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J O U R N A L



May 2025, Volume 17, Issue 1

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COVER IMAGE:

Ecclesiastical garment

Ecclesiastical garment (?), Ottoman Empire (1299–1923), Türkiye, Istanbul or Bursa (main fabric), Safavid Empire (1501–1736), Iran (trim), fourth quarter 16th century (fabrics) and mid-17th century (construction). Silk warp and weft and metallic-wrapped weft, integrated weave structure (*lampas*); 124.46 x 257.81 cm (49 x 101 1/2 in). The Textile Museum Collection 1994.27.2, gift of Neutrogena Corporation. See pages 8 and 9 for further description.

Photography by Breton Littlehales.

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Texting Collective Memory Through Li Brocade Textiles

YAN Yan

Introduction

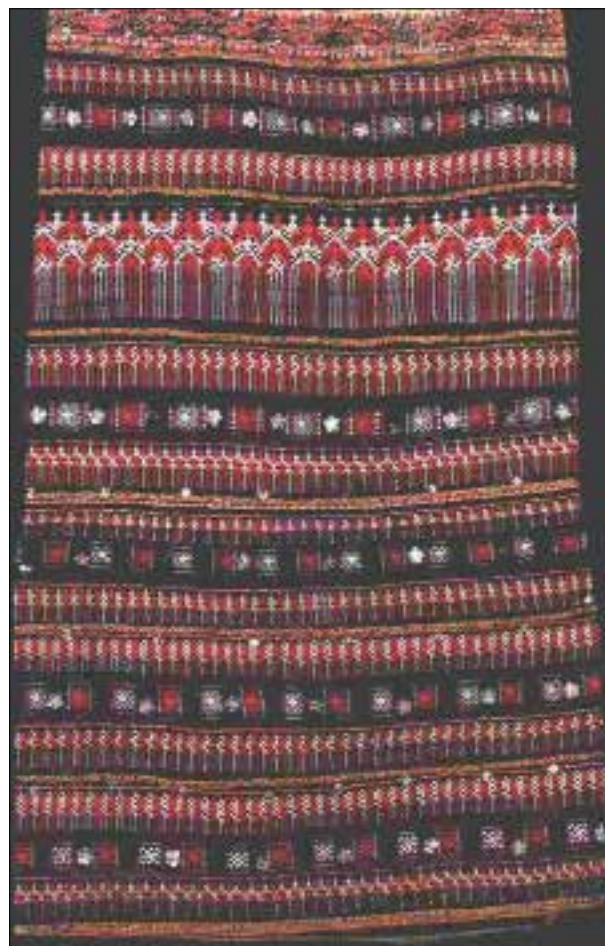
The Li people are indigenous people who migrated to Hainan Island over 3,000 years ago. After Han Chinese settlers arrived, the Li retreated into the island's central mountains where many of them still live today. Since 1949 Hainan became the southernmost frontier of China, and the Li became one of the 55 ethnic minorities of modern China.

The ongoing interaction between the Li people and their environment has led to the development of distinct cultural practices, such as tattooing, boat houses and gourd vessels. Among these practices, Li brocade (*Lijin*, 黎锦), woven by Li women, is one of the most striking aspects. There are approximately 160 different patterns across six categories which include nature motifs, animals, plants, human figures, rituals, folk myths, legends and geometric patterns (Fu, 2005). Without a written language, the Li have used their intricate patterns to pass down stories, history and traditions, with the brocade serving as a living archive of their collective memory.

Characterized by the shared symbols on Li brocade, spiritual representation is intricately developing along with the entire associated societal and cultural system of customs, mythologies, folk stories, funerals, festivals, etc. This network, starting from the imagination about self and the outside world and gradually extending to the Li's ethnic origins, life cycles, reproduction,



Water motifs. Adapted from uncredited image. Source: https://www.bilibili.com/bangumi/play/ep672132?spm_id_from=333.3370.0



Motifs of stars on Ha Li skirt. Photograph courtesy Fu G (2005) *Traditional Brocade in Li Ethnic*. Hainan: Hainan Publisher. 符桂花 (2005) 黎族传统织锦. 海南: 海南出版社.

shared environments, production modes, economies and customs— constructs a distinct collective memory for the Li community. Such common memory helps to form the way in which the community envisions itself and the emotional foundation for the shared Li ethnic cultural identity (Anderson, 2016; Wang, 2020), operating on both conscious and unconscious levels (Halbwachs, 1996).

The formation of this collective memory requires not only the horizontal network of symbols found in rituals,



Meifu Li ikat skirt with motifs of fog, Eld's deer, lizards, geometric motifs and areas of dots. Photograph courtesy of Chris Buckley.

mythologies and customs, but also a vertical accumulation and transformation in time. The meaning and application of the motifs on Li brocade are not static but rather undergo a process of constant construction and reconstruction, adapting across different social and historical stages—from the primitive era to the matrilineal clan society, and ultimately the patriarchal social structure.

Nature worship

Nature worship is a universally prevalent form of belief that has historically emerged among various ethnic groups living in “primitive,” low-productivity societies. In these early social contexts, human beings were highly dependent on the natural world, rendering them acutely aware of their vulnerability to its forces.

Among the Li people on Hainan Island, through their daily activities such as hunting, gathering and farming, the ancestors were exposed to natural phenomena such as wind, rain, thunder, the sun, moon, stars, mountains and rivers. They deeply experienced the immense power of nature, leading, rather than to control, to a dual sentiment of gratitude for nature's blessings and fear of natural disasters. They speculated upon the existence of supernatural forces to which they referred as “spirits” or “ghosts,” governing and influencing people's lives.

For instance, the Li ancestors regarded the abundance of crops as a gift from the “earth mother,” thus the worship of the “earth mother (ghost)” was also prevalent; the “water ghost” was revered for protection against droughts and floods, while the “mountain ghost” governed the birds and animals in the village, serving as the protective deity of the Li people. The “kitchen ghost” was worshipped to ensure a constant supply of smoke and fire throughout the year. The worship of the “sun ghost,” “wind god” and the “ghost platform” of the tall trees were also significant practices among the Li people.

As Lévy-Bruhl observed, in “primitive” worldviews

the act of donning the skin or weaving and wearing the pattern of an animal (such as a tiger, wolf or bear) is believed to transform the wearer into that animal. For these societies the interest lies in accessing the mystical “shared” capacity between the human and the animal, seeking to acquire their mysterious powers, avoid their potential harm and secure their protective blessings” (Strauss, 1962). Consequently, these totems representing the forces of nature occupy a significant portion of the Li brocade patterns, manifesting in various forms through prayers, rituals, dances, music and art to obtain the blessings and favors of the natural gods.

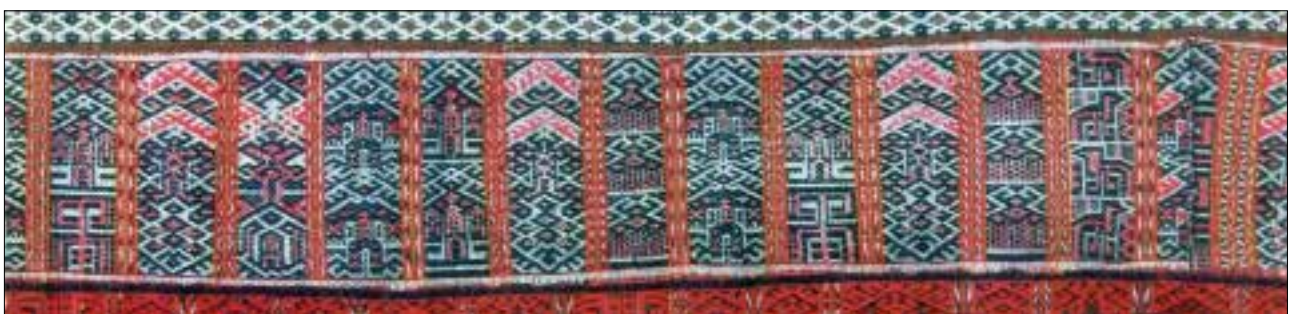
Totem worship

Gradually, in contrast to the instability of men hunting for food, the gathering activities undertaken by women allowed for a more reliable food supply as well as opportunities for reproduction and the continuation of life. Consequently, Li society transformed into a matrilineal clan structure with family production as its fundamental unit.

In the process of collaborating with or struggling against animals when hunting and gathering, each Li clan also developed its own unique totem worship and beliefs



Motifs of fog on a Meifu Li ikat skirt. Photograph June 2024.



Motifs of fog on a skirt. Photograph courtesy Sun H and Jiao Y (2012) *Symbol and Memory: Research on Li Brocade Culture*. Shanghai: Shanghai University Publisher. 孙海兰 焦勇勤 (2012) 符号与记忆: 黎族织锦文化研究. 上海大学出版社.

incorporating an abundance of motifs depicting animals, plants and even non-biological totemic elements. The defining characteristic of this totem system was the belief in a sacred, ancestral relationship between a particular kinship group and a specific species of plant or animal, which was seen as the origin of the clan's progenitors, the blessings of bountiful harvests, the growth and regeneration of life and the expression of aspirations for well-being.

The animal totems that serve as ancestral figures for the Li ethnic group are predominantly those creatures in the early Li society's hunting, fishing and reproductive economies. For instance, many Li clans revered birds as their totemic beings. According to Li folklore, their ancestral "Li Mother" was an orphan in her youth,

nurtured and fed by the diligent "Gangong Bird" (甘工鸟) feeding the "Li Mother" grains with its beak, leading the Li people to regard birds as protective deities worthy of veneration (Du, 1979). Similarly, in another piece of folklore a male Li hunter pursuing a deer finds that the animal transformed into a beautiful lady. The two fall in love, and their union is said to give rise to the Li people. As a result, the deer holds significant ancestral symbolic value within the context of animal totemism in Li culture. Another instance is in the Li village of Maodaodong in Kangmao Village (毛道洞抗茅村) where the villagers view cats as their ancestors, referring to male cats as grandfathers and female cats as grandmothers. Cats are considered sacred, and it is prohibited to harm or consume them. In addition to appearing as a motif on Li



Meifu Li ikat with Eld's deer, ancestor figures on horseback and geometric motifs. Photograph courtesy of Chris Buckley.



Cat motifs on a Qi Li skirt. Photograph courtesy of Chris Buckley.

brocade, during rituals, when a cat dies it is carried by two unmarried men on bamboo poles to be buried next to the village or under a coconut tree for blessing.

Rooted in fertility and reproductive symbolism, the frog motif is one of the most emblematic examples in the Li people's worship. Qi Qingfu and Ma Xiaojing's research has revealed that the frog pattern represents a vestige of the Li ethnic group's primitive totem worship of the mother figure. As the Li people's economy transitioned towards more advanced agricultural practices, their reliance on rainfall heightened, and the frog came to be seen as a harbinger of seasonal change and water/drought patterns. Moreover, the frog's prolific reproductive capacity and the resemblance of its swollen abdomen to that of a pregnant woman further contributed to its association with female fertility and the veneration of the reproductive powers of the primordial mother figure (Zhou, 2008).

In addition to the symbolic representations of animals associated with origins and reproduction, there are motifs with practical significance for daily production and life, such as the cattle pattern. The Li hold a deep reverence for cattle because cattle are used for plowing fields, agriculture and various important occasions such



Motifs of birds on a skirt. Photograph courtesy Sun H and Jiao Y (2012) *Symbol and Memory: Research on Li Brocade Culture*. Shanghai: Shanghai University Publisher. 孙海兰, 焦勇勤 (2012) 符号与记忆: 黎族织锦文化研究. 上海大学出版社.



Motifs of Gangong birds. Photograph courtesy Fu G (2005) *Traditional Brocade in Li Ethnic*. Hainan: Hainan Publisher. 符桂花 (2005) 黎族传统织锦. 海南: 海南出版社.



Dragon motifs on a skirt. Photograph courtesy Sun H and Jiao Y (2012) *Symbol and Memory: Research on Li Brocade Culture*. Shanghai: Shanghai University Publisher. 孙海兰, 焦勇勤 (2012) 符号与记忆: 黎族织锦文化研究. 上海大学出版社.



Ha Li blanket with various animal motifs including turtles and birds or butterflies. Photograph courtesy of Chris Buckley.

as weddings and funerals. The Li believe that cattle, just as humans, are sentient beings with souls. Every household cherishes a gemstone known as the "soul of the cattle." On the eighth day of the third lunar month, known as "Cattle Day," it is forbidden to slaughter cattle or use them for plowing. Instead, the cattle are offered a "celebratory wine" soaked with the "cattle soul stone" to ensure the well-being of the cattle and bless

the harvest of crops in the coming year.

For the Li, symbolic functions of plant motifs are closely connected to agricultural production. For example, they believe that rice has a soul and that the amount of grain harvested is arranged by the Harvest God. Every year during spring planting, the Li people hold ceremonies to worship the Harvest God in a Harvest festival which has become a traditional custom.

The Banyan tree plant, in addition to its role in agricultural production, holds significant symbolic meaning in terms of a protective deity. The Li people perceive the Banyan tree as embodying divine power and as a conduit for the souls of their ancestors. Consequently, the selection of village locations is often influenced by the presence of Banyan trees which are believed to offer spiritual protection. Furthermore, the roots of the Banyan tree are frequently depicted in Li brocade,

symbolizing the ancestral guardianship that the tree is thought to provide.

While animal and plants totems dominate the symbolic repertoire of the Li ethnic group, a smaller number of non-biological totemic elements also hold significance, the most prominent of which is the motif associated with the mythical origins of Li. The dragon totem is a widely documented folkloric remnant among the Li people. Closely intertwined with the dragon motif is the veneration of the snake totem. According to the "Legend of the Li Mother Mountain," a snake's egg was struck by thunder, giving birth to a human infant who would later become the revered "Li Mother" subsisting on mountain fruits and nesting in the forest. In this narrative, the snake is presented as an integral part of the Li people's ancestral origins.



Motifs of cattle on a skirt. Photograph courtesy Sun H and Jiao Y (2012) *Symbol and Memory: Research on Li Brocade Culture*. Shanghai: Shanghai University Publisher. 孙海兰 焦勇勤 (2012) 符号与记忆: 黎族织锦文化研究. 上海大学出版社.



Motifs of men-riding-cattle on a Ha Li skirt. Photograph courtesy Fu G (2005) *Traditional Brocade in Li Ethnic*. Hainan: Hainan Publisher. 符桂花 (2005) 黎族传统织锦. 海南: 海南出版社.



A Run Li blouse with embroidered designs, including plant motifs. Photograph courtesy of Chris Buckley.

Ancestor worship

Ancestral worship emerged as a significant belief system during the matrilineal clan era of the Li ethnic group, signifying a growing sense of human agency and the ability to shape their own destinies. In the context of symbols representing the origins and continuity of life, as well as in various rituals such as funerals, one of the key symbolic transitions observed in Li brocade is the shift from the predominance of frog motifs to the increasing prominence of anthropomorphic ancestral patterns.

Initially, this ancestral worship was focused on the revered elders of the matrilineal clans. As the clan-based social structure evolved into more differentiated family units, which in turn coalesced into tribes and even nascent states, the religious veneration of clan-based ancestral lineages underwent a dual transformation. On the one hand, it gave way to the veneration of more immediate, familial progenitors. On the other hand, the cultural hero-worship of tribal and state leaders also emerged as a form of ancestral reverence, reflecting the growing complexity of social and political structures within Li society.

The first form of ancestral veneration, rooted in the kinship-based relationships between the living and the deceased, follows the emergence of the concept of the human soul and the belief in reincarnation. The primitive Li people came to believe that the spirits of their



Harvest motif on a Run Li top. Photograph December 2022.

revered elders, who had imparted valuable experience and wisdom to their descendants, continued to exist in the afterlife observing the behaviors of their living kin, bestowing protection or punishment as warranted (Wang, 2004).

Consequently, the Li people developed a deep conviction that by performing rituals of veneration, they could secure the protection of their ancestors against misfortune. This reciprocal relationship between the living and the dead gave rise to the practice of “ancestor worship” within the Li ethnic group (Qin, 2003). On Li brocade, ancestral patterns often appear in rows, one after another, sometimes resembling countless people holding hands, symbolizing the ancestors guiding and safeguarding their descendants (Wang, 2001).

These costumes are utilized in funerals and ancestral worship ceremonies to ensure that the ancestors can recognize the deceased. Before the funeral procession, the “ancestral spirit leader” of the clan must be called upon to summon the spirits, and then they



Banyan root motif. Adapted from uncredited image. Source: https://www.bilibili.com/bangumi/play/ep672132?spm_id_from=333.337.0.01

proceed to the village entrance to bid farewell to the departing spirits. During the burial, the ancestral spirit leader continuously calls out the name of the deceased ancestor, signifying the guiding of the deceased's spirit. After the burial, a feast is held to entertain the visiting relatives who have come to pay their respects, and the villagers, both men and women, gather to drink. The "ancestral spirit leader," who presides over the ancestral worship activities, must remember the name of the deceased ancestor to pass it down through generations.

Another form of ancestral worship encompasses the reverence of prominent leaders and heroic figures. Those individuals who had wielded significant power and made substantial contributions to the collective

well-being of the community during their lifetimes were often revered as ancestral spirits even after their passing. They are perceived to have the ability to impact crucial aspects of the community's existence, such as production, warfare, population growth and the cycle of life and death. As a result, the Li not only felt compelled to perform rituals of veneration for their ancestral spirits during times of crisis or upheaval, but also maintained this practice as a regular part of their cultural traditions. In essence, the cult of ancestral worship among the Li ethnic group came to include the natural extension of reverence towards their revered leaders and cultural heroes (Li, 2007).



Ten thousand human motif. Collection of JU Julian in Sanya, May 2023.



Human figure on a Run Li skirt. Photograph December 2022.

Accordingly, when it comes to humanoid hero patterns, we must mention the creation deity in the myths of the Li ethnic group, known as the Great Strength God (大力神纹) (Sun and Jiao, 2012). According to legend, in ancient times the sky and the earth were very close together. There were seven suns and seven moons in the sky which caused great harm to humans and made it difficult for them to survive. The Great Strength God shot down six suns and six moons with his arrows eliminating the threat to the people. At that time, the earth was flat so the Great Strength God gathered a large amount of sand from the seaside to build mountains. He then kicked open the mountains creating deep valleys and rivers, and his sweat became the never-ending flowing rivers. The Great Strength God laid the foundation for the world and then peacefully passed away. “The Great Strength God is the embodiment of bravery and wisdom for the Li people, so they worship him in the ‘San Yue San’ (Third Day of the Third Month) Ceremonial Robe and Ritual. They also weave his image into their tube skirts as a commemoration.” These patterns, mythologies and rituals serve as memorials for heroes while also indicating the everyday life of the Li and embodying hope for the future of the Li ethnic group.

Conclusion

From belief to daily life, the motifs woven into Li brocade embody both material and spiritual significance serving as conduits for protection and blessings. These intricate designs assist the Li people in navigating not only the physical dangers of nature but also the unseen forces of the non-human world. In this way, Li brocade transcends its function as mere textile; it becomes a living archive—one that shapes, and is shaped by, the fate of its people. At a time when technology and the ideology of the modern nation-state dominate, revisiting these traditions is not an act of nostalgic regression but a conscious effort to reconnect with a deeper sense of identity and cultural continuity.

The motifs on Li brocade, however, extend far beyond what has been written or imagined here. Their significance is ever-evolving, waiting to be rediscovered and further developed by future generations. It is hoped that the texts inscribed in these textiles will continue to guide the Li people, helping them remain grounded in their heritage while moving forward—transcending the narrow confines of modernity and embracing the full depth of their cultural legacy.



Human figures on a Meifu Li ikat. Photograph courtesy of Chris Buckley.



Motif of human ancestors. Adapted from uncredited image.

Source: https://www.bilibili.com/bangumi/play/ep672132?spm_id_from=333.3370.0

YAN Yan holds a Master of Fine Arts in Social Design from Hochschule für bildende Künste Hamburg (HFBK), Germany, and is currently pursuing a PhD at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) in the Department of Chinese History and Culture. Yan's current research focuses on Li brocade from Hainan Island, tracing its journey from intricate motifs to the mythology and beliefs of the Li people, from its creation to the rhythms of the body, from its storied past to its imagined future, from the roots of its materials to the vast cosmos it reflects. With a background that bridges theory and practice, Yan aims, on the one hand, through research, to unravel the hidden stories, invisible pasts, and the uncharted knowledge and myths they embody. On the other hand, she explores how this intangible heritage can continue to resonate in the everyday lives of people in modern society.