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OATG events programme

Thursday 19 July 2018

Sumba – Island of the Ancestors a talk by OATG members David and Sue Richardson

David and Sue have researched and written about Asian textiles for many years and believe that some of the finest textiles are produced on the Indonesian island of Sumba. They will focus on two of the main techniques used – supplementary warp and warp ikat. Textiles are fundamental to life on the island, being used extensively in bride-wealth exchanges, for settling disputes, and for funerals. Some beautiful examples of Sumbanese textiles will be shown.

Location: The Pauling Centre, 58a Banbury Road, Oxford OX2 6QS.

Time: 6 pm for a 6.15 pm start

Tuesday 4 September 2018

Unpicking Woven Heritage: Cultural narratives of handwoven eri silk textiles from Meghalaya, Northeast India a talk by Anna-Louise Meynell

Remote Northeast India is home to eri silk, a fibre rich in cultural significance. It is cultivated and woven by many of the ethnic groups, each with their own techniques and traditions. In Meghalaya it is almost exclusively dyed with natural dyes and woven on simple bamboo floor looms. The weaving communities have been exposed to social change for generations, much of which can be 'read' through the textiles and techniques. The presentation explores these cultural narratives through an analysis of the textiles. It will conclude with samples and products for sale.

Location: The Pauling Centre, 58a Banbury Road, Oxford OX2 6QS.

Time: 6 pm for a 6.15 pm start.

Tuesday 2 October 2108

Japanese Export Kimonos a talk by Allie Yamaguchi

The talk will be preceded by a viewing of related material from the Ashmolean collection selected by our chairman Aimée Payton and the curator for Japanese Art Dr Clare Pollard.

Location: Ashmolean Museum Jameel Centre Study Room 1 (for the viewing) and the Education Centre (for the presentation)

Time: 4.15–4.55 pm (viewing) and 5.15 pm (presentation)

OATG events are free for members and £3 for non-members.

For more information and/or registration please contact: oatg.events@gmail.com

Contents

Unpicking Woven Heritage, Cultural narratives of handwoven eri silk textiles from Meghalaya, Northeast India by Anna-Louise Meynell	3
The Chris Hall collection of Chinese Textiles	15
Book Review: <i>Kam Women Artisans of China</i>	22
My favourite... by David and Sue Richardson	25
Dress labelled 'tribal' sparks Hmong outcry	29
Hazara bridegroom's smock identified	30
OATG contacts and administration	31

Front cover *Khasi mother weaving on a floor loom.* See article on opposite page.

Unpicking Woven Heritage

Cultural narratives of handwoven eri silk textiles from Meghalaya, Northeast India

by Anna-Louise Meynell

Eri silk weaving in Northeast India is a reflection of the culture, the natural environment, and the social context of its weavers. Eri silk is cultivated and woven by many of the ethnic groups of the region, each with their own traditions and techniques.



Eri silk fibre and handspun yarn.



Eri silk worm and cocoon.

Eri silk is native to the northeast: a fibre that defines the textile culture of the region in its tactile aesthetic and its production process. The characteristic slubby texture and the dull sheen of the matt eri silk have led to it being called locally as ‘the poor man’s silk’ when compared with the smooth and shiny texture of muga or mulberry silk. Recently, eri silk has been termed *ahimsa*, or ‘peace silk’, as it does not harm the silkworm when the silk is extracted. Unlike the continuous filament of a mulberry silk cocoon, the eri cocoon is made up of short staple fibres. This requires it to be hand spun, which results in its characteristic rustic texture. In the Khasi communities of Meghalaya, it is still almost exclusively dyed with natural dyes and is traditionally woven on simple bamboo floor looms.

My research examines the social and tribal history of some of the weaving communities of Meghalaya through their textiles. These communities have been exposed to significant ethnic and social change for many centuries, and I have first explored the notion that tribal identity in Northeast India transcends state boundaries, and secondly that a regional identity has formed which acknowledges the human exchanges, intervention and interaction over generations.

Meghalaya, Northeast India

There is a long history of tribal migration across Northeast India and the neighbouring countries. Long before modern political borders were drawn, power between tribal groups and kingdoms rose and fell on a continuous basis, constantly shifting the region’s demographics. The Ri Bhoi district of Meghalaya, the focus of my study, has been the location of many of these demographic changes over the centuries. As the cultures interacted there are indications of cross-fertilisation.

ERI SILK TEXTILES FROM MEGHALAYA

Meghalaya was the northeastern headquarters of the British , well positioned on the border of Bengal (now Bangladesh) and a gateway to the northeast. The wet, cool climate of Meghalaya – known as ‘Scotland of the East’ – offered respite from hot

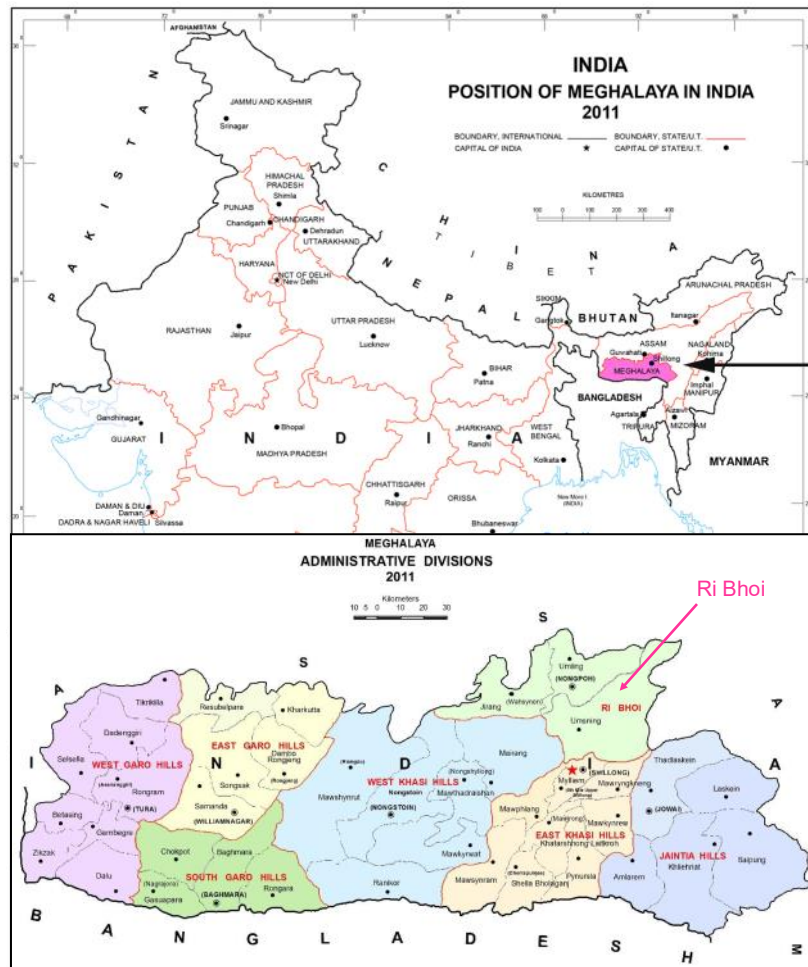
Indian summers. Over time the Khasis came to accept the presence of the British and the social developments they brought with them.

The Ri Bhoi district, at a lower altitude than the hilly areas of the state, receives heat from the Assamese river plains, and with the frequent rains is a fertile area. This, and the accepting nature of the native Khasi Bhoi people, has encouraged numerous tribes to settle in the area.

Production process

The Ri Bhoi District is the hub of eri silk weaving, largely because of this fertile environment. eri silk has always been cultivated domestically in Meghalaya, and still is today. Cloth made from Eri silk has a humble charm that reflects the rural

communities who weave it. The quality of the silk depends on the quality of the castor leaves on which the worms feed. The texture of the thread is dictated by the hand of the spinner. The natural dyes are sourced locally, and the weaver, working with a bamboo floor loom, brings her own signature to the cloth's design and construction.



Eri silkworms feed on castor leaves for a month before spinning their cocoons.

ERI SILK TEXTILES FROM MEGHALAYA



Right Spinning of eri silk is done with a simple drop spindle, or takli.



Left Turmeric grows in abundance in Meghalaya. **Above** The fresh bulb is pounded into a dye paste.



Above The resin secreted from the stick lac insect is... **Centre** ...pounded to create a pinky-red dye. **Right** The turmeric dye is mixed with water, heated on an open fire and is ready for the yarn.

ERI SILK TEXTILES FROM MEGHALAYA

The traditional *Khasi* method of weaving is on a *thain madan* (floor loom). It is a simple structure made of locally-sourced bamboo and wood. The warp is stretched between two sets of wooden posts, and tensioned by a bamboo or wooden beam at the beginning and the end of the warp. The *lewi* (string heddles) are set up with each new warp to create the shed. The *snad* (the reed) is also crafted from a thin bamboo pole at the top and bottom. The teeth, or dents, creating the comb of the reed, are thin strips of bamboo, held in place by tightly wound cotton.



Top left Hand tying the lewi (heddles) for each warp.

Above and left The handmade snad (reed) made from local bamboo.

Below left and right The Khasi floor loom may be set up anywhere, and is often rolled up at night to avoid the morning dew.



Ethnic groups and their dress

The primary tribal families indigenous to Meghalaya are the Khasis, the Jaintias and the Garos. A unifying thread of the three is the matrilineal structure of their societies. In Khasi society the bloodline of a clan is passed through the mother. A newly-married man will go to live with his wife, and their children will take her name. Property and family inheritance are passed to the youngest daughter, who has the responsibility of maintaining the clan's lineage. Family and community authority lie with the man, but there is a great deal of respect for the woman and her role as maternal head.

The pure Khasis, the mother tribe of numerous Khasi sub-groups, traditionally wear a simple garment called the *jainsem* – two pieces of untailored cloth pinned on the shoulders. They do not use any waistband, head-cloth or sarong. Their dress is neat, elegant and uncluttered.

The Khasi Bhoi, a sub-group of the Khasi family, make up the largest ethnic community in the Ri Bhoi district. They follow traditional Khasi beliefs and social structure, yet have their own customs, dress and celebrations which relate to the agricultural cycle of the Ri Bhoi district. The Khadar Lyngdoh community are the other Khasi sub-tribe that forms part of this study. They adamantly define themselves as Khasi, yet the complex and layered aesthetic of their traditional dress indicates they are culturally distinct, even from the Khasi Bhoi, their immediate neighbours.

The Karbi (known as Mikir by the British) migrated from the Karbi Anlong district in Assam, escaping persecution to find refuge in the more hospitable Ri Bhoi district. As a community, they maintain their cultural identity as members of the Karbi family, which in terms of customs is closer to the ethnic groups in the State of Assam than to the Khasis.

The key cultural difference is the matrilineal system of the Khasis and the patrilineal system of the Karbis. When intermarriage takes place, most commonly a Khasi man takes a Karbi bride as the power struggle between a matrilineal Khasi wife and patrilineal Karbi husband is not easily overcome. A cross-ethnic marriage of a Karbi bride elevates her to



Above The jainsem of traditional Khasi dress, here with a thohrewstem shawl.



Right The Khasi Bhoi traditional dress with thoh pan sashes.

ERI SILK TEXTILES FROM MEGHALAYA

the maternal head of her new clan when she joins the Khasi family. She may remain Karbi, yet she will adapt to the Khasi milieu and her children will be Khasi. As many Karbi women weave, they are likely to bring their handwoven fabrics to their new home, and share their knowledge of weaving and technical skills with their daughters and the women around them.



Above The *thoh pan* waistband/sash, worn by the Khadar Lyngdoh.



Above right Karbi women. **Right** Older dress of the Karbis.



The *thoh pan* shown in the images above is a sash with complex supplementary weft designs. It is tied around the waist, and worn as part of a ceremonial or a dancer's dress. It is a fascinating cloth for ethnographic study as it features in the Khasi groups of the Ri Bhoi district, but definitely not in pure Khasi dress. It is also worn by the Karbis in Assam and Meghalaya. There is little documentation to confirm the ethnic origins of this garment, and the collective memory of the present-day artisans does not reach further back than three generations. It is an example of tribal assimilation between the communities who live peacefully side by side.

ERI SILK TEXTILES FROM MEGHALAYA

Traditional Khasi fabrics

As with many traditional communities, weaving is deeply integrated into the cultural fabric of the rural communities of Meghalaya. The traditional eri silk fabrics of Khasi weavers are simple. The most common is the *tlem*, an undyed, naturally-white, scarf. It is of plain-weave construction with a simple design of three or nine ribs known as *khnong*. The design reveals the superstitious nature of the Khasis. The *khnong* ribs, in multiples of three, offer protection from the devil, just as a gate with three horizontal bamboo poles prevents the devil from entering a home. The *tlem* is worn by both men and women, and is the customary gift for important guests or dignitaries.



Left A typical bamboo gate in a Khasi Bhoi village. Its three horizontal bamboo poles prevent the devil from entering a home. **Right** The natural white eri silk *tlem* scarf.



The thohrewstem or Khasi check.



Tying the knotted tassels on the thohrewstem.

ERI SILK TEXTILES FROM MEGHALAYA

The *thohrewstem* (Khasi check) is the cloth that most clearly communicates Khasi tribal identity. It is a small red and yellow check similar to gingham. It is of plain-weave construction in stick lac red and turmeric yellow, the most abundant natural dye colours in Meghalaya.

Of the handwoven Khasi textiles, only the *tlem* and the *thohrewstem* are widely known as pure Khasi. The Khasi Bhoi subgroup of the Ri Bhoi district is an intriguing example of cross-cultural assimilation, as there are many more fabrics that represent them, hinting at cultural influences from other tribes in the Ri Bhoi district.



Left Stripes and checks of the Khasi Bhoi from the Ri Bhoi district. **Right** A supplementary weft design from the Khasi Bhoi community.

Narratives within the textiles

A key participant for my research, Kong Thran Tmung, is a weaver from the Khasi Bhoi area of Raid Nongthluh. One of the most complex pieces in her collection is an antique *thoh pan*, woven and worn by her grandmother. As both a weaver and dancer, her grandmother retained this piece when many similar items were destroyed. The *absence* of other antique *thoh pan* textiles offers as much insight into social change in the area as does an analysis of the item itself. The arrival of missionaries brought a major change to the social and cultural world of Meghalaya as Khasis across the state embraced Christianity. Expressions of traditional culture were viewed by the missionaries as pagan and were discouraged or forbidden. Traditional rituals, dances and celebrations came to an abrupt halt, and once the textiles and costumes were rendered worthless, they were sold or discarded.

The rusty-red colour in the antique *thoh pan* (shown at the top of the next page) comes from a local leaf known as *jajew*, while the blue is from a local indigo plant. Indigo dyeing is no longer practised, and knowledge of the laborious technique has virtually died out. Based on discussions with her grandmother, Kong Thran has been able to shed some light on the weaver's thought process behind the designs. While not common to all weavers of the area, the interpretations reflect the artisan's own relationship with her culture and surroundings.

The designs marked A and B are called *khmat nakhmat* and *khmat nadien*, respectively. The designs are a woven interpretation of the bamboo patterns of the decorative door panels of the matrilineal queen's house. The *syiem lukhimi*, loosely translated as 'queen', or 'king's mother', is the keeper of culture, the organiser and

ERI SILK TEXTILES FROM MEGHALAYA

patron of traditional festivals. The designs reflect the respect for the queen, and also demonstrate that there is a set of pattern conventions used not only in this medium but elsewhere. Bamboo is plentiful in the area, and bamboo craft is practised right across the region.

The design marked C is *khmat longsan*. The Khasi social structure is complex and has many layers of authority. The family clan is held as the most important, followed by the village council, the *dorbar*. The diamonds in the design represent the heads of the clan elders sitting together in the *longsan* for a community meeting.

An antique thoh pan, or dancer's waistband, of the Khasi Bhoi. See text for explanation of the designs marked A, B and C.



The designs of the Khadar lyngdoh

The artisans of the Khadar lyngdoh ethnic group do not weave in eri silk in the same way as the Khasi Bhoi, largely due to a lack of knowledge of silkworm rearing. Instead they cultivate and spin cotton, although mill-spun cotton, acrylic wool and polyester are now available in the market. They weave geometric patterns using the supplementary weft technique, yet they have mastered the technique far better than the present-day Khasi Bhoi weavers. The artisans all use the same names for the designs, indicating there is a collective understanding of them.



Khmat lyngdoh.



Khmat lewi.

ERI SILK TEXTILES FROM MEGHALAYA

Khmat lyngdoh is a design that represents one of the most important figures in the community – the *lyngdoh* (priest) performs the rites and rituals of the indigenous Khasi religion. The vertical line of nine diamonds separating the motif repeats is protection against the devil. *Khmat lewi* is a direct reference to the craft of weaving. The small diamond-shaped eyes of the design represent the eye of the *lewi*, the heddles of the loom made by hand when setting up a floor loom. The *Khmat dulong byrnie* design is an interesting reference to the physical surroundings. The original Dulong Byrnie was a wooden bridge constructed some three generations ago on the Meghalaya/Assam border. It has long since been replaced by a concrete one, but the design remains an indicator of the impact its construction had on the weavers.



Khmat dulong byrnie.



Khmat dkhar.

The *Khmat dkhar* design is an example of the interaction between locals and outsiders. The translation of the Khasi word *dkhar* is ‘outsider’ or ‘foreigner’. It is a commonly used word, although now in a derogatory manner. It could be that the design is an interpretation or copy of the textiles that the Khadar Lyngdoh weaver might have seen belonging to other ethnic groups who had settled in the area.

Karbi designs

The Karbi have a more hard-working and productive approach to weaving, and have a strong Assamese influence in their culture and textiles. Their skills in creating complex designs far outdo the Khasis, and their design vocabulary is far broader, incorporating figurative and geometric designs such as birds, flowers, mythical creatures and human figures, although the weavers consulted were not aware of any particular design names or significance in them.



Figurative and geometric designs of the Karbis.

ERI SILK TEXTILES FROM MEGHALAYA

It is likely that the Karbis are at least one of the ethnic groups the Khadar Lyngdoh refer to as *dkhar*, which suggests a possible origin for the *Khmat dkhar* design: there is a similarity between the *Khmat dkhar* design with the second design from the bottom of the *thoh pan* shown in the image to the right.

The supplementary weft techniques

It is not only the designs, but also the variations in the supplementary weft techniques that give insight into cultural exchange. The Khasi Bhoi weavers traditionally pick the design freehand from memory or replicate an existing sample. It is picked with a *wait*, a smooth sword-like stick with a pointed end.

The Karbi technique of inserting sticks at the back of the warp allows the weaver to repeat the design, or reflect the motif without having to pick the entire sequence again. This technique has been adopted by many Khadar Lyngdoh weavers, and to some extent the Khasi Bhoi weavers in Raid Nongtloh. This transmission of traditional technology is testament to the frequent interaction between the artisan communities, sharing knowledge and textile practices.



A Karbi thoh pan.



Left Picking the supplementary weft designs with the waid.

Below Thin bamboo sticks are inserted at the back of the warp to retain the design.



Conclusion

At the outset of this research, my intention was to find evidence for the ethnic origins of the *thoh pan* and the geometric supplementary weft designs. After prolonged discussion with the weavers, it emerged that the textiles are of deep significance to all of the communities, and they believe them to have been part of their respective tribal identity for generations.

ERI SILK TEXTILES FROM MEGHALAYA

It seems clear that the presence of the Karbis has influenced the Khasi subgroups in the Ri Bhoi district in many ways. However without documentation, or a living memory beyond three or four generations, any conclusion is only speculative. It is likely that there is a fluid cross-cultural assimilation, for as communities live alongside each other, interacting and exchanging through trade, marriage and celebrations, culture is shared, absorbed and adopted. The Ri Bhoi weavers discussed in this article are an example of this cross-cultural assimilation, which has occurred in the region throughout history. It illustrates the shifting and dynamic tribal identities in a region with a diverse ethnic heritage.

Hand-weaving in Meghalaya is a living craft that continues to adapt to contemporary challenges. Globalisation, trade and diversity of products in local markets are changing the aesthetics and the design vocabulary of the weavers once again. Synthetic yarn is often used as it is cheap and avoids the laborious process of hand-spinning eri silk or cotton. Now designs are beginning to reflect imported textiles as the weavers have access to cloth from many sources. Some weavers even interact with Facebook and WhatsApp, drawing inspiration from the internet. While this dilutes the purity of the indigenous design, it is simply another phase in the evolution of their craft.

Modernity and human interactions will always influence weavers in their creative process, and in turn the weavers will leave clues in their textiles of the social changes of their times.

Anna-Louise Meynell is a weaver, textile designer, and consultant. Her doctoral research is through the London College of Fashion supervised by Prof Sandy Black and Dr Eiluned Edwards, and combines her knowledge of weaving and her interest in the indigenous cultures of Northeast India. In 2013 she launched Annaloom, working with hand-weavers in Asia to develop textiles combining traditional techniques with her design aesthetic: www.annaloom.com. She lives in Assam with her husband, Champak Deka. They run a bespoke tour company, Native Northeast, which has textile and cultural tours of Northeast India: www.nativenortheast.com.

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Acknowledgements

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Lecture

Champak Deka and Anna-Louise Meynell will be giving a talk to OATG in Oxford on 4 September 2018, presenting both this research and Northeast India.

The Chris Hall collection of Chinese Textiles

Chris Hall declared that “My collection is my life’s work”, in an interview with Bloomberg in 2006. This came across loud and clear when the 15th Conference of the Early Textiles Study Group heard from Chris Hall when he talked about *Badges of rank at the Chinese Court (14th–16th centuries)* using examples from his collection. Showing slides of these stunning early pieces, he also spoke about collecting and about specific textiles that he owned. The Early Textiles Study Group two-day conference was held at Lucy Cavendish College, Cambridge, in September last year.



Chris Hall examines a red Tibetan jacket made from 17th-century Chinese embroidered silk, originally a Daoist priest's robe. Behind him is his 2009-portrait by Paul Binny in which he is wearing a robe made of 80-year-old Japanese obi material. Photograph Fredi Marcarini.

A tax accountant by trade, inveterate collector Chris Hall first chanced across Imperial Chinese robes at a Sotheby's auction in Hong Kong in 1978. He has been hooked ever since. “It changed my life”, he says. “The ancient Chinese clothes on display were of astonishing beauty, finely embroidered in bright colours. Many cost over US\$ 650, the equivalent of my monthly salary at the time. I couldn't afford them, but it was love at first sight. I realised that my passion as a collector had finally found an object on which to focus. I also realised that, unlike jade and precious stones, there was no real recognition for the great cultural legacy of historical mandarin garments.”

Although his collection did not really start in earnest until 1985, when his income had risen sufficiently high, he began buying prolifically. Sometimes on trips to China he acquired as many as 30 to 50 pieces at a time. Events snowballed, and as his wealth grew, so did his appetite for finer items. Dealers began calling. “If the piece cost

CHRIS HALL COLLECTION OF CHINESE TEXTILES

tens of thousands of dollars, they would show it to me. If it were hundreds of thousands of dollars they would show it to the Met [the Metropolitan Museum of Art]. Since then I've spent all my spare money on textiles, and I'm extremely gratified when, during my travels in China, I'm offered antique textiles that are blatant copies of those I already own."

Chris Hall was born in the Sudan in 1952, the son of British colonial administrators, but home is Hong Kong. He first went there as a three-year-old in 1955 for three years when his father, just prior to Sudanese independence, was appointed assistant bursar at the University of Hong Kong. The family returned to Hong Kong in 1968, and Chris himself came to work there in 1978 after school in UK, reading history at Pembroke College, Cambridge, and qualifying as a chartered accountant in London.

The Chris Hall collection comprises not only imperial robes and badges of rank, but also domestic goods such as furniture coverings, advertisements for textiles, and ephemeral items such as an ink pattern on paper for a dragon robe. His purpose is to have a comprehensive assemblage of Chinese textiles of all periods. Some of his collection is now held in Singapore, but many items are in his flat in Hong Kong, where they are kept in museum conditions.



Republican period advertisement for good-quality dyed cloth, showing a gentleman in a changsan (long gown) where the colour has run. He is buying better quality cloth to replace it, while a lady customer looks on in wry amusement.

Private collections of Chinese textiles were rare when Chris Hall started apart from the notable exception of that put together by the foremost Chinese textile collector of the early twentieth century, the Chinese politician Zhu Qiqian (1872–1964). After the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911, many textile works from the imperial collection made their way to Zhu Qiqian. Amongst Zhu's published works are the catalogue of his personal collection *Cunsutang sixiu lu* 存素堂絲 繡錄 (Catalogue of Silks and Embroideries from the White Repository) published in 1935, many objects of which

CHRIS HALL COLLECTION OF CHINESE TEXTILES

came from the imperial collections, and Qing neifu kesi shuhua lu 清内府刻絲書畫錄 (Kesi and Textiles in the Qing Imperial Collection) published in 1963.

Hall's textiles first attracted international attention when they formed the nucleus of an exhibition which he co-curated at the Hong Kong Museum of Art in 1995, *Heaven's Embroidered Cloths – One Thousand Years of Chinese Textiles*, and for which he wrote most of the entries in the 488-page catalogue of the same name which was published by the Urban Council of Hong Kong. As well as drawing on his own collection, the exhibition included pieces from all over the world, including the Liaoning Museum, which has the best collection of Chinese textiles in mainland China, and a private American collection.

“One of my aims is to publicise one of China's great achievements: the discovery of silk and its manufacture into beautiful works of art”, Chris Hall says. “Chinese people know little of their textiles and much has disappeared. I want to acquaint them with one of their main contributions to civilisation. I've lent many of them to two institutions so that as many people as possible can enjoy their beauty: the Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore, which houses about 220 of them, and the China National Silk Museum in Hangzhou.”



Chris Hall with two imperial robes in the *Heaven's Embroidered Cloths – One Thousand Years of Chinese Textiles* exhibition in Hong Kong in 1995.

In 2004, textile collector and researcher Judith Rutherford co-curated the exhibition *Celestial Silks: Chinese Religious and Court Textiles* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, which borrowed heavily from the Chris Hall collection; and in Singapore in 2006, 125 items of his collection were shown at the Asian Civilisations Museum under the title *Power Dressing: Textiles for Rulers and Priests from the Chris Hall collection*. The exhibition presented the 2,000-year history of Imperial rule in China. The oldest exhibit in Singapore was from the Warring States period (475–221 BCE), and the most recent an official's badge from the court of the Hongxian emperor (1915–1916). Chris Hall's collection does not stand still and, for instance, it now includes a celebratory weaving from the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

Of the various categories in Chris Hall's collection, Chinese insignia and

CHRIS HALL COLLECTION OF CHINESE TEXTILES

festival badges, particularly earlier examples, have been highlights in the Hong Kong, Sydney and Singapore exhibitions. In 1988, Chris bought from Sotheby's New York eleven Ming insignia and festival badges dating from the Wanli period (1573–1620). They were originally made up into a rectangular panel, but the parts were better than the whole, so after the panel was photographed and the border retained, the individual badges were conserved and are now seen as they should be.

In the Ming dynasty, courtiers were required to wear robes for festivals bearing badges front and back specific to the celebration. The resulting embroidered squares abound with the symbolism of the celebrations for which they were created.



Front and back festival badges. On the **right** is the front panel, with the robe opening made in two pieces, with two tigers invoking protection from the dangers present during the summer and the Five Poisons (snake, scorpion, lizard, toad and centipede). **Left** is the back badge. These badges were designed for wearing from the first to the 15th day of the fifth lunar month, surrounding the time of the Dragon Boat Festival held on the summer solstice on the fifth day, when the negative yin forces are on the rise and the positive yang is at its lowest ebb, leaving little defence against the whims of malevolent powers. Silk embroidery on gauze. Ming dynasty, Wanli period (1573–1620). Front badge Height 36 cm, width 37 cm; Back badge H 36 cm W 37 cm. CH 187a ACM and CH 187b ACM.

Chris Hall explains: “After the communist revolution many male garments, especially those of the imperial period, were burned by owners who didn’t want to risk being linked to that time. Bridal gowns, however, have been preserved, handed down from mother to daughter. In any case, the Chinese do not consider brocades and silks to be an art but rather simple decoration.” The dragon robe worn by the emperor was a symbol of power, wisdom and morality. On it were embroidered nine dragons, bat motifs, and 12 imperial signs such as water weed to show purity and an axe to represent the power to punish. Rank badges, sewn on the back and front of official robes, bear dragons for nobility, phoenixes for princesses, cranes for members of the first civil rank, and so on.

However, the symbols had a new twist when these traditional garments were adapted during the Cultural Revolution. “I have a copy of a badge with a dragon in the air and wheat in the field – the idea being to grow more wheat. Instead of chasing a pearl, the dragon is chasing a sprocket wheel, which symbolises industry, and the red sun in the background symbolises Mao”.

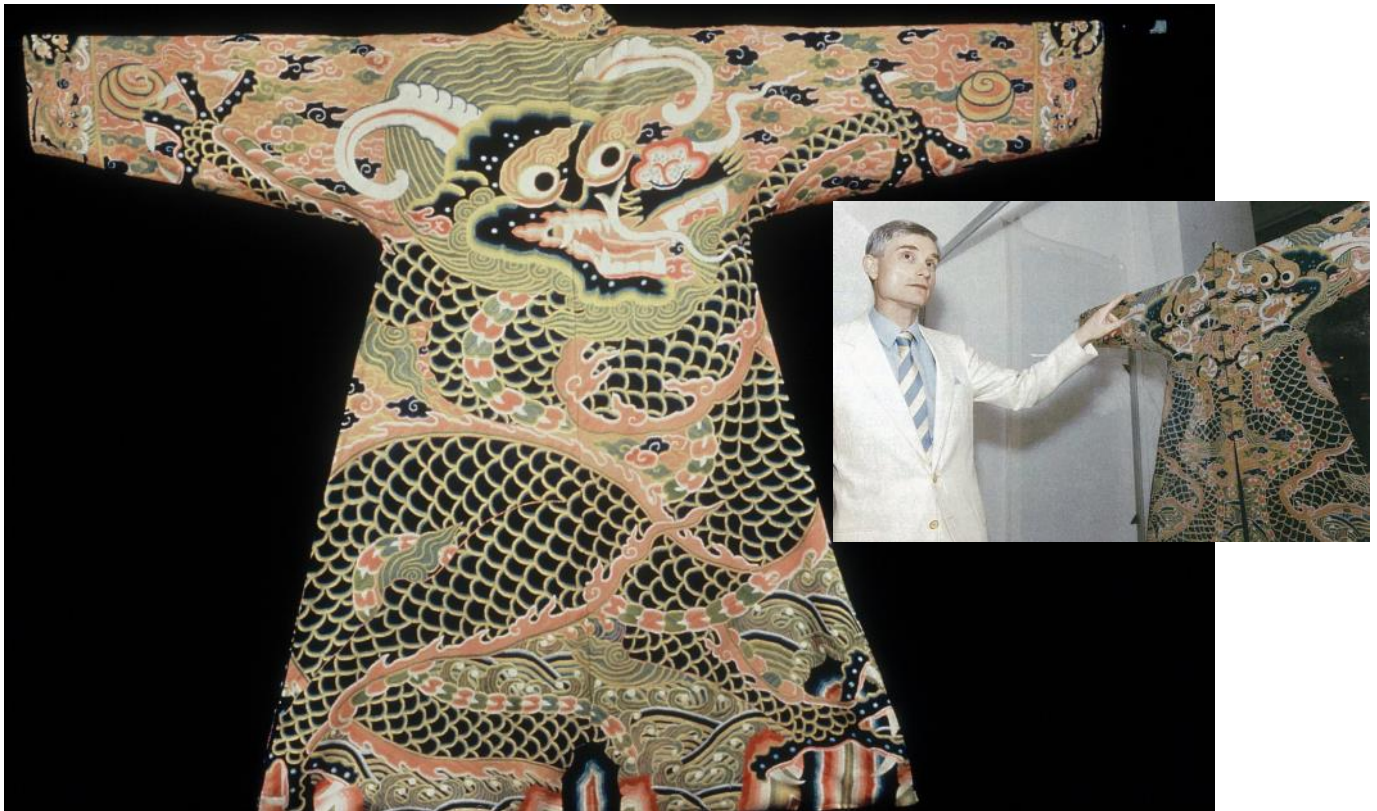


Embroidered badge with a scaled, horse-like creature with a single horn (the Chinese were not known to acknowledge unicorns). Late Ming, Wanli period (1573–1620). H 35 cm W 37.8 cm. CH 60 ACM.

As is the case with most collections of antique Chinese textiles, some of Chris Hall's showpieces, though originally Chinese, come from Tibet, where many outstanding examples were kept in Buddhist monasteries and cared for so they could be used in a few annual ceremonies. The storage conditions in the cool, dry climate preserved them for centuries. They came onto the antique market in the 1980s and 1990s. One of the highlights of Chris Hall's collection, a photograph of which he showed in Cambridge, is a 15th-century robe of a dragon against a pink silk background which he first saw in San Francisco. It is in excellent condition. Many robes now extant were buried with their owners and decayed, but Chris thinks that this one (see the photograph at the top of the next page) remained out of the ground, and like many similar items came out of Tibet.

"Like all collectors I am faced with the continuous problem that there are more things that I want to buy than I can afford," Chris explains. "I therefore try to make my purchasing budget go further by focusing on less popular areas." When he first began collecting, Chris focused on Ming (1368–1644) rather than Qing (1644–1911)

CHRIS HALL COLLECTION OF CHINESE TEXTILES



Chris Hall's favourite robe of gauze entirely covered with counted stitch embroidery in silk floss. A pair of large douniu, a type of horned dragon, on the front (inset with Chris Hall), a single douniu dominates the back (main picture). Early Ming dynasty, circa 1450. H 122 cm W 168 cm. CH 110 ACM.

robes in the expectation that there would always be plenty of Qing robes to buy. A large selection of Ming material was on the market, and he found that his ability to make a quick purchase attracted dealers especially when compared with the time frame that it takes most museums where purchasing committees must agree on acquisitions. However, in due course Qing robes became popular with collectors and therefore expensive, so when this happened, he focused more on buying embroideries and *kesi* tapestries. Now these are sought after by Chinese buyers.



Detail from Kesi silk tapestry. Hanging with decoration of deer in a landscape. Qing dynasty, Kangxi period (1662–1722) 171 x 59 cm.

CHRIS HALL COLLECTION OF CHINESE TEXTILES

Chris Hall's personal system for selecting ancient Chinese fabrics is the Wah! Technique, which he describes as "Wah is a Cantonese expression which translates as 'wow', and is the expression of joy and surprise on my face when I see a fabric that arouses my response to its beauty, tempered with my experience as a collector recognising its rarity, condition and age. I must say, it works!"



A central xiongbei [chest or back cover] of a deer, which is brocaded, holding a lingzhi (fungus of immortality) in its mouth, surrounded by silk patches of brocade, damask and embroidery. Mainly dating from the Yuan dynasty, and probably used as a wall hanging, or an altar, or a throne cover in a Tibetan monastery. This is the oldest badge in the Chris Hall collection. Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368). Height 105cm width 100 cm. CH 203 ACM.

With the increase in buying by the increasingly wealthy mainland Chinese, the prices of Imperial textiles have increased. However, according to his friend David Rosier, who lectured to OATG in May on Chinese badges of rank, Chris Hall is still collecting, and dealers still know to come to him first before offering items elsewhere. As this edition of *Asian Textiles* went to press, Chris Hall was in London where he had just bought some Chinese wallpaper made for an English country house.

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Kam Women Artisans of China

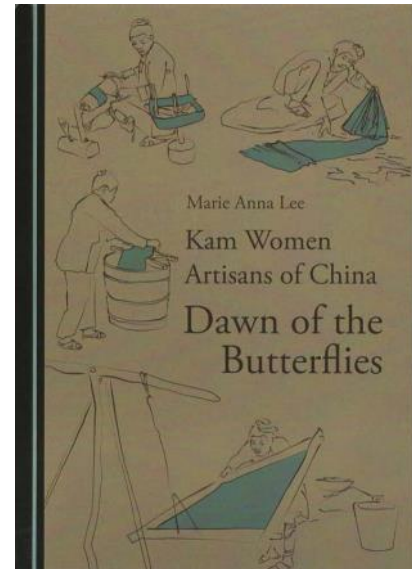
Kam Women Artisans of China: Dawn of the Butterflies by Marie Anna Lee

Book review by Pamela Cross

Published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 2018.
ISBN 978-1-5275-0553-7. 289 pages, A5 size. £76.99.

Deep in the fir woods of south-west China are women who follow the centuries-old lifestyle of their ancestors, the Kam. Their history is told in their songs, and they weave, dye fabric to a rich indigo blue, and embroider sleeves, hems, hats, and bags in bright colours. *Kam Women Artisans of China: Dawn of the Butterflies* is set in the Kam village of Dimen in the mountains of Guizhou in south-west China, and documents the culture of the Kam – or the Dong as they are known to the Han in China, and internationally – in the terms of their textiles, dress and paper.

Marie Anna Lee is an Associate Professor of Art at the University of the Pacific in California. She has worked on the cultural preservation of the Kam heritage since 2007, and in 2014 she was part of the Kam delegation from Dimen to the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington, DC. She has also exhibited her art in USA and China.



Dimen is seven miles from the nearest road and only opened up to the outside world in the 1980s and 1990s. In 2004, the Hong Kong scholar, publisher and entrepreneur Lee Wai Kit founded the *Dimen Dong Cultural Eco Museum* with the aim of studying and preserving Kam/Dong indigenous culture. Marie Anna Lee, then based in Hong Kong, visited Dimen three times between 2007 and 2009. Taking up a faculty position at University of the Pacific in Stockton, California, she then arranged trips in 2010 and 2011, and briefly in 2014. The aim of the later visits was to learn the range of crafts practised there: papermaking, weaving, dyeing, embroidery and making clothing.

Key to learning, and core to the authenticity and the charm of the book, is the group of five elderly women, the *za*, a term of respect in Kam for elderly women, who agreed to teach the author and one or two colleagues a range of skills in the middle of all their other duties such as the care of grandchildren and farming. The reader gains huge respect for these matriarchs who work from sun-up to sun-down: “The *za* have little but lack nothing.” “Through stories, songs and personal example, the *za* weave the centuries-old Kam culture before our eyes.”

Each of their personalities emerge, and they are also shown in the many colour photographs which illustrate their tuition. The *za*’s joyfulness, and their pride in their proficiency, shine through. We see them working together – as many of their techniques require. The pooling of effort, having fun from working together, and any excuse to sing, are all part of their daily life and underpins the teaching process.

Lee did not want just to obtain snapshots of different parts of the production. Her requirement was to learn each technique of every craft and work through all the stages rather than just watching, photographing or filming the process. This was unusual for the *za*, who, when the opportunity arose, tended to move things more quickly. The author's determination to learn every part of the process gives a sense of how long it takes from thread to garment, and the huge amount of effort required. The many stages in the preparation of a skirt is particularly telling. I found the process of dyeing fascinating. The application of the red over-dye, which gives a purplish hue and sets the pleats, was particularly interesting and not something usually explored in such detail.



"Our five teachers show us fabric-dyeing techniques."

I visited several Kam/Dong villages in 2005, so I can tune into the atmosphere of the book, especially the joy that the *za* take in singing, which is so core to their culture and its communication to others. My respect and appreciation of the Dong has led me to focus on many aspects of their craft in my own collecting through the years. I have watched demonstrations of the techniques used, so I had a background for the detailed descriptions in the book. However, I am not sure I would be able to turn my hand actually to execute each technique as shown in the text, diagrams and photographs, although they are numerous and detailed. There is mention that a video was shot which might support the written documentation and provide a useful record.

There are only a couple of references that the Kam are generally known as the Dong. The author's determination to use 'Kam', including in the marketing of this book, could mean she has missed attracting those with an interest in them. The

BOOK REVIEW



"I pleat with Dong Ran's help."

specialist literature invariably refers to them as 'Dong', as indeed they are called in the name of the museum in Dimen. As the book is expensive at £76.99 for an A5 size volume, this is likely to further limit the buying audience.

I found that the volume enhanced my understanding of the Kam/Dong and their crafts which were so much part of their everyday life. I was, however, disappointed to find several minor editing errors. Nevertheless, this does not detract from its overall worth.

Lee does justice to her teachers and showcases their wide range of technical and life skills, all wrapped up in their zest for life and supported by and manifesting their culture.

So much has and is changing in the za's lives. Documenting these indomitable ladies is as important as detailing the skills of which they are such great exponents.

Pamela Cross created in 2000 a tribal textile information website with a forum which she administers. She set up OATG's first website in 2004 and remains its web manager. She joined the British Museum Friends Advisory Council in mid-2016.

Textiles of Myanmar

There are some places available on the Oriental Rug and Textile Society's *Textiles of Myanmar* tour 7–21 Nov 2018.

The cost, sharing a twin or double room, is £2,685, single room supplement £830. Emirates airfare currently from £595. Further details from: www.indusexperiences.co.uk or 020 8901 7320.



Our favourite...dye pot

by David and Sue Richardson

When editor Gavin asked us to write about our favourite textile-related thing, be it a cloth, an item of costume, a weaving village, or island, we were dumbfounded. We had so many, where could we begin?

Our favourite dye pot on the other hand? Well that was an easy choice, especially as we only have one! It was used for dyeing indigo and came from the beautiful low-lying island of Savu in eastern Indonesia, a magical place, covered for the most part by grassland and lontar palms and fringed by sandy beaches and coral reefs.



Our precious Savunese unglazed indigo dye pot from the hamlet of Lede Tadu in the district of Mesara.

The Savunese believe that their two primary natural dyes, indigo and morinda, were created by the very first mythical ancestors, who arrived on the island maybe eighty generations ago. Before starting a new dye pot, it therefore remains vital that the dyer makes a ritual offering of chicken meat, mung beans and rice to the four ancestors who bequeathed the island with its first dyes.

Savu is a very dry island – with no mountains to catch the rain, the vegetation becomes increasingly parched from April to October and, as the streams run dry, water is obtained from wells or small reservoirs. The Savunese call this the hungry season, *musim lapar*, and in the past survived by drinking the juice of the prolific lontar palm tree – sometimes stored in the form of syrup. Yet despite the hostile climate, indigo remains plentiful on Savu. There are three varieties, one indigenous and adapted to the arid environment, the others apparently introduced. Indigo dyeing

OUR FAVOURITE...

normally takes place at the end of the rainy season, between March and May, before the plants become desiccated.

Every dyer has her own indigo recipe. After harvesting, the indigo leaves are left to wilt before they are added to the dye vat with lime powder (obtained from burning coral) and ashes from burning the seedpods of the Java Olive tree, known as *nitias* (*Sterculia foetida*), with the bark of the Castor Oil tree, known as *jarak* (*Ricinus communis*), and the flowers of the Lontar Palm (*Borassus flubellifer*). The lime and ash make the dye vat alkaline, an essential requirement for the bacteria in the indigo plant to grow and produce the enzymes that will hydrolyse the indican into soluble indigo. Other additives include turmeric and a powdered mix of Areca nut, the catkins of the Betel vine and the aluminium-rich leaves and bark of the *luba* or *Symplocos* tree. The vat is left to mature overnight, usually in a dark sheltered spot in the female part of the house.



The very last time our dye pot was used for making indigo.

The ikatted cotton yarns are added the following day. The number of immersions and the right amount of time depends on the depth of colour required. A deep blue may need thirty separate immersions, the yarns thoroughly aerated after each immersion to precipitate the indigo dye onto the surface of the cotton fibres. After every third immersion the yarns are thoroughly dried for several days. To achieve a virtual black, yarns might be given one initial immersion in a dye bath of morinda before the start of the indigo dyeing process.

Dyeing the yarns red with morinda root only takes place after the completion of the indigo dyeing stage. By tradition, women are not permitted to embark on this second stage of dyeing until the indigo blue has faded from their hands.

Buying our delicate pot on Savu was the easiest part. We then faced the challenge of getting it safely back home to the UK. We nursed it on our knees for the domestic flight to Bali and then harangued security and airport staff in Denpasar and

OUR FAVOURITE...



Above Multiple dyeing can achieve a very deep dark blue but not an absolute black.

Right An example of a woman's sarong, known as an èi in Savunese, produced by the weavers of Lede Tadu. This 35-year-old hand-spun èi ledo from the authors' collection is decorated with the ledo serpent motif, restricted to women from the Lesser Blossom or hubi iki matrilineal clan.



David aboard the school truck carrying our dye pot on the bumpy road back to Seba, sitting beside Geneviève Duggan, the leading expert on Savunese ikat.

OUR FAVOURITE...



Making a Savunese dye pot in Lede Tadu.

Doha to treat it as if it were the crown jewels as it passed through numerous x-ray machines and security checks. We also had to guard the overhead locker to prevent our adjacent airline passengers crushing the pot with heavy hand baggage.

In May this year we were fortunate to be given a demonstration of how these pots were made by the same woman who made our own. She is the only remaining potter in the village. The process is simple but very laborious. First, a pile of dry clay powder with the appearance of cement is mixed with water and pounded into a ball on top of an old rice sack. The ball is shaped into a cylinder by hand and the centre hollowed out to form a cup-shape. The bottom is then enlarged by hand into a bowl and the top moulded into an angled rim. Now the walls are thinned, with the potter wetting the outside and beating it with a stick while supporting the inside with a stone. The clay remains remarkably

elastic throughout all of this manipulation. The final stage is to fire the pot in a simple wood fire. It's primitive technology but it works.

Today there are only two or three villages left on Savu that can still produce natural dyes in the traditional manner. Elsewhere chemical dyes prevail. Indonesia is developing rapidly and economic changes are increasingly reaching these outermost islands. Despite the dedicated support provided by Geneviève Duggan to the weavers of Lede Tadu, it is unlikely that all of their daughters will want to follow in their mother's footsteps and dedicate the rest of their lives to binding, dyeing and weaving.

If our pot manages to survive, it might one day be a reminder of a long-lost dyeing tradition on a tiny remote island on the eastern edge of the Indian Ocean.

Editor's note: The Richardsons cite Geneviève Duggan in this article about their favourite dye pot. Dr Duggan has spent many years researching the culture of the island of Savu. She studied at the Institute of Anthropology at Heidelberg, and completed her PhD on memory processes in Savu at Singapore University. Amongst other publications she is the author of *Ikats of Savu; women weaving history in eastern Indonesia* (2001) and her most recent publication is (2017) *Une note au sujet de tissages à chaîne continue dans l'Est de l'Insulinde* [A note about hand-woven cloths with a continuous warp in eastern Indonesia]. Archipel 93, pp 119–132.

The editor would welcome *your* long or short contribution to this series of "My favourite..." place or textile or collection or book etc. Please feel free to get in touch via gavin@firthpetroleum.com

Dress at royal wedding labelled 'tribal' sparks Hmong outcry

Victoria Vorreiter, who wrote the detailed article on Hmong dress in *Asian Textiles* 65, drew the attention of her various correspondents to this story, published on 24 May. Thank you Victoria.

When Prince Harry's ex-girlfriend, Cressida Bonas, arrived at the royal wedding, she wore a colourful dress by English designer Eponine London. The dress is part of the designer's 'Tribal' collection, which is made from "fabrics sourced from antique shops in the north of Thailand," according to the designer's website. In Minnesota, home to the largest urban Hmong population in the United States, the dress did not look 'tribal' at all, but like traditional Hmong clothing. Facebook posts ranged from mildly annoyed to calls of cultural appropriation, while some were flattered to see a Hmong dress worn to a royal wedding.

Xiong Lee Pao, director of the Center for Hmong Studies at Concordia University in St Paul, saw posts about the dress later that day on social media, and said "At first I was happy to see the Hmong culture getting exposure on the national stage, but they didn't reference it as a Hmong outfit." Traditional Hmong clothing has a 5,000-year history, stretching back to a war his ancestors fought against China, and lost. "As we were escaping the Chinese, we lost our writing system. So the elders sewed the alphabet into our clothing."



Cressida Bonas, centre, arrives at St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle for the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle wearing a dress from Eponine London's 'tribal collection'. Photograph Chris Jackson | Pool photo via AP.



Hmong women's clothing as originally worn and as worn by Cressida Bonas.



Hmong fabrics are a record of their history. Bright stripes in the cloth represent specific rivers crossed during their escape to Laos.

Photograph Ian West | Pool photo via AP.

Bright stripes in the cloth represent specific rivers crossed during the escape to Laos. Hmong fabrics are a record of their history – and Xiong said the fashion industry has been exploiting that for years. “I travel to China, Laos and Thailand. I’ve seen entrepreneurs travel into these remote Hmong villages and buy antique clothing. They take it back home, cut it, sew it into a new design and sell it for \$500, when they only paid \$20.” The website of fashion designer Eponine London has been modified since the social media backlash, and has changed the labelling from ‘Tribal’ to ‘Hmong’.

Xiong commented: “They just changed the name of the collection. I don’t think it’s genuine. They never cared in the first place. If the designer really cares about the Hmong people, they should bring some of their profits back to the villages where they found the cloth in the first place.”

Hazara bridegroom’s smock identified



Readers will recall that Carolyn Gurney brought to the February Show & Tell an item (see photograph left) which had been purchased in 1976 by her brother, Roger, in Chicken Street in Kabul. Nobody at the meeting could say what it was precisely, so *Asian Textiles* invited comments on its identification. Member John Gillow promptly emailed: “That Afghan dress front is from a Hazara bridegroom’s smock. Probably bought from my old friend Haji on Chicken Street.” Thank you, John.

Roger Gurney has confirmed that the piece came from Haji Aslam, and has provided two photographs of Haji Aslam’s shop and Chicken Street from circa 1978 (see pictures below).



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We depend on your subscriptions to keep our programme of lectures running, as well as for the printing and postage of *Asian Textiles*.

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THE DEADLINE FOR THE NEXT ISSUE IS MONDAY 8 OCTOBER 2018

Contributions should be emailed to: gavin@firthpetroleum.com



The Khasi-Bhoi traditional dress, with the distinctive waistband/sash called a thoh-pan. See article page 3.