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## **AN AESTHETIC STUDY ON TRADITIONAL BATIK DESIGN OF MIAO ETHNICITY IN CHINA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

As an ancient folk art, batik has a production history of more than two thousand years in the world. In China, batik is mainly concentrated in the minority areas of southwestern, such as Guizhou, Yunnan, Hunan Province. The Miao batik art has rich patterns and profound cultural implications. At the same time, it has strong regional characteristics and national personality, showing the historical changes, cultural customs, and aesthetic ideas of Miao people. Danzhai is known as the “land of batik”, and the batik pattern is different from other batik types by its primitive and uninhibited style. This research introduces the history, special technological process, typical patterns, and aesthetic study of traditional Miao batik in Danzhai. And the purpose of this study is to discover the aesthetic characteristics of Danzhai Miao batik.

**Keywords:** Danzhai Miao, traditional batik, process, patterns, aesthetic study

### **INTRODUCTION**

Batik is one of the four major printing skills in ancient China. According to Chen (1984), textile resist and dyeing appeared at least 2000 years ago and can be traced to the ethnic minority regions of Southwest China during the Qin and Han dynasties. Indeed, batik is quite popular and widely practice in Southwest China’s ethnic minority regions such as Guizhou, Yunnan, and Guangxi provinces. Not only Miao, but also other minorities in China, such as Buyi, Yao, Shui and Gelao, are all good at making batik (Yu Meng., Jongmyoung., C et al. 2018). During the year 2006, China Intangible Cultural Heritage Network giving a recognition to Danzhai Miao batik technology as the first batch of national intangible cultural heritage in China. This recognition has formed a unique historical symbol in the long-term historical development of Miao batik and ethnicity. Miao people believed, batik history is a wooden map that have symbolic meaning in traditional culture of Miao people and important part of traditional culture in China (Yiyang Liu & Young Chun Ko, 2021).

Danzhai is a county that known as the “land of batik” in which Miao batik has historically established itself as a unique batik group, known for its intricate composition, antique patterns, abundant themes, and exquisite techniques. In the past because of its remote location, Danzhai Miao batik has not been largely recognizable. Thus, it is fair to say, Danzhai is home to the highest concentration of batiks, and an important region to study Chinese ethnic batik. Moreover, the Miao lives are inextricably related to batik. Batik products have been worn for both everyday practices and rituals since ancient

times. Liu (2018) had mentioned in his paper, batik plays a vital role in Miao people, from birth to death as well as symbols that represent the history and culture of their ethnicity. In addition, there are many documentations on the historical study of Danzai Miao ethnicity through various batik motifs, pattern and the expressive meaning towards their ancestors (Gao et al., 2010). Furthermore, Xiong (2016) believed, traditional batik patterns have strong national characteristics, expressive special beauty, unique decorative influence, and infinite artistic vitality, while also serving as both aesthetics and philosophy, bearing many auspicious, belief, spiritual, and historical legends. Therefore, this paper employed an observational study on the aesthetic element of Miao traditional batik design specifically the motifs, patterns, colours, techniques, and tools of Miao batik. This article also explains the significance and correlation of local minority culture that can be reflected in China's batik craft.



**Figure 1:** Miao women dressed in batik costumes

## **TRADITIONAL BATIK PROCESS**

The traditional Miao batik has experienced hundreds of years of development, the process of batik making has already matured and a self-sufficient production state. Although Miao batik making has long existed, the workforce of the batik industry in Danzhai is mostly dominated by women. Batik craftsmen are commonly female members of ethnic minorities in a different area. Scholars believe it has something to do with the Miao customs and culture. Lei and Xiangzhen (2014), mentioned that the Miao people regarded batik as an appraisal of women's wisdom and wealth. This view also conforms with the study of Liu Yong (2018) when he pointed out that in Miao customs, all women are obligated to inherit batik skills, and each mother must teach her daughter how to make batik.



**Figure 2:** Miao women making batik

### **Materials and tools for making batik**

Batik is generally made from white cotton that is spun by the locals themselves. Because this kind of fabric is cheap, thick, and durable, it is commonly used for printing and dyeing. Before making batik, craftsman regularly beat and rub the fabric with a wooden stick or a cow's jawbone. The purpose of this step is to make the cloth smoother so that the wax can be absorbed more easily, and the pattern lines can be perfected.



**Figure 3:** Miao women pressing cloth with cow's jawbone

The most important material for making batik is wax. Wax for batik has very rich selection, such as beeswax, paraffin wax, rosin wax and so on. Differing waxes produce different batik textures. Nowadays, craftsman is prone to choose types of wax depending on the desired batik effect that they wanted. In Danzhai, Miao women tend to use a mixture of 70 percent beeswax and 30 percent paraffin wax.



**Figure 4:** Mixture wax

The dye used in the batik is made from local plant, called bluegrass (Chinses Lancao), which is common in mountainous areas of Guizhou province. The plant is grown in the spring, and when it matures, the leaves are picked and fermented to make indigo dye. The indigo dye has a high saturation and strong fixation effect in which the colour giving a pleasant feeling to the wearer (Shi, Y., Zhang, L., Wang, L. et al, 2021; Yong Ma, Dong Yang L., et al, 2019). Furthermore, some researchers believed this plant is a Chinese traditional medical plant, and the dye could protect the cloth from mildew caused by the humid climate in southern China (Lu, S., & Pan, D, 2019).

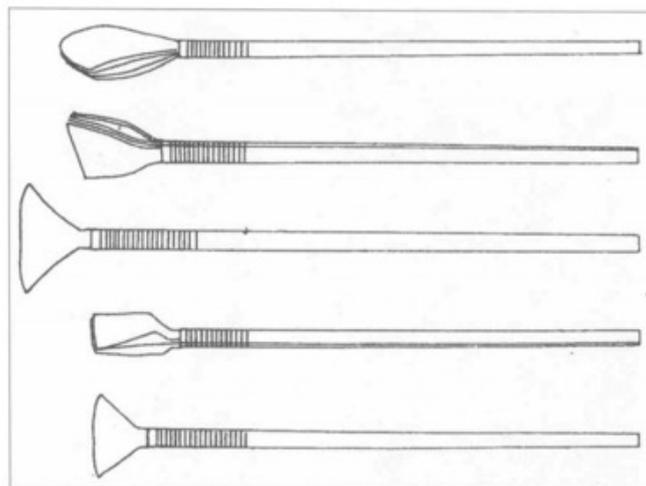


**Figure 5:** Indigo dye

The copper wax knife is regarded as the main tool in the Chinese batik process. Traditionally, the tool used to produce batik was made by the artisans themselves, but now, people tend to purchase it from the market. The handle part of tool is usually made of bamboo, while the blade is made of copper. Wax knives come in different shapes and sizes and are used to paint different patterns. Curved wax knife is to adapt to the circular patterns in the Batik of Danzhai Miao, such as bronze drum pattern and swirl pattern. As Jia (2010) mentioned that the most distinctive feature of Chinese batik art is because the artisans are expert at describing the dots and lines of exquisite pattern with wax knives.



**Figure 6:** Wax knives (danzhai miao)



**Figure 7:** Different shapes of the wax knife

### **Batik Production Process**

Due to the mountainous geographic location of southwestern China, villages are generally far apart. The cultural inheritance and environmental conditions of each clan branch are different, which leads to slight differences in batik styles and patterns in different villages during the development of batik (Zhang Huan & Tian Xin, 2019). In general, the batik process is basically similar, where before making batik, craftsmen need to prepare wax liquid, dye, wax knife and other batik materials. The process of batik production can be divided into drawing, dyeing, dewaxing, cleaning, and drying.



**Figure 8:** Batik Production Process

Many scholars, such as He Chen and Yang Wenbin (2009) agreed, the most important step in batik is drawing. This step will represent the Miao women's artistic capacity. However, the Miao craftsmen do not need to draw sketches in advance. They usually rely on their vast life experience to

create patterns in their minds, which they can draw directly with wax on the cloth without using any drafts (Bo, 2014). The key to drawing patterns on the fabric is to allow the wax to penetrate the fabric fibres, so the craftsmen must make sure the wax is at the correct temperature. If the wax temperature is too low, the wax cannot penetrate into the fabric, and if it is too high, regulating the form of the pattern will be difficult, both of which will affect the quality of the batik.



**Figure 9:** Drawing patterns

Meanwhile, for dyeing process, the craftsman soaks the fabric in the dye solution and stirred it evenly with a stick so that the fabric was fully exposed to the dye solution. Then the fabric is picked up and left to stand in the air to oxidize. In general, the number of dyeing is determined by the fabric used and the depth of dyeing. The colour of the fabric will change from yellow to green, then to blue, and eventually to dark blue as the number of times increases. After making sure the cloth is well dyed, the craft women take it to a nearby river, removing the dye from the surface with water. Then, they put the fabric in boiling water for a while to melt away the wax and extracted it. Moreover, the craftsmen wash the fabric in clean water again and let it dry. After all the above steps are finished, the exquisite batik fabric is complete.



**Figure 10:** Wash batik in the river

## METHODS

In this research, we used an observational study with a series of unstructured and semi-structured interviews. We are also actively involved in Miao community activities to understand the Miao lifestyle as well as the meaning of batik in their lives. The first field of study we went through was in Danzhai District, Guizhou Province, China. Danzhai is an ideal location to see the transformational impact of State-inspired development programs on local communities (Zhengfu C., et al. 2021). In addition, this location is a major population centre of the Miao people and batik production. By looking at the authenticity and cultural meaning of Miao batik, Danzai has offered a wealth of information on the aesthetics of their batik motifs and patterns. For Miao, traditional motifs and patterns always refer to Miao beliefs and culture. Therefore, this research focuses on traditional patterns and explains their origins and implications. Moreover, this study uses formal analysis including analysis to find out the basic materials of batik works such as appearance, shape, colour, space, and composition. This research also analyses design principles such as balance, harmony, repetition, unity, rhythm, and attraction.

### The Traditional Pattern of Miao Batik

The development of style for pattern design has been influenced, firstly, by the cultural, history and religious setting in Miao communities. Secondly, through the external culture that has been transmitted through intermarriage, trade, and migration factors. The traditional batik decoration method continues to this day and is accepted by Miao people, thus perpetuating Miao aesthetics. Danzhai Miao batik has historically established itself as a unique batik group known for its intricate composition, antique patterns, abundant themes, untrammelled styles, and exquisite techniques. According to Bo (2014), batik motifs are mostly based on natural plants, animals, and folk stories. He also added, the common motifs in Miao batik, include butterfly pattern, bronze drum, swirl pattern, fish and bird pattern, worm pattern and dragon pattern. Figure 11 below shows the main elements used as traditional motifs and patterns in Miao batik.

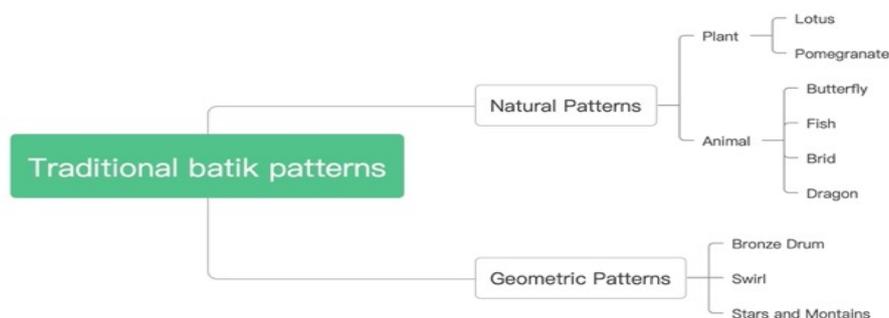
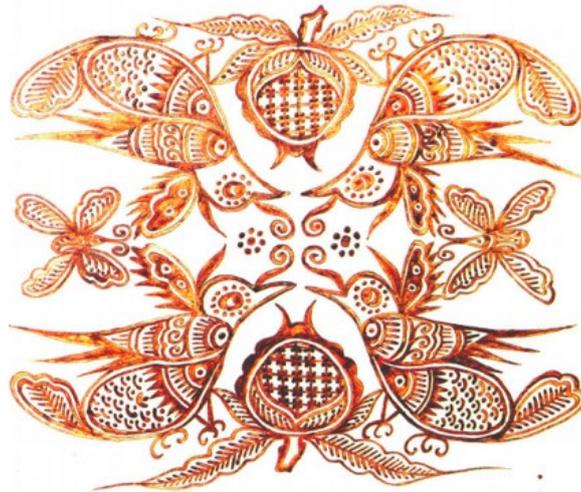


Figure 11: Natural and geometric elements in traditional patterns of Miao batik design

In Miao batik, many patterns are composed of bird and fish patterns. The ancestors of the Miao took the bird as a totem from ancient times. So far, they still retain the custom of bird worship. Yang (1997) pointed out that the bird pattern is not only a symbol of ancestors, but also as a messenger that guides their souls back to forefathers, as well as representing masculinity. For this reason, the Miao believe, fish are highly fertile, and they have long been regarded as a symbol of fertility and female, thus the fish pattern evolved from their worship of fish. Furthermore, fish pattern is intended as prayer for ancestors blessing and procreation in Miao custom. In the Miao culture, the combination of pattern from fish and bird symbolizes conjugal love between husband and wife, and equality between men and women (Dong Han & Linlin, 2021). This believed could embodies the Miao people's worship of reproduction and ancestor (Chen Jintao, & Zhao Liling, 2015).



**Figure 12:** Bird, butterfly, fish, and pomegranate pattern

Butterflies are the important pattern in Miao batik where they are considered a symbol of reproduction, beauty and worshiped by the Miao people (Liu Jia & Wang Qunshan, 2017). Moreover, according to the beliefs of the Miao people, the beautiful appearance and strong reproductive ability of butterflies are in line with the aesthetics of the Miao ethnic group. However, the strongest reason is that the Miao people made butterflies as a symbol of worship to their ancestors. In ancient Miao songs, it is explained that the butterfly mother is the ancestor of everything in the world. These include Miao ancestors, ghosts, animals, plants, thunder, lightning, and many more. All of this is derived from the mother butterfly. He Chen (2006) wrote in his book 'Miao Batik', that butterfly pattern is the embodiment of the primitive religious beliefs of the Miao nationality. Therefore, this proved that the important of butterfly's motif and pattern in Miao batik as well as their community.



**Figure 13:** Butterfly pattern



**Figure 14:** Dragon pattern

Meanwhile, in addition to butterflies, the dragon pattern is also the most common pattern in Miao batik. Chinese people have worshipped the dragon and regarded it as the symbol of the Chinese nation since ancient times. “The Miao dragon was indeed influenced by Han dragon”, Li Shan (2019) noted, and she further explained that the Miao dragon represents the commoner consciousness, symbolizing friendship, equality, and harmony, which is different from the imperial power represented by the Han dragon. Miao craft women usually create the dragon pattern according to their own understanding and aesthetic appreciation, for this reason there is no unified style of Miao dragon, and the shape is far from the standard of Han dragon.



**Figure 15:** Plant pattern for children clothing

Without doubt, Miao batiks also show a wide variety of plant patterns, especially the local plants (see figure 15). This is because the Miao people live in the mountainous areas of Guizhou Province for a long time and the picturesque natural environment provided an abundance of sources and creative inspiration for them. Besides that, Miao people in Leigongshan are also regard themselves as an integral part of nature (Dongchang Zhao & Feng Liu, 2021). Generally, the plant pattern frequently used in Miao batik art is influenced by the nature, lifestyle, custom, belief etc. For example, when designers design plant motifs, they prefer plants with positive and beautiful meaning, for example the lotus symbolizing love, the pomegranate symbolizing fertility, the peach symbolizing longevity, etc.



**Figure 16:** Bronze drum pattern

In terms of geometric patterns, the study conducted by He Chen (2006) believed that on the one hand, the geometric patterns express the Miao's knowledge and understanding of society and environment, and on the other hand, the geometric patterns also have the nature of primitive witchcraft. Most of the geometric motifs depict either flora or fauna that have undergone simplification, stylization, and abstraction from the original motifs. Some motifs are too stylized or abstracted and there can be a difficulty in identifying the original source of the motif (Daoling & Pengpeng, 2021). For example, the drum pattern in figure 16 above, represented by the circle is the most ancient and typical pattern. In ancient times, bronze drums were often used for sacrifice, entertainment and war (Ma, 2010). Miao craftsmen represent their worship of bronze drums in batik, which also symbolize their memory and worship of ancestors. There is also a common geometric pattern in Miao batiks which seems to look like a spiral and is called Swirl Pattern (figure 17). Many scholars also call this pattern "Wuotuo", in fact, "Wuotuo" means "batik" in Miao language. Swirl pattern of Danzhai Miao batik, according to Zhang Huan and Tian Xin (2019), is the most rigorous and unique, as it must be composed of eight spirals in a regular pattern. This pattern consists of eight circular spirals spread around the ancient coin pattern or bronze drum pattern in the middle, which is associated with offering sacrifices to ancestors and recording history. Therefore, the design of this pattern cannot be changed.



**Figure 17:** Swirl pattern (Sleeve)

As we can see, Miao batik patterns originates from national history, myth, worship of nature, ancestors and reproduction, primitive witchcraft and so on. Danzhai Miao batik has various compositions, rich patterns, wide themes, varied shapes, bold ideas, highly unified content, and form, and has profound national cultural connotation and artistic characteristics. These patterns play an important role in cultivating national consciousness and preserving national individuality of Miao

nationality. In addition, they also have the functions of cultural symbols and recording history for nationalities without writing.

### **Analysis Study on The Aesthetic Design of Miao Batik**

The composition and modelling design of Miao batik both reflect that the Miao women take full as the aesthetic pursuit. The fullness and integrity of the composition symbolizes happiness, harmony, while symmetry and balance are the basic principles of batik composition aesthetics. In general, Miao batik adopts symmetrical and balanced form in the composition, in the picture, there exists both the main pattern and the auxiliary pattern. Most of the batik patterns take the centre line or centre point as the axis, using upper and lower symmetry, left and right symmetry or four-angle symmetry. The Miao batik design is mostly full, orderly, and complex, but not messy. This way of composition has a generous, dignified feeling. From our observation, we believed, the Danzhai Miao batik has a large and wide format, rich with composition, varied and exaggerated patterns, as well as visual tension and uninhibited artistic style.



**Figure 18:** Upper and lower symmetry design (Quilt)

While, from the perspective of modelling design, the Miao women are skilled in regrouping and transforming various kinds of plants and geometric patterns to form the composition patterns. When Miao people create batik, they do not stick to the original objects and the connection between them, but cleverly combine some elements of them together. For example, some butterfly patterns are a combination of the torso of the fish and the wings of the butterfly (figure 19). Some other bird patterns grow up with flowers and vines which can see in the figure 20 and 21. These curious batik designs show the rich imagination and creativity of the Miao women. Moreover, the Miao batik design also creates a three-dimensional space. They present the front and back sides of objects in the one pattern and creating a sense of space in the plane.



**Figure 19:** Fish and butterfly pattern



**Figure 20:** Butterfly and bird pattern

The Miao batik craftsmen are not limited their skills by imitating natural things and object reality, but they also deconstruct and restructure the graphics according to their hobbies and aesthetic habits. Therefore, the traditional batik pattern is very vividness and idealistic. The Miao community believes that all living creatures are spiritual in nature and different species are interchangeable. In this way, the patterns will be able to reflect their animistic primitive religious vision. In fact, the traditional patterns will look more vivid and idealistic. For them although this form violates the laws of nature, but the form is clearer and has more ethnic characteristics.



**Figure 21:** Bird and flower pattern

The colour of traditional Chinese batik is not limited to blue, but for Danzhai batik, it is the most distinctive feature of the area that take blue as main colour in monochromatic batik. The colour of Danzhai Miao batik art is different from other colourful folk art. This based on the classic blue and white colour, the simple and elegant colours are a symbol of the integration and harmony of all things, blue and white collocation, which give a simple, fresh aesthetic enjoyment to people. Although the batik is only blue and white, the clever combination of dots, lines and space makes the whole pattern present rich colours and layers, which makes it look simple and lively.



**Figure 22:** Traditional batik pattern on indigo blue colour fabric

Miao batik is a folk handicraft based on traditional agricultural economy and society, which emphasizes the harmonious coexistence between man and nature and between man and society. It can be said that it is the potential driving force for maintaining the survival and development of tradition for the nation. Moreover, in Miao costumes, patterns of costumes usually have special significance and strong national cohesion. To a certain extent, it plays the role of group identification, marking ethnic culture and managing ethnic groups. These vivid and interesting pattern, orderly form, elegant and simple colours from the mountains of daily work experience and perception from Miao or in other words Hmong ancestors. All these patterns reflect the deep understanding of beauty, the expression of feelings and the love for nature, as well as a high artistic aesthetic connotation.

## **CONCLUSION**

Miao batik, if well preserves by the cultural traditions of ethnic minorities, has unique artistic characteristics. To sum up, batik not only reflects the life interest and aesthetic ideal of Miao people, but it also becomes the carrier of Miao nationality culture and historical development. Batik patterns not only convey the information of historical changes and folk culture of Miao nationality, but also have strong regional and national characteristics. However, with the development of globalization, the traditional batik is dying in a fast rate, and the present situation of its inheritance is worrying. Although the local government and research institutions have formulated corresponding protection measures, traditional batik art needs more researchers' attention because the cultural environment suitable for traditional batik has changed. More importantly, no matter how modern batik of Miao nationality changes, researchers should always respect the cultural values and aesthetic concepts created by Miao ancestors in excavating and protecting the cultural connotation and humanistic spirit behind batik patterns, as well as protect and inherit this national printing and dyeing technology and its unique artistic characteristics.

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