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Thangchhuah Puan: The Highest Status Mantle among the Mizo People of Northeastern India

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The dress of the chiefs is the same as the common people, except on occasions of ceremony, when they wear dark blue cloths with red lines of particular pattern...(which cloths) can also be worn by anyone who has given certain feasts (and)... earned the title of ‘Thangchhuah’¹

Shakespear

The Mizo² are a group of the Chin (also known as the Zo, Lai or Kuki), a loosely related collection of some two million people living in the rugged hills of western Myanmar (Burma), northeastern India, and southeastern Bangladesh. The Mizo probably moved into the central Chin Hills of Myanmar from the Kale valley to the east between the 14th and 16th century CE whence they were forced in the 18th century CE by stronger Chin neighbors to migrate west where they settled in the Mizo Hills³ of what is now Mizoram State in India. (Figure 1.) The 19th century brought the British who annexed the Mizo Hills in 1892 following several skirmishes with the Mizo. Among the most bellicose of the Mizo were the Sailo, who had become the clan that spawned Mizo chiefs by defeating other Mizo in war and by developing the ability to govern. British and American missionaries arrived in the area in the mid-19th century.⁴ After initially slow progress in converting the then-animist Mizo to Christianity, the missionaries enjoyed considerable success. Today most Mizo are Christian. With over 500,000 members, the Mizo are the largest Chin group.⁵

The Chin strive to distinguish themselves and thereby attain merit through success in hunting, war, accumulation of wealth, and communal feast giving. Among some Chin groups including the Mizo, feasts are given in a prescribed series with each feast becoming more elaborate, requiring more days, more animal sacrifices, more eating and drinking, more cost. The Mizo series generally comprises five separate feasts: *Chong* lasting 4 days and during which two boars and a sow are killed; *She-doi* lasting 3 days during which one mithan (a jungle ox, the most important sacrificial animal to the Chin) is killed; *Mi-thi-rawp-lam* and *She-doi* each lasting 4 days during which mithan are killed and *Khuang-choi* lasting 4 days during which at least 3 mithan must be killed.⁶ Among some Chin groups including the Mizo, merit may also be attained in slaying men and certain large game animals including a bear, an elephant, a wild mithan, a boar, a barking deer, a king cobra, a particular type of

¹ Shakespear 10-11

² Referred to in the British annals of the 18th and 19th century as Lushai

³ Formerly known as the Lushai Hills

⁴ Dena 32, 42-43

⁵ Grimes. “Mizo” is a term confusingly used by some to describe all the Chin peoples in Mizoram, by others to describe the largest group of non-Lai Chin in Mizoram, and by still others to describe a particular subgroup of non-Lai Chin. We and Grimes use the second meaning.

⁶ Shakespear 87

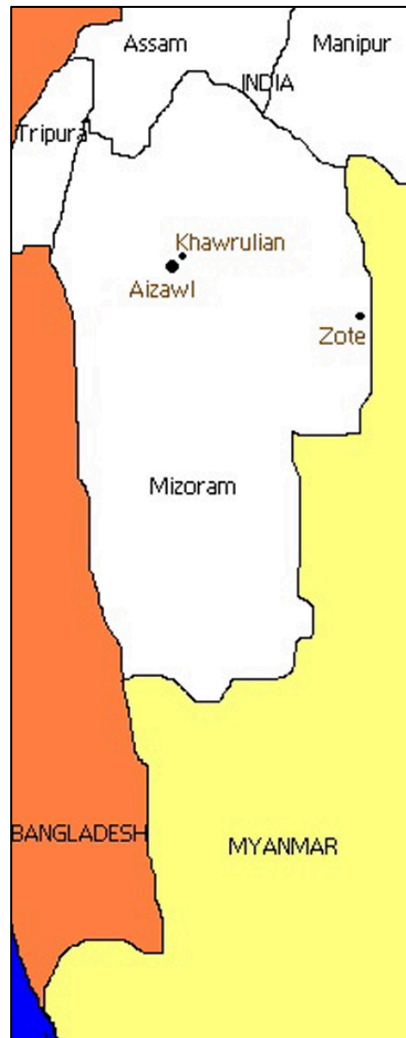


Figure 1. Map showing Mizoram and villages mention herein.

hawk, and a sambhur.⁷ A Mizo man who has either hosted two complete series of five communal feasts or killed the entire series of wild animals attains the greatest merit and the right for himself and his wife to pass directly to *Pial ral* (heaven). Only he may build a veranda at the back of his house, place a window in his house and build an additional shelf near his bed. Such a man is known as a *Thangchhuahpa*.

Textiles also announce these accomplishments through specific patterns reserved for the meritorious. The “dark blue cloths with red lines of particular pattern” worn only by a Mizo *Thangchhuahpa* are made of indigo-dyed, handspun, locally grown cotton. They are woven on a back-tension loom by women. Generally, the dark blue field is crossed both weft-wise and warp-wise by a grid of thin red or red and white lines creating a plaid-like pattern. It is worn with a head wrapper, *thangchhuah diar*, of similar color and pattern into which are inserted the feathers of the king crow (*Figure 2.*)⁸ This paper describes three early examples of these important Mizo cloths.

⁷ Cole 137-141

⁸ Shakespear 10. See also, Chatterjee photograph labeled “Two Mizo chiefs in their traditional dress (1950)” preceding chapter 1

The Pitt Rivers Museum “*Thangchhuah Puan*”

The Pitt Rivers Museum collection in Oxford includes a cloth collected in Zote Village (see figure 1) in the southeastern Mizo Hills by the British anthropologist and administrator, James Philip Mills, who was stationed in Assam, India by 1916. During the 1930’s, he served as



Figure 2. Thangchhuah pa as pictured in figure c.6 of Guite, Vanlalruat. Traditional Dresses and Crafts of the Zomis in Manipur: A Historical Study, Imphal: Department of History Manipur University, 1999.

Deputy Commissioner of Assam. In 1930 he was appointed the Honorary Director of Ethnography for Assam and in 1943 Advisor to the Governor for Tribal Areas and States, with overall responsibility for tribal matters in North-East India. These various appointments gave him considerable access to the groups living in the area and resulted in his authorship of several monographs on the Naga.⁹ He remained in the area until 1947 when he returned to England as a recognized authority on the people of the area. He donated this cloth (Figure 3.) to the Pitt Rivers Museum in 1928, identifying it on the museum label as a “*thangchhuah puan*” that was “worn by a man who has given full series of Feasts of Merit”.

In this example of a *thangchhuah puan*, the indigo field is crossed both weft-wise and warp-wise by alternating red and white stripes. The warp stripes comprise three or four warps; the weft stripes consist of a single weft. The selvage at the sides is indigo. At the mid-line the selvages consist of three red warps. Each end is finished with a countered pair of rows of weft twining gathered in a tassel at the

⁹ MacFarlane 272-273

center of the cloth just above a narrow fringe. As is generally the case with textiles made on a back-tension loom, it is warp-faced.

The British Museum “Cloth”

While not labeled as such, a cloth (As 1899, 1018.6) in the collection of the British Museum is clearly a *thangchhuah puan* as it substantially resembles the Pitt Rivers Museum example in size, field color, pattern and spacing of the weft and warp stripes, although it is slightly shorter (at 203 cm) and more finely woven (with 11 wefts per cm and 23 warps per cm). It differs primarily in that, as described by Shakespear, the thin warp and weft stripes are created in red only. Additionally, every other weft stripe consists of three wefts (each of a single yarn). This



Figure 3. Mizo man's mantle, thangchhuah puan, shown folded into quarters. L = 217 cm; W = 133 cm. Homespun cotton. 9 wefts per cm; 18 warps per cm. 2 loom widths, joined simply. Warp-faced plain weave. Countered weft twining. Courtesy of Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford (1928.69.1587.)

cloth, donated to the museum in 1899, is probably somewhat older than the Pitt Rivers example. It was collected by the British missionary J. Herbert Lorrain, who worked in the Mizo Hills from 1894-1897. He, along with his fellow missionary, Fred W. Savidge, created the orthography for the Mizo language based on the Latin alphabet.

Museum records indicate that Lorrain reported that it had been given to him by the “old warrior chieftain Savunga when dying as a mark of gratitude for bringing the Gospel to him before he passed away”. Savunga was the Sailo chief of the southern Mizo Hills in the latter half of the 19th century. He

was prominent in numerous raids on the British in 1871 and was finally defeated by them in January 1872. One author describes Savunga in later life as “poor and powerless”.¹⁰ Shakespear reports that *zu* (rice wine) “contains much nourishment and Savunga, one of our opponents in the 1871-72 expedition, whom I found still living in 1898, was said to have taken little else during the last two years of his life.”¹¹ Lorrain, however, in a letter to Col. T.H. Lewin dated 25 April 1899 wrote, “...you will, I am sure, remember the Chief Savunga. He was very old, when first we knew him, and died about 2 years ago. Just before his death, I visited his village, and I shall never forget the time I spent with him. He was a grand old warrior and retained his faculties to the last, revered even by his enemies.”¹² Chief Savunga was 97 when he died. One suspects that he may have owned this textile for several decades before he gave it to Lorrain and that accordingly the British Museum *thangchhuah puan* is well over 125 years old.

Khawrulian Village Thangchhuah Puan

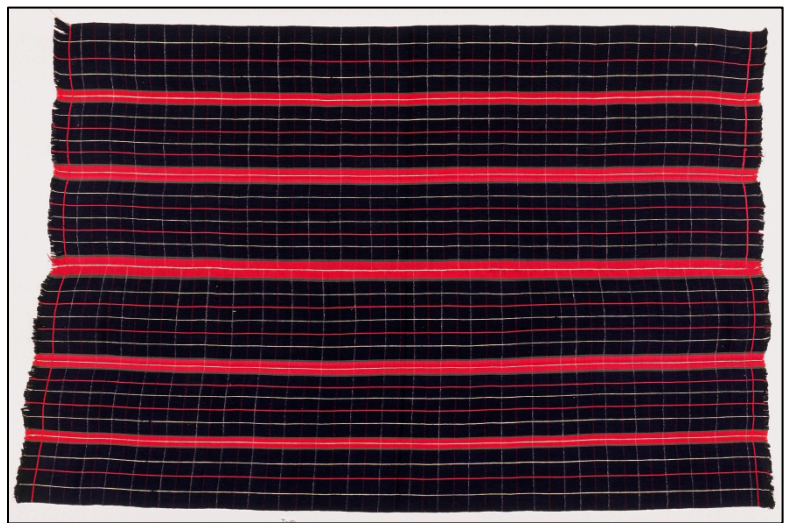


Figure 4, left. Mitinchhinga on left with her family in 1947. Khawrulian village, Mizoram, India. Courtesy of B. Lalchhanhimi.

Figure 5, right. Mizo man’s mantle, thangchhuah puan. L = 199 cm; W = 131 cm. Homespun cotton. 6 wefts per cm; 26 blue warps per cm; 42 red warps per cm. 2 loom widths, joined simply. Warp-faced plain weave. Countererred weft twining. Photograph by Jeff Crespi.

In 1910, in Khawrulian village northeast of Aizawl, in Mizoram (see figure 1), Mitinchhinga (figure 4.) of the Hmar clan of the Mizo wove a *thangchhuah puan* (figure 5) for her husband, Rochhunga, of the Bawlte clan of the Mizo, who became a *Thangchhuah pa* by completing the full series of feasts. She wove it of cotton that she had grown and dyed it with indigo from leaves that she had collected. As in the Pitt Rivers Museum example, thin red and white warp and weft stripes alternate in the field of Mitinchhinga’s *thangchhuah puan*. The narrow warp stripes on the blue field are made with three white warps or eight red warps; the weft stripes are two wefts. It differs most significantly from the museum examples described above in that in addition to the narrow warp stripes, five broad red warp stripes

¹⁰ Chatterjee 153

¹¹ Shakespear 38

¹² Verghese 140

decorate the cloth. Chin weavers often use warp stripes to decorate their cloths and are judged on the artistry with which the stripes are arranged. Mitinchhinga has used two subtle methods to affect the appearance of her *thangchhuah puan*. First, she varied the width of the broad warp stripes by weaving the central stripe to be somewhat wider than the four outer stripes. Each broad red stripe is flanked by narrower green warp stripes and is divided down the center with a white stripe of only four warps. Second, she varied the width of the field between the broader stripes. The outermost broad red stripes are separated from the outer selvage by three of the narrow stripes that create the field grid. They are separated from the next broad red stripe by four of the field stripes. These second broad stripes are separated from the center stripe by five of the field stripes. By varying the stripe and field widths, Mitinchhinga has created a lively and beautiful *thangchhuah puan*.

Other Thangchhuah Puan

In the Chin culture, textiles announce not only meritorious accomplishments, but also the group to which one belongs. Accordingly, the *thangchhuah puan* may differ in pattern (and have variant spellings) between Mizo clans and between them and Chin groups culturally related to the Mizo. This observation is based on comparison of the three early *thangchhuah puan* described above with a variety of *thangchhuah puan* woven in the last 20 years, so differences may relate to age as well as group.

Generally, the field of Mizo *thangchhuah puan* is dark blue although one seen in Keifang village east of Aizawl was white. Closely resembling the examples in the Pitt Rivers Museum and British Museum are those of the Gante (although in the thin stripes of a more recently woven example the weaver alternated the red warps and wefts with yellow warps and wefts, all on an indigo field¹³). The Hmar version closely resembles that woven by Mitinchhinga, a Hmar, with the gridded field and five broad red warp stripes flanked with narrower green stripes. In a recent Hmar example in the Manipur State Museum, the white warp stripe in the center of the broad red stripes is decorated with one-faced supplementary weft patterning.¹⁴ This type of warp stripe is deemed to be the most difficult form of weaving by the Chin who use it. They save it, therefore, for important textiles.

The *thangchhuah puan* of some other Chin groups differ even more greatly from the examples described above, primarily because they do not have narrow weft stripes. The *thangchhuah puan* of the Paite clan does have four broad red warp stripes flanked in green as well as the narrow white and red warp stripes (*figure 6.*) Like the Hmar *thangchhuah puan* in the Mizoram State Museum, the white stripe in the center of the broad red warp stripes is decorated with one-faced supplementary patterning (*figure 7.*) The Vaiphei version¹⁵, however is quite dissimilar, more closely resembling the *cong-nak puan* worn by the Chin feast givers living in the Falam area of the Chin Hills with zig-zag supplementary weft patterning along the broad warp stripes, no grid and two weft-wise bands of yellow twill that divide the mantle roughly in thirds.¹⁶

¹³ Guite figure c.3 bottom of page

¹⁴ This style of *thangchhuah puan* appears to be the one described in Chatterji 36 and plate 7. For a similar example see also Guite figure c.3 second from bottom of page

¹⁵ Guite figure c.2

¹⁶ Fraser and Fraser figures 130-131

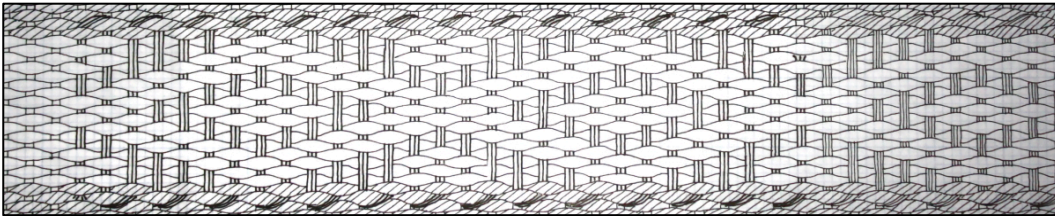


Figure 6, top. *Thangsuaipuan. Commercial cotton. 2 loom widths. Warp-faced plain weave. One-faced supplementary weft patterning. Countered weft twining. Photograph by David Fraser.*

Figure 7, bottom. *One-faced supplementary weft patterning of the narrow white warp stripe in the Paite mantle in Figure 6. Shown are two of the three colors of discontinuous supplementary weft (longitudinally striated) that create patterning by floating on the obverse when they are not hidden with the structural weft (unstriated) in this warp-faced textile. They also float on the obverse to move from one weft row to the next. In Fraser and Fraser, this type of patterned white warp band is called a vai puan stripe.*

Other Chin Plaids

Plaid textiles have long played an important role in the dress of several of the Chin groups living in the northern and central Chin Hills and in several of those who have migrated to India from this area. The Siyin in Tiddim township use them as coffin covers. The man's (*tang ciing*) is red; the woman's (*khe phiu*) is dark and should contain no red. Haka and Mara men and women wear plaids at feasts and other ceremonies. Many Mizo textiles combine warp and weft striping to create a plaid-like appearance, but all of these are distinctly different from the *thangchhuah puan*: the woman's dress skirt or wrap (*puan laisen* or *puanchei*); the young person's or man's wrap (*ngo te kherh puan*) and men's and women's *puan*.¹⁷

¹⁷ In Fraser and Fraser see figures 152-153 for Siyin plaids, figures 30, 93 and 178 for Haka and Mara, figure 160 for *puan laisen*, figures 164 a&b for *ngo te kherh puan* and figures 167 and 169 for *puan*

Professor F. K. Lehman opines that the Chin's use of plaids began with the Mizo and spread to the other groups.¹⁸ T.H. Lewin, a British soldier-administrator in India in 1870-71 wrote that the Mizo "were all clad in home-spun cotton; the sheets or plaids worn by the men being often a dark tartan".¹⁹ Such early use of plaids, but not the *thangchhuah puan* pattern, is documented in a photograph of Mizo chiefs taken in 1872.²⁰ Although the Mizo may have been the first of the Chin to use plaids, just when the *thangchhuah puan* pattern was introduced is unknown. To date, Chief Savunga's *thangchhuah puan* is the earliest evidence of that important design. The design persists in today's Chin culture in such adaptations as the tailored shirt and matching headband worn by high-ranking officials at Mizo ceremonies.²¹

Final Comment

B. Lalchhanhimi, the 69 year old Christian granddaughter of the weaver Mitinchhingi, illustrated the traditional importance of the *thangchhuah puan* and its changing role, in discussing with the authors why she was prepared to part with it. She was proud of her grandparents' accomplishments and wished to have them memorialized. Her children, however, had little knowledge of their family's cultural history, including the name of the textile, which they mis-identified as a *puandum*. B. Lalchhanhimi wanted the *thangchhuah puan* properly preserved and exhibited, so she gave it to the authors in an exchange of gifts.

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¹⁸ Lehman, F.K. personal communication, 2006

¹⁹ Whitehead 249

²⁰ Verghese and Thanzawna following 112

²¹ See several pictures at <http://www.mizoram.nic.in/about/chapchar.htm> (accessed 21 January 2007). The criteria for earning the right to wear the *thangchhuah puan* have evolved considerably, as evidenced by the gift of a *thangchhuah puan* to each member of the Mizoram under-16 football team that beat their West Bengal counterparts in the 2005 championship game, as described at <http://www.zoram.com/index.php?module=pagesetter&func=viewpub&tid=3&pid=1117> (accessed 21 January 2007).