

172 Designers, producers, and users: minority women's three identities in their costume culture

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Abstract

Different from the modern fashion design industry where the roles of designer, producer and user are distinct, in traditional minority societies of China, the minority women have a triplet of identities: as designers, they are people of uneven talents who must design within limited space by following the given styles of their costume; as producers, they are amateurs who not only have to participate in daily chores but also make lots of costume; as users, they are women of various ages and appearances who do not have the perfect figures of models.

This paper focuses on the style and design detail of minority costume, and analyses the roles played by the minority women from the perspectives of design, production and use by the methods of sample measurement, field investigation and comprehensive comparison.

First, the features of minority costume in its style, structure and decoration are summarised through sample analysis. Taking the pattern as a primary example, the paper illustrates how the minority women innovate on the basis of traditional constraints so that the costume expresses individuality while adhering to the styles of the minority groups to which they belong. Second, based on fieldwork, the methods and procedures of making costume by the minority women are interpreted and analysed, noting how they accomplish the production successfully and swiftly, with the same or similar costume to mark different social identities. This establishes their identities as producers so that they are recognised by their ethnic groups. Third, by analysing the way the minority people wear and match their costume, the impact between the users and the resultant costumes are discussed. From these three aspects of the exposition, a conclusion is drawn that the triplet of identities is relevant to the modern fashion industry, as it dissolves the separation of the three identities, involves more people in the design and production processes, and allows the design work to benefit both production and use.

Introduction

A special phrase to describe the minorities of China is 'Big mixed-up and small inhabit'. (This means the different minority groups are mixed inhabiting in the vast regions, while some are living together in individual concentrated communities of small areas.) This is the main reason that there are differences in each branch within the minorities in China. Torii Ryuzo, a well-known ethnologist from Japan, differentiated the Miao branches by their costume characteristics at the beginning of the 20th century. This means even with two different branches from the same minority thousands miles apart, the costume will be similar; costume is also the main way to identify the different branches within the same minority.

Costume is a significant element of people's daily life throughout history and development in China. Costume has to be useable for everyday wear, and for ceremonial wear. Different from the system of 'male for farm work and female for weaving' of Han, minority women must take care of everything from farming to weaving. However, as the society is becoming more developed, the minority is also open and adapting to modern clothing, but traditional costume is still kept for ceremonies. Still, the costume is made and sewn by the hands of a minority of creative women. One thing the costumes have in common is that small pieces decorated by embroidery, patchwork or batik can be used as a single pattern on parts of the costume or merged as a large piece of cloth. Women tend to rework these clothes, patching with different styles to adapt the clothes to the required look. Thus, women have been participating from cloth making through to wearing, as designer, producer and user.

Methodology

In order to depict the triplet identity of the minority women, the following methodology has been employed.

Sample Measurement: Taking the minorities costumes in the Ethnic Costume Museum of Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology (BIFT) as a study sample for collecting the data of the minorities costumes, 64 items in total, including Miao, Yao, Yi, Jinuo, Wa, Hani, Li, Gejia and so on. Making column diagrams of the patterns, and structural drawing of the costumes with which to analyse and compare the design idea or production process through to the finished garments.

Field Investigation: This is the best way to approach minority women and obtain first-hand information. Through a five-year field investigation from 2014 to 2018 in Guizhou, Guangxi, Xinjiang, Yunnan, Sichuan and other minority areas, questions concerning the cutting and dressing methods of the costumes have been explored, which supplement or overturn the existing opinions in the sample measurement. Via several individual interviews with the local minority women who are non-professional designers or craftswomen, and the records of the original process of wax painting, embroidery, cutting, sewing, and dressing a comprehensive understanding of the costume and the interrelated circumstances was established. The investigation

method is based on *The Investigation Report of Miao* (by Torii Ryuzo, a Japanese ethnologist, 1903) and *Peasant Life in China: A Field Study of Country Life in the Yangtze Valley* (by Fei Xiaotong, a Chinese anthropologist, 1939), as well as some local adjustments according to the actual situation.

Comprehensive comparison: The combination of the costume style, the minority women's lives, marriage, family status, local customs and social situation, explain how the costumes fulfill the function as the dialect to achieve the differentiation, identity, and continuity.

These three main methods will run through the following sections.

Designers: Create from limitation

Creating thousands of different elements from a very limited number of patterns is what women from different minorities do well. Living in remote regions means that minorities have limited materials for making clothes. The symbols of each ethnic group are unchanging, and yet do not limit the imagination and possibilities of creative re-working.

For example the Miao group, located in the northwest in Guizhou province, due to the unchangeable geographical conditions, deep in a valley without a river, silver is no longer affordable or used as decoration, but batik is. In figures 1 and 2, three different branches of Miao from the same area wear large Updos on their heads, and wear batik and embroidery decorated tops and skirts. These are one of the major similarities among women's costumes.

It is hard to differentiate these three sets of costumes without detailed observation. First, the styles are all short at the front and long at the back. Second, indigo blue is largely used and mixed with red and yellow. Third, batik is commonly used in the making technique, in addition embroideries and cotton prints are often seen on costumes.



Fig.1 The costume of three different branches of Miao from same area

Marked as A, B, C from left to right, recorded in Xiaotianba Village, Guizhou Province, 1998-2005



Fig.2 The front view of the three branches of Miao costumes
Left: personal collection, 1950s / middle & right: Ethnic Costume Museum of BIFT collections, 1950s-1960s

An experiment demonstrates how similar these costumes can be: marking blue as the batik area and red as the embroideries, and separating them as front pieces and back pieces, it can be seen that even though these three branches of the same ethnic group have similar decoration at a glance, the cloth layout is never the same (see Figure 3, 4, 5 and 6). The rules of how cloths shall be merged or placed has to be strictly followed because of ancestral symbolic meaning. These are the creative limitations and rules that must be obeyed. That's why when two people meet for the first time from different branches, they can tell if the other one is from the same region by distinguishing the differences in the cloth placement.



Fig.3 Photographs of costumes of branches A (Front/back, marked blue as batik and red as embroideries)



Fig.4 Photographs of costumes of branches B (Front/back, marked blue as batik and red as embroideries)



Fig.5 Photographs of costumes of branches C (Front/back, marked blue as batik and red as embroideries,)

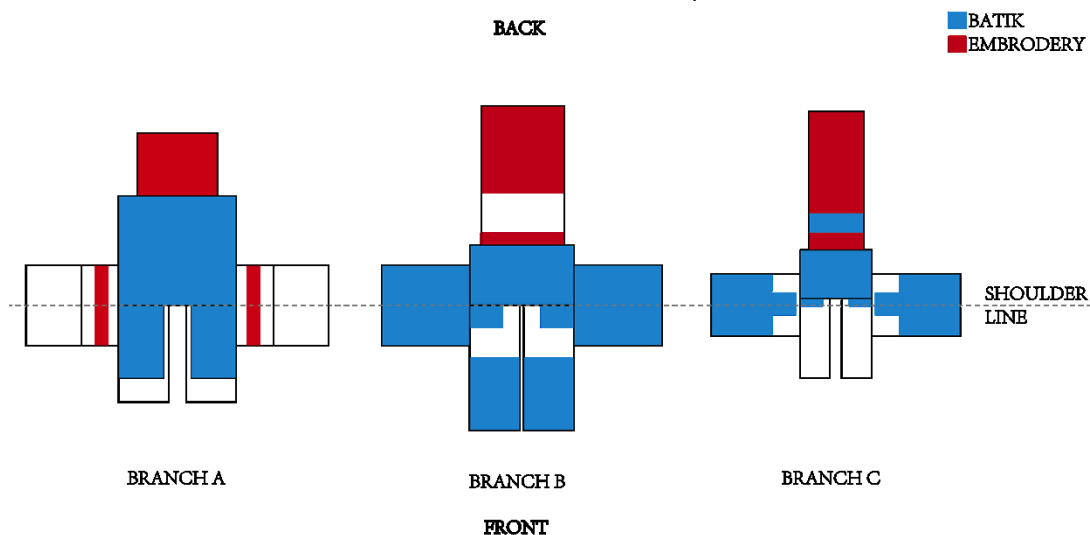


Fig.6 Analytic drawing of decoration layout of three branches of Miao costumes

From the result of the field investigation, women are creating new patterns on a piece of squared cloth instead of drawing batik or embroideries onto ready-made clothes. The small square shaped cloth limits their creation. Usually a piece of squared cloth is measured as 0.3 to 0.4 metre. In these limited 0.09 to 0.16 square metre spaces, women have to make good use of the tiny space either to create the best decoration, or to create the most memorable. It is fair to say, no matter what the pattern is like, it represents who you are as a designer. In the minority societies, women's handicraft abilities are seen as one of the criteria for marriage.

Zooming into the details, the patterns tend to be very 'crowded', there is no space left. It is hard to imagine how these women, who have been living in the villages without education or professional training, can create these complex patterns. From field observation, women define the basic 'coordinate grid' with their nails, and then fill in the pattern based on the 'coordinate grid' with liquid wax (see Figures 7, 8, 9 and 10). In this way, the 'coordinate grid' plays a role as a definer - to keep the pattern looking 'clean and tidy', which makes it easier for beginners and more experienced makers

alike.



Fig.7 Using nails to define the 'coordinate grid' by a Miao woman of branches A
(Recorded in Xiongjing Village, Guizhou Province, 2015)

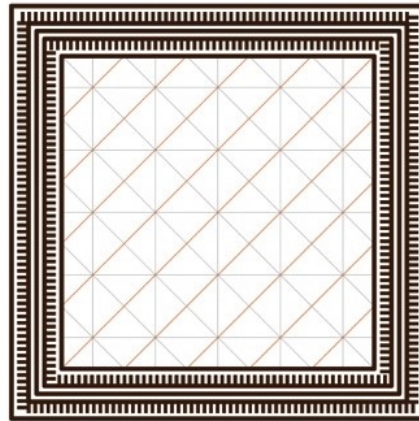


Fig.8 The column picture of the 'coordinate grid' of branch A

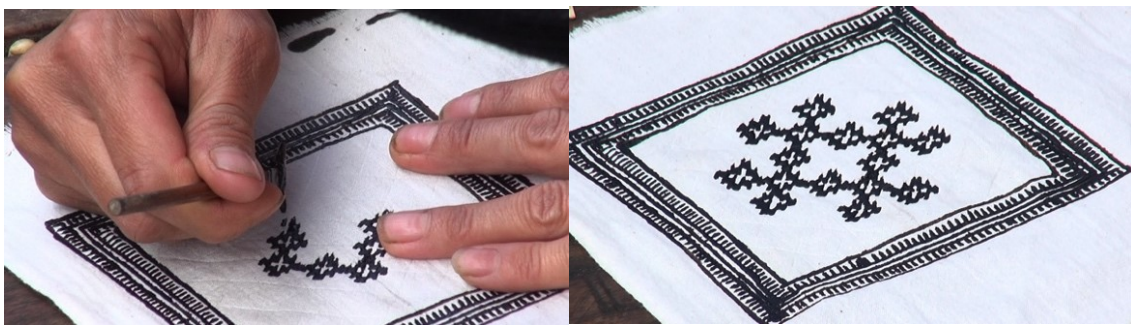


Fig.9 Photo of the wax painting process of branch A
(Recorded in Xiongjing Village, Guizhou Province, 2015)



Fig.10 Photo of finished pattern and the column picture
 (Left: recorded in Xiongjing Village, Guizhou Province, 2015 / right: made by Li Xin)

This grid system is called 'the rules of thirds', 'MI Character grid', and the 'magic square', and is also used in Chinese architecture. According to Lei (in Yang & Lin 1992:131-133), in 'Si Fang Ba Wei' it looks like the 'Luo Shu' of China, as shown in Figure 11, is the key to it: east, south, west and north, and northeast, northwest, southeast, and southwest. This matrix has been used since Han Dynasty (202 BC-220 AC); most of the patterns on bronze mirrors or eaves tiles shows the characteristics of this Chinese Pattern. This is the life of Chinese Pattern, and is the reason to keep the Chinese Pattern alive.

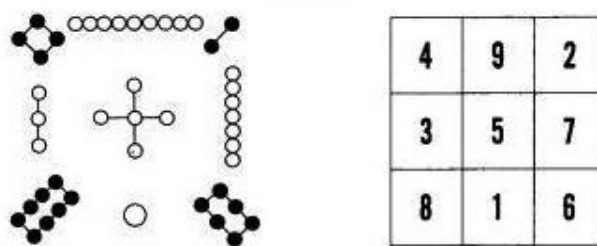


Fig.11 The picture of 'Luo Shu' and the 'magic square'

No matter how complex the pattern looks like, it is based on the structure like the Chinese characters '十', '米' or '井' (see Figure 12). Based on these rules, even the women who have no education can accomplish the work completely. After mastering the skill, patterns can be changed or reworked as other designs. It is easy to find completely different patterns on two costumes that otherwise appear the same. 'We always draw what we want to draw, freely' said one of the minority women.



Fig.12 The picture of the pattern on the back, and the column picture, on three branches of Miao costumes

(Marked the ‘十’, ‘x’ or ‘井’ structures in green, by Li Xin)

Producers: fast to implement

After completing the patterns on the squared cloths, the next step is to use these cloths to construct the costumes. After marriage minority women need to take care of making clothes for the whole family; they are all different sizes, ages and gender, but all need to wear the same clothing style of the particular branch they belong to. So an easy and efficient way of making clothes is actually helpful for minority women to reduce the pressure of their daily work.

Most of the minority traditional costumes are made directly from several pieces of rectangular cloths. Hand-made cloth is woven into a rectangle. The minority women use these rectangular cloths to construct the costumes, with little or even no cutting. The entire making process is time-consuming, from planting cotton or hemp, twisting the threads, spinning through to dyeing and that is why the women incorporate the entire pieces of cloth into the clothing.

Based on square or rectangular pieces, there are many different construction methods for each ethnic group and branch. The principle is shown in Figure 13, four rectangular pieces of cloth are arranged in four directions of up, down, left and right. The producers can use one side of every four pieces to create a new quadrilateral and make it as a neckline. As long as the producers fine-tune the sizes, proportions, and joins of the pieces, a diverse variety of collar structures and styles can be produced.

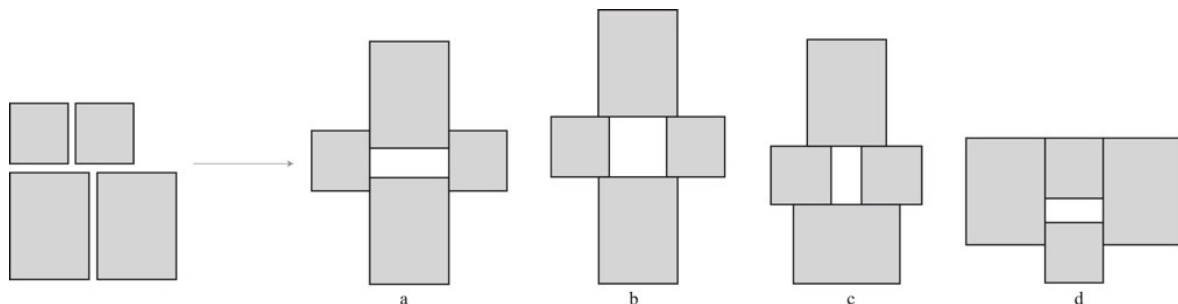


Fig.13 The principle arrangements of four rectangular pieces

The Guanshou Costume of Gejia (a Chinese ethnic group located in Huangping County, Guizhou Province) is a typical example. Four rectangular pieces are stitched together to form clothes (see Figure 14, 15 and 16). These four pieces include two shoulders with the same measurements, but the back piece is longer. The shoulder pieces are folded down one-third, the back piece is sewn along the crease, and then combined with the front piece on both sides to form a flat rectangular neckline.



Fig.14 The Guanshou costume and collar detail picture of Gejia (Ethnic Costume Museum of BIFT collections, 1940s)

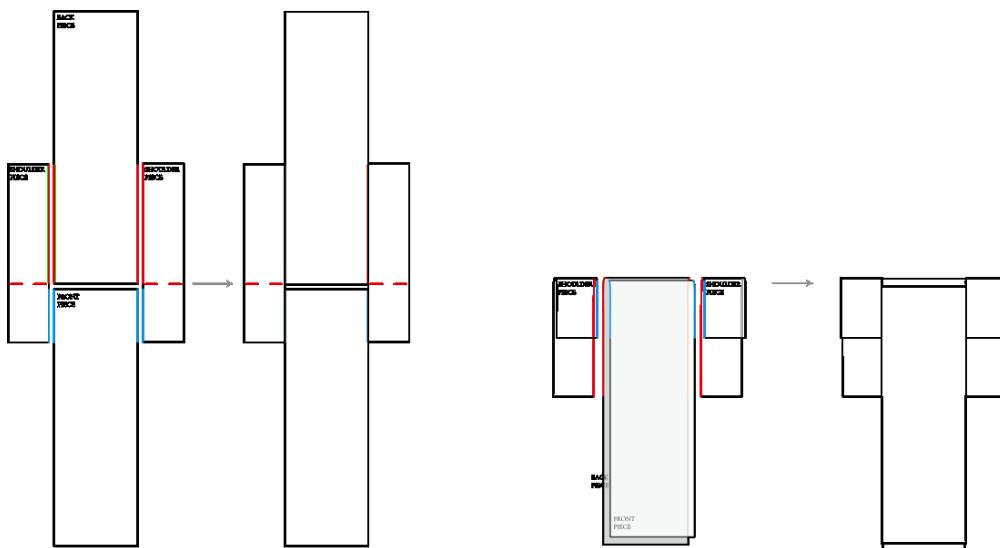


Fig.15 The flat view (left) and front view (right) structural drawing of Gejia Guanshou costume
(Red imaginary line: fold line; red and blue full line: sewing line)



Fig.16 Women in Guanshou costume
(Recorded in Matang Village, Guizhou Province, 2014)

However, the same method can also lead to a different result. The Guanshou Costume of Blue Trousers Yao (a very small population branch of Yao, located in Libo County, Guizhou Province) can be seen as another comparable example, as shown in Figures 17, 18 and 19. It also consists of four rectangular pieces, but the front piece is 22cm wide and the back piece is 34cm wide. Since the front piece is narrower than the back one, when they are combined with two shoulder pieces, the flat rectangular shoulder piece overlaps forwards and inwards. The best part of this structure is that it forms the perfect arc of the shoulder at the same time, which means a transformation from two dimensions to three dimensions. It is noteworthy that the seaming points on the left and right sides of the front piece are located 3cm below the front neckline, while the stop points on the sides of the back piece are placed 9cm above the bottom margin of the back piece, so that two small angles are formed between the front piece, back piece and the two shoulder pieces. The function of these angles is to complement and balance the width disparity of the front and back pieces effectively, and create a curious shape of the neckline for the Guanshou Costume made by only four rectangular pieces.

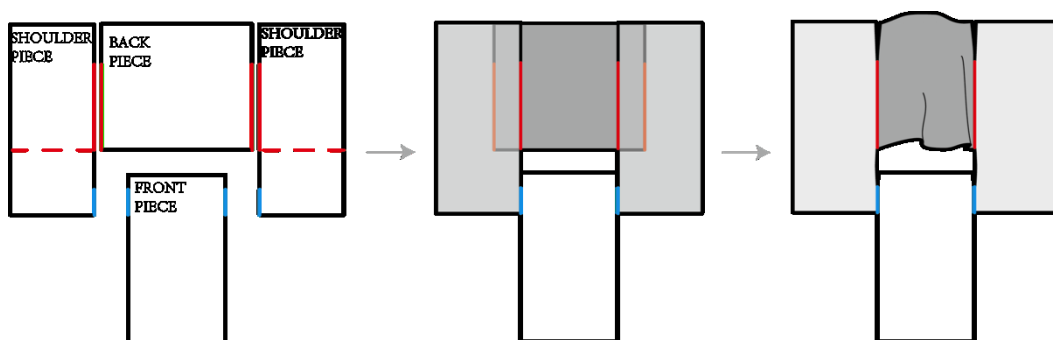


Fig.17 The flat view structural drawing of Blue Trousers Yao Guanshou costume
(Red imaginary line: fold line; red and blue full line: sewing line)



Fig.18 The front view structural drawing of Blue Trousers Yao Guanshou costume
 (Red imaginary line: fold line; red and blue full line: sewing line)



Fig.19 Woman in Blue Trousers Yao Guanshou costume
 (Recorded in Yaolu Village, Guizhou Province, 2018)

These subtle differences in the construction process leads to a contrast between the Guanshou Costume of Gejia and Blue Trousers Yao. Although making clothes with square or rectangular pieces is easy, and simple to do, the minorities have the ability to distinguish the costume styles and ethnic groups by these nuances. They can also play a role in identification and distinction within the branches of one ethnic group. 'One Cutting' is a way of making collars mastered by Miao women from many different branches. The fundamental principles are uncomplicated as shown in Figure 20: stitch the two narrow cloths together to create the back centreline of the costume, fold the cloths lengthwise and broadwise successively, then cut along the crease, and sew a small rectangular insert piece at the cut to form a three-dimensional collar.

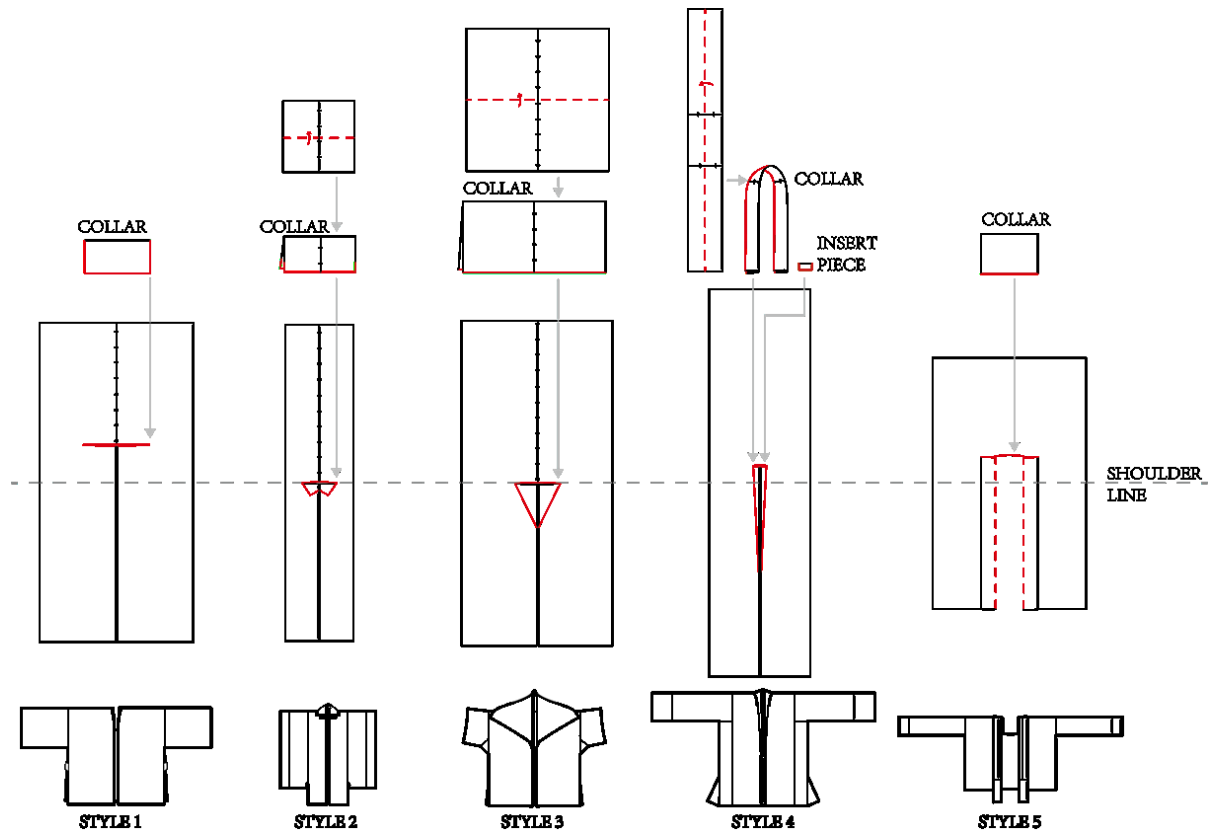


Fig.20 Five different 'one cutting' garments of Miao

(Red dashed line: fold line; red full line: sewing line)

Most branches of Miao women use this way to make the collar, and the variations are unlimited. Due to the cutting positions, depths, seams, and the sizes and proportions of the collar pieces, various styles of collar and costume emerge so that the distinction among different branches within the Miao ethnic group is realised. What's more, as long as the proportion of the cloths is adjusted, the men's and women's style, or the youth's and elder's style in one branch can easily be distinguished (see Figures 21 and 22).



Fig.21 Photograph of Yaque Miao costumes

(Shorter for women and longer for men, Ethnic Costume Museum of BIFT collections, 1950s)



Fig.22 Back view of Flowery Miao women's clothes
(Longer for old and shorter for youth, recorded in Dongguan Village, Guizhou Province, 2015)

Although there is no expressed stipulation on 'how to make and how to wear', when the minority women take on the work of making clothes, they are also the founders and maintainers of traditional etiquette and social ethics.

Users: from designer to stylist

After stitching the finished decorative pieces onto the clothes, the process of making costumes is finished, but the final style of the costume is further developed as it is worn on the body. Using the rectangular-shaped cloths to make the minority costume utilises less cloth cutting or even no cutting, and it also achieves the result of the tri-dimensional style for women's bodies. Within a relatively loose and flexible style, the minority costumes are not only good-looking but also comfortable to wear, and they can be adjusted to fit a range of sizes.

During the process of dressing, the minority women complete the final style by crossing, wrapping, binding, folding, overlapping and adding accessories to realise the division of groups and marital status.

'Overlapping' is a common dress custom in Chinese minorities, it happens in the Hani, Yi, and Yao groups, but is most typical in the costume culture of Miao. Wearing a lot of costumes together is a symbol of family wealth and feminine craftsmanship, especially in festival time. An example of this is the dress custom of 'ad Hmaob' (a branch of White Miao, located in Xianmu Village, Dafang County, Guizhou Province). Women wear more than a dozen homemade batik skirts during the Tiaohua festival. On their wedding day, the bride puts on as many as 35 skirts as the dowry, to form an exaggerated shape on their hips, this is something to be proud of, and seen as

attractive. After marriage, women have to sew a piece of dark coloured cloth on the edge of their skirts to indicate their marital status (see Figures 23 and 24).



Fig.23 Woman in White Miao costume
(From *A Picture Album of China's Miao Costumes and Ornaments*)



Fig.24 White Miao Skirts
(Left: for unmarried woman / right: for married women, recorded in Xianmu Village, Guizhou Province, 2015)

In the culture of another branch, called 'Small Flower Miao', located in Shuicheng, Guizhou, the women always wear a number of 'Huabei', a kind of colourful shawl with delicate patterns on every layer to express their beauty and ingenuity in the festival. If a boy is attracted by the beauty of the girl, he will take the huabei away to show his love. Thus the woman, who 'loses' the most shawls is the most popular (see Figure 25 and 26).



Fig.25 The small Flowery Miao shawl (Ethnic Costume Museum of BIFT collections, 1930s)



Fig.26 Small Flowery Miao women at festival time
From *Miao Zhuang* by X Zeng (1992)

This demonstrates that the minority women, as the users of costumes, can change their appearances and enhance personal charm in the local social circumstance through their costume. Even though it takes a great deal of time from the design to the production, and entails a lot of energy to bear the weight of the clothes, in their minds the hard work is worthwhile, for the reason that it can help minority women to earn the sense of identity in their groups, and bring them a better marriage and future life.

Conclusion

Within the minority tribes costume is as much a means of identification and differentiation as language. For the minority women, making clothes is one of the must-have skills from the past to the present: the outstanding design, craftsmanship and dressing style are about elevating the value of women in order to achieve a good

marriage and life, which symbolises hard work (goodness), intelligence (excellence) and wealth (beauty) in their culture.

Any minority woman can learn these uncomplicated methods of costume making in a very short time, and then extend their skills to the next level. With imagination and practice they can reach a higher level, and can easily switch between their triple identities.

It's the wisdom and wealth inherited from ancestors, which is not only effective and teachable, but also contains clemency and mercy. Zhu Xi, a Neo-Confucianist in Song Dynasty (960 AC-1279 AC), said 'When you eat your food, you should remember that is not easy to grow it; remember that every material of your clothing is difficult to produce.' So 'be sparing' is an idea that reflects on Chinese costume design. It is easy to identify with, it means saving on costs and materials, responding to different seasons and occasions, and embodies 'loving'. It reflects on minority costume as well, that is simple, easy-to-make and generally usable. And it has important implications for modern fashion design and the various designs that are being developed in the context of current sustainable development.

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