurements combining systematically the auspicious numbers three and five. The *sai tap long* shares with the headdress some symbols. First, it is edged on both its sides by series of five multi-coloured lines representing the rainbow (the figure five); secondly, just like the inner ribbon of the headdress, its central part is made of two red stripes surrounding a third one, green coloured, the whole device being a symbol of marital union and a prophylaxis for a fertile couple. Let us add that at the wedding ceremony the in-laws offer to the bride her first headdress ribbon along with a *sai tap long* belt.

The second belt is just called *sai tap* “belt”, since it is the main one worn everyday. The same combination of the auspicious figures three and five is applied to this artefact, through in a different way: the belt is three centimetres wide and five metres long. The concept of “double rainbow” is reproduced through a ten striped ribbon of different colours, while the fertile union of man and woman is suggested by two stripes, a red and a green.

The third and outer belt is called *sai tap niao* “narrow belt”, because it is just a centimetre wide (for five metres long). This belt and the *sai tap long* are both antithetic and complementary. While both are exclusively worn during festivals, the former constitutes the narrowest and outer belt, whereas the latter is the widest and the inner one. Moreover, the *sai tap long* is characterized by two red woven stripes surrounding a green one, contrary to the *sai tap niao*, whose central stripe is red and its two externals are green.

Finally, the three belts, despite their differences, share a common feature: the prophylactic expression of women’s fertility through an emblematic union of green and red, the respective colours of woman and man.

### Other garments, other adornments

On occasions of village or family ceremonies, adolescent girls and young women wear a fourth belt, supporting a small cylindrical basket of woven bamboo on the back of the waist line. This container, called “rice-seedling basket” (*mai ha kaw poet*) for it was originally used to hold rice-seedlings for transplanting in the fields, is adorned on its back side with three or four rows of “flowers” (*hua*). Each flower is made of three plastic pearls strung on a thread ending with clumps of wool strands. Usually women blend many colours of wool to produce a very shimmering effect. The rows of flowers cover embroidered ribbons sewn on the basket and whose motif is the *shiao ra liem*, or “excellent legs embroidered” (we have seen this on the edge of the inner jacket). The belt which binds the

basket to the waist is more than three meters long. It is made of a black and white cotton stripe. More precisely, series of three black vertical lines are woven on a white background following one another at close intervals.

The basket serves several purposes. Young women use it frequently as a make-up container; while elder women stuff into it their chewing betel. Moreover, on the “flowered market” festival (*Hua jie*), organized during the first lunar month, and which is favourable to courtship, suitors slide candies into the basket of the beloved girl.

Leggings (*mung kao*) are the last costume’s elements to deserve attention. Actually, Tai Sai women protect their legs under the knees with tubular pieces of cloth tied up by the same kind of narrow red and green ribbon that served as third and outer belt. The wearing of these items varies according to circumstances. On festivals they are worn decorated side out, otherwise women display their white lining. The decorated side is made of a black satin cloth, edged on its *tin*, or “foot” (i.e. the lower end) with multi-coloured appliqués and two embroidered stripes. The first one is a series of white Greek crosses embroidered on black background and represents flowers according to informants, while the second consists of parallel columns of superposed points turned upwards and symbolizes waves.

To conclude these observations on women’s costume, let us add that the Tai Sai are known in the Xiping area for their jewellery-making. Their silversmiths are famous not only within the Hua Yao Dai communities, but also among other ethnic groups. They notably provide Hani and Yi with earrings and necklaces, while they manufacture ring-shaped earrings, called *wien woe* (“round ears”) for their own group. Offered by the groom as part of the *matrimonial prestations*, they symbolize marriage and are characterized by a hooked extremity, named *huk kang la* (“middle hook”). This end is “closed” by a *ta lew woe* “ear’s eagle-eye” engraved on silver, and protects the women’s ears (a very sensitive opening to their body)



The *ta lew ko* frame, together with the “head’s pillow”, and the “sky flower” adornments (photo B. Formoso)



Details of the headdress and of its ornamentation (photo B. Formoso)



Details of the patterns decorating the back of the inner jacket (“double rainbow” motif, “embroidered wave”, and triangles representing gourds) (photo B. Formoso)



The butterfly shape of the outer jacket (photo B. Formoso)



Woman with a *ta lew* tattooed on her right hand, who wears a *sai tap* belt, and who is embroidering a “line of skirt” (photo B. Formoso)



A group of women at the *Hua Jie* Festival (photo B. Formoso)



against malevolent spirits. The other extremity of the earring presents a large number of painted grooves, alternating green, yellow, red and black colours.

Other jewellerys that the Tai Sai women's prize are silver bubbles, leaves and fishes which adorn headdress, collars and the fronts of jackets. Their profusion on the upper part of the body is both a sign of, and a prophylaxis for, wealth and abundant offsprings. Thus, some Tai women wear up to five kilograms of silver ornaments (Zheng, 2002: 455).

### Conclusion

Finally, when we consider the costume of the Tai Sai women, the close identification of this Tai group with the upper reaches of the Red River is outstanding. Actually, the label "people of the three rivers" that they use to define themselves finds a perfect illustration in clothes' symbolism, particularly in the recurrent trebling of garments, decorative patterns, and adornments.

We can justify in several ways the central place that the Tai Sais' self-representation confers to landscape. Firstly, their claim to the status of "people of the upper reaches" (i.e. "people of the upstream"), boils down to the Tais' pretension to the flattering status of "elder" in relation to the other ethnic groups of the Red River basin. Let us add that the thesis which establishes a cultural filiation between the Tai Nüa (lit. "the upstream Tai") of the Burmese border and the Hua Yao Dai is enhanced by such a claim.

Secondly, the Tai Sai perfectly illustrate the remarks of R. Stein (1987: 57-59) on the system of close correspondences uniting macro and micro cosmos in Chinese cultural context. In such a context, the reproduction at the micro level of the landscape in which man lives, expresses his wish to control the major principles regulating the Universe, as well as to attract the positive properties of Nature (fertility and abundance, for instance). The dominant idea is that there is a magical power inherent in

representation: to represent something is the same as creating it, explains R. Stein; moreover, smallness enhances this power: the more the copy of the natural object distances its size from the reality, the more it takes on a mythical and magical character.

Our study also stresses the symbolic importance of the upper half of the body, which the Tai people currently think of as concentrating the main spiritual components of the person. As a consequence, its extremities (head, hands), and its orifices need special protective devices. Under the form of tattooed or embroidered motifs, and woven patterns, they are miniature avatars of the *ta lew* which regulates access to the house or village. Here again we see the effective correspondence between micro and macro cosmos.

Evidently, embroidered or woven motifs are not only semiotic units, but also adornments which serve aesthetic purposes. However, as pointed out by A. Coomaraswamy (1938: 3), the Asiatic work of art "was never made for anything but use, or to be exhibited anywhere but in the place for which it was designed, and its final product is an organization of life". I have suggested elsewhere (Formoso, 2000: 97) that in this context, beauty is related to cognition, physical and spiritual values are never mutually exclusive; form and essence, meaning and power are inextricably linked.

The last remark I wish to make concerns Chinese influences, operating directly or through the Yi, a constellation of deeply sinized Tibeto-Burman people. In the case of women's costumes, these influences mainly lie in the adaptation of the *fu-lu-shou*, the auspicious Chinese trinity and in the propitiatory combination of colours: yellow, red, and green. The two latter are elsewhere identified with male and female principles and their association symbolizes a fertile marital union. Chinese ideograms signifying fortune and happiness are also frequently printed on skirts, or tattooed on arms. In other words, the Tai Sai have adopted some of the Chinese classical devices for prosperity. Nevertheless, this acculturation

corresponds to a dynamic appropriation, since the dresses and adornments of this Tai group are not only noteworthy in their originality, but flourishing in their glitter.

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**Note**

<sup>1</sup> Red deserves a special mention. Informants relate a legend to justify its use. According to it, red threads were primitively identified by Tai women as an efficient device against the frequent attacks on young ladies by a monstrous snake haunting the Red River (He, 2000: 8).

<sup>2</sup> Many legends explain the tattooing of Tai Sai women. According to one of them, tattooing proved in ancient times to be an efficient device against a monstrous snake that used to attack the young girls drawing water from the Red River (He, 2000: 8). Another tale relates that long ago, the Thunder God used to

cut man's skin to make drums. In order to protect themselves and not to be chosen by the god, Jiasa people, and especially women, tattooed their skin. Moreover, Tai Sai believe that tattooing is a mark of Tainess and preserves such an identity in the course of successive rebirths.

<sup>3</sup> When entering her in-laws' house, the wedding day, the bride solemnly lays her right foot on the first step of the stairs, the groom putting his left foot upon that of his wife (He, 2000: 10).

<sup>4</sup> The rainbow, according to Tai Sai, is made of five colours: red, green, blue, yellow, and pink.