



#1. Garuda motif from Sabai's sampler. "The King of the Eagles" is a powerful symbol of the element of air and the "vahana" (totemic animal vehicle) of the Hindu protective god, Vishnu. In the epic Ramayana, he aids Vishnu in his avatar as Rama. Garuda has long been identified as the symbol of royal Thailand .

หมอนใย เท่ Cloth: ๓ Southern Thai

วัฒนธรรม Textile

August, 4, 2006

For Surface Design Magazine



#2. Khun Fai Sukong, master weaver of Na Muen Sri, Trang, Thailand.

Textiles have long played an important part in the Buddhist culture of Thailand, in daily life, religious observances and rites of passage, from birth through death. In this article we will get a glimpse of a rare and meaningful textile woven by one woman in southern Thailand. The weaver, Khun Fai Sukong, was a master weaver from Na Muen Sri District, Trang Province. Her unique cloths, made for use in Thai

Theravada Buddhist ceremonies, especially funerals, often included woven inscriptions imparting advice on how to live a good Buddhist life. Central to this philosophy is the concept of merit. The production and donation of these special cloths are regarded as a spiritually meritorious act, which will help to bring the weaver to a higher plane in the next life.



#3. Fai's old,original sample cloth combining "Garuda", "Bird"and "jasmine garland" motifs within oval frames.

I was in Southern Thailand with a field study group from the Golden Jubilee Royal Goldsmith College Silk Department at the Grand Palace in Bangkok. We were there searching for rare historic textiles from the southern provinces to document and reproduce, especially *pha tor na meun srti*, traditional weaving from Na Meun Sri. Khun Fai Sukong was one of the most outstanding proponents of this style. Fortunately, her grand niece, Sabai Sukong, was in our group and happily accompanied us to Khun Fai's home. By this time, Fai was well into her eighties, nearly blind and had not woven for a number of years. Nevertheless, her memory was sharp and she could still remember all the words to her long weaving songs and chanted them for us. She could still discuss in detail the techniques she had used and recounted them to us with relish.

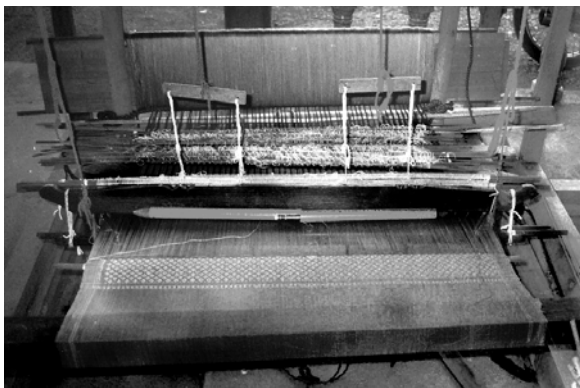


#4.Khun Fai's scripture cloth on display at the museum in Institute for Southern Thai Studies, Thaksin University, Songkhla. See page 5 for translation.

Khun Fai brought out her old original pattern cloths and samples of her later work. She also showed us her first weaving tools which consisted of a tubular bamboo shuttle case and a simple wooden template for tying string heddles on the loom. We also saw her old loom, which had a rather light frame and a simple direct tie-up arrangement. It had only four standard shafts for the plain weave ground and an arrangement of pattern sticks with string heddles tied directly on the loom. She could weave up to twenty-four shaft patterns this way. The complexity of her beautiful cloths comes not from elaborate equipment but from elegant use of the simplest of technology, with creativity and refined aesthetic sensibilities. We were so impressed with what we saw and heard that we asked Khun Sabai to stay with her "Granny" for a time, to document her life and work and to learn her skills and patterns.



#5. Fai Sukong's first weaving tools, (left) polished bamboo shuttle bobbin case style and stick bobbins, (right) new plastic bobbin case shuttle with metal tip.



#6. Khun Fai's old loom.

The cloths Khun Fai wove for ceremonial occasions were about 50 centimeters by 46 centimeters on a fine cotton plain weave ground in a continuous supplementary weft patterning technique called *khit*. They are usually composed of bands of dark colored inscription alternating with colorful bands of stylized mythical animals or humans with floral garlands and ovate frames. These small cloths were used in funeral ceremonies, laid on the west-oriented coffin of the deceased above the head. Thai village funerals might last for a number of days while monks chant and offer prayers for the deceased, and friends and relatives gather to send the departed on his way to his next existence. I was told that the cloth is removed from the coffin before cremation and later cut up and distributed among the

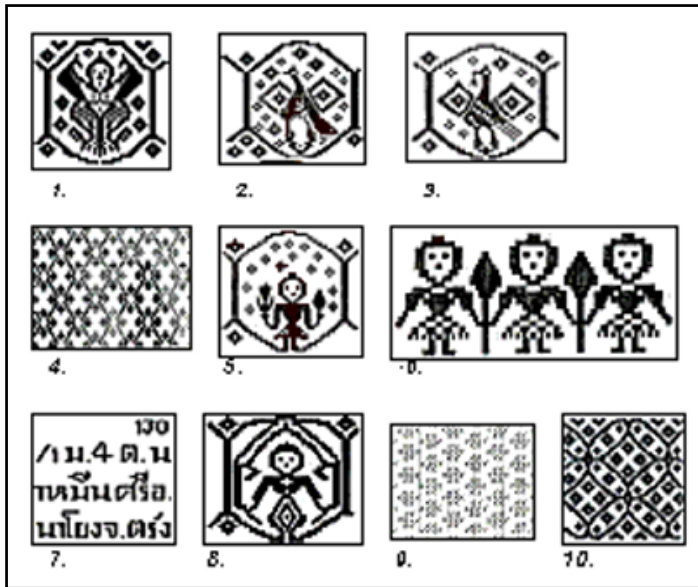


##7. A longer coffin cover with red back ground.

monks who had presided at the funeral. The background color of the cloth may also be significant since among some groups in other parts of Thailand, funeral cloths for people who died a peaceful death in old age are white, while for those who died an untimely or violent death, they are red.

Khun Fai Sukong was born in 1921 in Nong Yuan village, Lamore county, Nayong District, Trang Province. She was the youngest of six children born to a poor farming family. She began weaving when she was eight years old, was married when she was twelve and raised seven children. Although opportunities for formal education were limited in those days, particularly for girls, Fai learned to read and write at the local temple school. Perhaps this is where she also learned the devotional songs she later wove into her ceremonial cloths. Even more importantly, she learned how to design her own weaving patterns and

graph them on paper. Most often young weavers simply refer to older cloths by master weavers as samples. Working from a paper draft is still unusual.



#8. Khun Fai's Motifs Graphed by Sabai Sukong

1. *Lai Krut (Garuda motif)* 2. *Lai Nok (Bird motif)* 3. *Lai Hong (Swan motif)* 4. *Lai Cho-malai (garland)* 5. *Lai Tuk-ka-ta Tham-ma-noon motif (Doll holding lotus and object)* 6. *Lai Tuk-ka-ta dok bua (Dolls holding lotus)* 7. *Lai Nang-kee-non (Girl motif)* 8. *Lai Tua-ak-sorn (Script motif)* 9. *Lai Med-tang (Melon seed motif)* 10. *Lai Kaew Ching Duang (which is different from the traditional one, her Kaew Ching Duang is more round shape while the old one is oval shape.)*

This rare skill combined with her vivid imagination led Fai to design a series of lively motifs from mythology and folk Buddhist imagery. She continued to weave her cloths in various combinations of these motifs throughout her life.

Although she must have drawn inspiration from pre-existing models, like the well-known mythical bird, "Garuda," the national symbol of Thailand, she certainly put her own stylistic mark on them and invented others. It is worth noting that out of ten of Khun Fai's original figurative motifs, three are bird forms; *lai krut* (Garuda, King of the Eagles), *lai nok* (bird) and *lai hong* (swan or goose). And three others are human-like figures, leaving aside floral and abstract motifs. This is not an accident. In Buddhist iconography (which originally hails from India), birds in general are seen as the intermediaries between the terrestrial and

celestial spheres, representing the end of suffering and symbolizing nirvana. The swan, hamsa, is identified with the sun, divine knowledge, and the ability to tell right from wrong. It is a male symbol and coincidentally may also refer to constancy, since swans mate for life and return to the same place to nest year after year.

The second category of imagery is a stylized human figure. These may occur singly or in a line. While Fai has called them “dolls”, similar figures elsewhere in Thailand have been identified as ancestor figures, which would make sense in a funeral textile. Only the single figure in *Lai tuk-ka-ta tham-ma-noon* (doll holding lotus and votive object) has raised hands. *Lai tuk-ka-ta dok bua* (dolls holding lotus) and *Lai nang-kee-non* (girl motif) are shown with hands pointing down. This is potentially meaningful since hand gestures, called “*mudra*,” play an important role in classical Buddhist iconography. It is interesting that her “girl” appears to be wearing the traditional unisex hip wrapper, *pha chong kaben*, while the “dolls” wear western style skirts and “boys” are nowhere to be seen! Within the lexicography of Khun Fai’s imagery, we see that elements of ancient animistic religion and spirit worship have been skillfully woven into the fabric of popular Buddhist folk culture of recent times.



#9. Funeral cloth with white background text and two kinds of birds; Garuda and “the little bird that sings in the night” said Fai. There may be some significance in the color of background used in these kinds of cloths. Elsewhere in Thailand a white background is used for someone who died a peaceful death and red is used for someone who died an untimely or violent death.

The introduction of inscriptions into the funeral cloths appears to be Khun Fai’s own invention and may have been a direct result of her education in the temple school. Her first woven words were, “Wish me prosperity and good luck” (*ko hai khaphajao mi kuam jareon le chai-yo*). The text consists of sayings from “old country Buddhist wisdom,” which she sang as she worked. One piece in the museum at the Institute for Southern Thai Studies, Thaksin University, Songkhla is composed only of text alternating with bands of simple geometric patterning. A broad translation of the homily in this funeral cloth reads as follows (:*see Figure #4., P. 1)

“Everyone, whether man or woman, rich or poor, young or old, has to be aware of death. We, now, when we are alive, live here on earth. But one day we have to return to where we came from. When we are born, we do not bring anything with us. Also we cannot bring anything when we return (die).”

The implied lesson is clear; “We are born, we live, we die, we are born again and we can take nothing with us except the merit we have acquired over many lives, which will eventually lead us to Buddha-like perfection.”



10. Textile-like carving of interlocking roundels on the walls of Angkor Wat (?????? date) in Cambodia illustrate the antiquity of this motif.

#11. Interlocking circle pattern, “keo ching duang” woven by Fai and on display in the Thaksin University Museum in Songkhla.



Of all of Khun Fai’s patterns, the one I like best is the interlocking circles called “keo shing duang.” It is an old and widely dispersed pattern found all over Southeast Asia, from China to Angkor Wat in Cambodia, throughout Thailand and into Burma and ancient India. But Fai’s rendering of it is quite special. It is not a funeral cloth, but a celebratory textile upon which gifts to people of high status (like monks or royalty) are placed for presentation. The pattern is universally seen as auspicious and may be read as “bestowing honor, promoting prosperity.”



#10. Khun Sabai back in Bangkok weaving “keo ching duang” back in Bangkok at the college. She is teaching other weaving students what she has learned in her four months with Khun Fai.

#11. Khun Sabai’s reproduction sample of Khun Fai’s Keo Shing Duang.



After returning to Bangkok, Khun Sabai continued weaving what she had learned from her aunt and also taught other students in the Silk Department to

weave *pha tor na meun sri*. Khun Sabai has subsequently shared all of her research and samples with me. The project was funded by a U.S. government grant from the world-wide Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation. This study was most timely since within one year Khun Fai had died, but not before passing on her weaving skills to others. Happily, the tradition of Khun Fai's creative spirit and good works lives on.



#12. Offering of a lotus flower on the foot of the Buddha.
Wat Mahatat, Nakonsitammarat.
Dedicated to the memory of Fai Sukong.

Kathleen F. Johnson
17409 Sylvester Road
Seattle, WA 98166
(206) 695-2355
travlinweaver@yahoo.com