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Hither Come the Merchants: Textile Trade at the 19th Century Courts of Lan Na (north Thailand), Chiang Tung (eastern Shan States), Lan Xang (western Laos) and Sipsong Pan Na (Xinshuang Banna, south-west China).

“Hither come the merchants’ is the beginning of a quote from the 16th century British explorer Ralph Fitch who listed goods from China traded in Chiang Mai, Lan Na.¹ It is not clear whether he actually travelled to the ancient city, or collected his information from another source. It was not until the 19th century that Europeans and Americans became familiar with the inland states of Southeast Asia. What they found was a unique culture that had developed from the 12th century. In the 1890s the inland states came under the control of Siam, China, Britain or France. At the end of the colonial period, they remained as part of Thailand, China, Burma (Myanmar) and Laos (see Map).

The inland Southeast Asian principalities of Lan Na (north Thailand), Chiang Tung (eastern Shan State) Lan Xang (western Laos) and Sipsong Pan Na (Xishuang Banna, Yunnan province, south-west China) formed an area with a common culture, including a written language, architecture, arts, crafts and social organisation. The states, governed by princes and local chiefs were allied through political and marital alliances and trade. This fascinating and complex world has never attracted the level of attention focussed on coastal Southeast Asia where throughout history foreigners came by sea to trade and make conquests. Until recently Southeast Asian textile research has concentrated on coastal trade.

Goods, including silk yarn, textiles, clothing and trimmings were transported overland on mountain passes and through river valleys. Itinerant traders controlled teams of ponies and oxen, elephants were used on some routes; human porters carried packs across the lowlands and along river valleys and on some routes goods were also transported by river.² The trade routes passed through all the major cities of the inland states, going overland to and from the city of Dali, Yunnan, south through Lan Na and on eastward to Luang Prabang, Laos, or south-west to the port of Moulmein in Burma. There was a route to and from the Shan States, through Lan Na and on to Moulmein or to Luang Prabang.³ The route south to Bangkok involved an overland journey as far as the town of Uttaradit on the Nan River where goods were transferred to riverboats for the journey south.⁴ Some caravans made the journey to the town

¹ Fitch, Ralph, ‘The Voyage of M. Ralph Fitch, Merchant of London’, in R. Hakluyt (ed.), *The Principal Navigations, Voyages and Discoveries of the English Nation, 1599*, Vol. 5, Glasgow, 1903-1905.

² Men travelled about fifteen miles a day carrying about eighty pounds (Ferrars, M and Ferrars, B., 1901).

³ McCleod, Capt., 1836, Lowndes, Capt., 1871, Hildebrand, 1875, Satow, Sir E. 1885-1886. Public Records Office, Kew, England.

⁴ Only a few caravans went as far south as Uttaradit, the majority went to Chiang Mai and continued eastwards to the port of Moulmein.

of Thoen on the Nam Ping River. River journeys were hazardous, there were rock pools and dangerous rapids and in some places the rivers were not navigable at all. The boats were then unloaded and the cargoes hauled along the banks with ropes until a safe place was reached. This process alone could take several days. When going downstream the boats were lashed with bamboo poles along the gunwales to help prevent them from capsizing.⁵ All these problems combined to make the Bangkok river route unprofitable. Even the overland routes were not without hazard. They functioned well in areas where there was good security but were subject to banditry where there was poor policing. The path to Yunnan was unsafe in the mid-19th century, and bandits disrupted the Shan State routes in the same period. Traders relied on each other for information regarding safety and the physical condition of the passes.⁶

Itinerant traders were a familiar part of economic life and were allocated resting places at city limits where they were permitted to camp, and feed and water their pack animals. The majority were Yunnanese (Ho) or Shan (Ngio) or Burmese. The Yunnanese (who were mainly Muslims and had both Chinese and Muslim names), were said to be the most adventurous, crossing steep terrain and narrow mountain paths into remote valleys.⁷ Some traders relied on bullocks that were restricted to the easier routes.⁸

At Chiang Mai they were accommodated outside the city wall, their packsaddles deposited at the roadside guarded by fierce dogs. The men and their animals created a colorful scene, as evident in the following excerpt.

*...a party of Shans wearing blue trousers and jackets and great straw hats atop of the silk handkerchiefs which were twined round their top knots. All the oxen wore nose-bags of rattan cane, to prevent them from browsing by the way; and the leaders wore a mask in front of their faces, fancifully worked with cowrie shells, and topped by a beautiful peacock's tail.*⁹

The explorer George Younghusband who travelled in the Shan States was full of praise for the design of the packsaddles that could be loaded and unloaded at great speed.¹⁰

Many of the senior princes of the inland states were engaged in trade. They controlled the merchants and taxed all their transactions. They owned teams of pack animals and also used their slaves as porters. Trade was not the monopoly of male members of the royal families; princesses also owned concessions. Princess Ubonwanna of Chiang Mai (see Plate 1) was described as one of the largest traders in the country with a number of elephants, teams of pack animals and slaves.¹¹ When the British sent an agent to assess the

⁵ Warrington Smyth, H. *Five Years in Siam*, London, 1898.

⁶ McCarthy, James, *An Englishman's Siamese Journals 1890-1893*, published privately, London, 1895.

⁷ McCarthy met a trader called Suliman whose Chinese name was Ma Yueh Tcheng, and another called Suliman Maliki, whose Chinese name was Ma Chaw.

⁸ Sethakul, Ratanaporn, 'Political, Social and Economic Changes in the Northern States of Thailand resulting from the Chiang Mai Treaties of 1874 and 1883', Ph.D. dissertation, Dept. of History, Illinois University, 1989.

⁹ Hallett, Holt, *A Thousand Miles on an Elephant in the Shan States*, London, 1890, repr. Bangkok 1988, p.208.

¹⁰ Younghusband, G. J. *Eighteen Hundred Miles on a Burmese Tat*, London, 1888.

¹¹ Hallett, Holt, 1988, p.103.

amount of goods carried throughout the inland states, it was Princess Ubonwanna who provided him with the statistics.¹²

In terms of court dress and textiles, the caravans were a vital source of supplies. Chinese silk yarn was purchased, or exchanged for local cotton, and woven by the princesses and their attendants in the court workshops. Many royal ladies valued Chinese silk more than locally produced silk that had a coarser texture. In practical terms, Chinese silk yarn was said to be easier to reel and spin because the filaments were less prone to knotting and tangling.¹³ From time to time, there were shortages of local silk that added to the demand for imported yarn.

*The cocoons of the wild silkworm are collected, and employed in the manufacture of native silk fabrics. The quality is coarse, and the supply insufficient for the home demand, considerable quantities of silk being bought from the Yunnan traders in exchange for the Lao cotton, of which far more than enough for local consumption is grown.*¹⁴

More Chinese silk yarn than silk cloth was imported because most women were weavers and produced their own clothing and textiles for the household and for Buddhist monks and monasteries. Weaving textiles for the monks was a way of making merit (spiritual grace for the next life). For the women of inland Southeast Asia weaving was an essential expression of female creativity and even a wealthy princess was not exempt

*'from the necessity for making the silken garments which are the symbol of her rank, any more than the poorer women can do without weaving their cotton clothes'*¹⁵

There are many descriptions by Europeans and Americans who visited palaces where female members of the royal family were engaged in preparing yarn, weaving and working at embroidery frames.¹⁶

Woven cloth with distinctive patterns was an expression of ethnic identity, particularly for women. In Lan Na the princesses wore skirts (*sin*) with central panels woven in horizontal stripes of silk and silver and gold metal thread. An elaborate border (*teen*) with a complex discontinuous supplementary weft pattern (*jok*) was added as a decorative hem. In Laos the central panel generally had vertically striped patterns worked in silk and silver and gold metal thread. A narrower band of continuous supplementary weft, woven in silk and silver and gold metal thread was added at the hem. In the Shan States, the skirt was woven with horizontal stripes of silk and silver and gold metal thread in the central panel. The hem was not woven locally, but made of bands of Chinese silk or silk velvet, Chinese embroidery and sequins (see Plate II). Interestingly village women's dress was similar in design but made from local cotton although according to oral history, wealthier families purchased some

¹² Conway, Susan, *Silken Threads Lacquer Thrones, Lan Na Court Textiles*, River Books, Bangkok 2002.

¹³ Interview with Chao Villai na Chieng Tung, Chiang Mai, 1995.

¹⁴ Bock, Carl, *Temples and Elephants: Travels in Siam*, London 1884, repr. Oxford UK, 1986, p.324.

¹⁵ Op.cit. pp. 322-323.

¹⁶ Bock, 1884, Le May, R. 1926, McGilvary, E., 1877.

silk and fancy trimmings to be worn on festival days.¹⁷

There was a tradition of intermarriage between the courts of inland Southeast Asia, and princesses often left their home courts to live at the court of the bridegroom. The princess, and the attendants who went with her, continued to wear the dress of their homeland. This was made possible because itinerant traders carried Chinese silk yarn and silver and gold thread and trimmings throughout the inland states. In the 19th century a policy of forced resettlement had seen many peasant families moved from one state to another and itinerant traders also supplied them with the materials required to make their clothes. The women of Chiang Kham, Phayao Province *'were fond of the light blue silk ribbon brought by the Ho [Yunnanese], which they used to decorate their jackets. Part of the reason for this was that they themselves were Tai Lu [Lue] and came originally from Sipsong Pan Na and were thus well acquainted with the Ho for some time'*.¹⁸

The princes of the inland states were not identified so easily by their style of dress. At their home courts, most princes wore silk sarongs, made from local silk or from Chinese silk yarn and gold and silver metal thread. Some also wore turbans and shoulder sashes, their ears decorated with flowers. Others were photographed in Chinese Mandarin-style silk shirts and loose-sleeved jackets. For the cool season, court tailors made shirts and jackets from local cloth and from imported Chinese silk, velvet and satin fabrics.

Other textiles carried on the trade routes included silk sashes made in Luang Prabang that were particularly popular with Lan Na princesses. Silver sequins, produced by Shan and Lan Na silversmiths were sewn on skirts and jackets. Goldsmiths and silversmiths also produced silver and gold hair decorations and jewellery. Chinese embroidery, sold by the strip and mother-of-pearl sequins were also used to decorate skirts and jackets. Imports from Moulmein included brass buttons, sewing needles, gold cloth, cotton velvet and flannel, the latter used to line winter jackets. Printed cotton was also carried on this route and was used as room screens and floor mats. Photographs of the princes of the inland states often include cotton hangings used as backdrops (see Plate III). Foreign travellers described being accommodated overnight in palaces (*haw*) where servants would come to hang printed cotton cloths as room dividers to provide privacy.¹⁹ From the Shan States the traders brought homespun silk yarn and silk cloth and lacquer ware which they traded for cotton and salt.

Other dress, textiles and regalia, not directly associated with commerce, also circulated in the inland principalities. On ceremonial occasions associated with tributary obligations, the dress worn by the princes reflected political relationships. The northern Shan courts paid allegiance to China and received Chinese dress, textiles and regalia. Other Shan courts paid tribute to Burma

¹⁷ Interview with Ba Sangda Bansiddhi, Chiang Mai, 1985.

¹⁸ Moerman, Michael, 'Chiangkham's Trade in the "Old Days"' in G. Skinner and A. Thomas Kirsch (eds.), *Change and Persistence in Thai Society: Essays in Honor of Lauriston Sharp*, Cornell, 1975, p.157.

¹⁹ Collis, Maurice, *Lords of the Sunset*, London, 1938.

and were assigned dress, textiles and regalia in Mandalay court style. The Lan Na princes were tributary to Siam and accepted court dress, textiles and regalia from Bangkok. The princes of Luang Prabang were also tributary to Bangkok. As is evident from 19th century photographs, the princes wore tributary dress when they went annually or bi-annually to pay tribute to the superior power.²⁰ This dress was graded according to strict sumptuary laws. For example, the King of Siam wore a seven-tiered crown while the princes of the Lan Na courts were designated three to five tiers, depending on their relationship to the king.

In conclusion, the traditional weaving culture of inland Southeast Asia led most women to weave cloth for themselves, for their families, for the household, and for use by Buddhist monks. This tradition also applied to members of the royal family. As a result the courts imported silk yarn and trimmings and the trade in ready-made clothing and textiles was small. In contrast, the courts in the coastal states of Southeast Asia had access to dress, textiles and trimmings from India, Europe and the rest of Asia. At the end of the 19th century there was an improvement in river travel and at the beginning of the 20th century rail links were made that opened up the inland states and foreign goods were transported more quickly to inland markets. Women continued to weave and embroider but had access to a wider range of yarns, trimmings and finished goods than before.

²⁰ Tributary dress was also worn at the inland courts where a major power exerted strong influence. In the senior Shan States at least one Burmese official was resident at court, and there were Siamese officials at the Lan Na courts.