Yao Lan Tan Shamans' Robes

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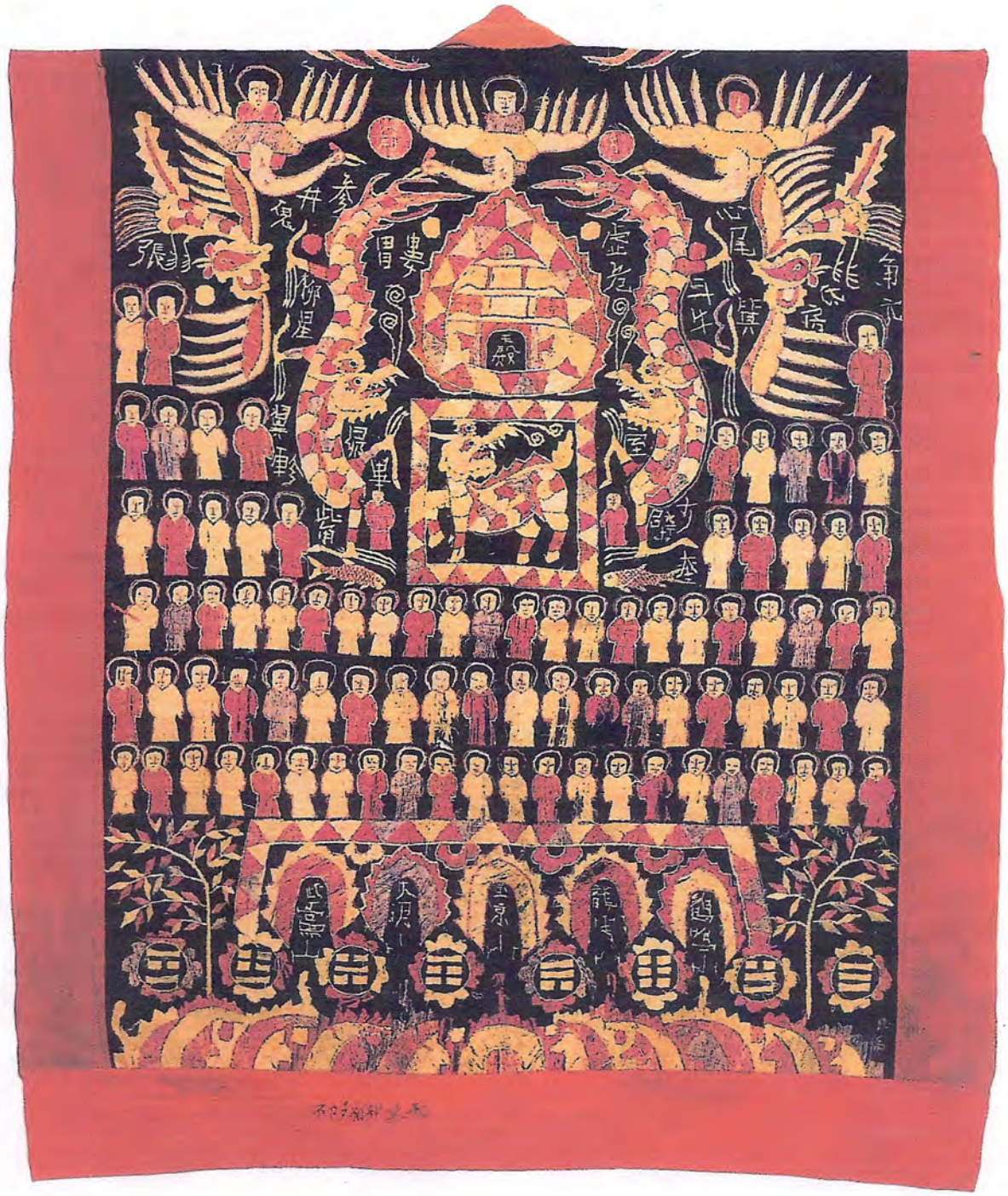
Among the hill tribes of southern China and mainland Southeast Asia, the Yao are unique in that they have recorded and still continue to copy their history and rituals in books and scrolls, using Chinese characters, thereby preserving their cultural and religious heritage. Yao religion is a synthesis of ancestor worship, animism and Daoism in which village shamans play a leading role in upholding cosmic order. The ceremonial robes worn by the shamans are of particular ritual importance, offering an ongoing record of traditional Daoist symbolism, which is capable of detailed interpretation.



The Yao are hill tribe descendants of people who lived in the mountains around the Changjiang River Basin in China during the Qin and Han dynasties (221 BC–220 AD). Today they are found throughout southwestern China and in mainland Southeast Asia, where they are known by a variety of names, including Mien, Lan Tan, Mun, Pu nu, Iu ngien, Lak kja, Zao and Dao according to their clan and country.

Yao religion is a combination of Daoism, ancestor worship and animism.[1] The goal of Daoism is a reconciliation of duality, *yin* and *yang*, into unity: the Dao transcends all, the world of nature and the unseen. Interference with its natural rhythm disturbs cosmic order. Yao Daoism is laced with magic, fortune-telling and the supernatural. Ancestor spirits must be informed when a household has a new member, through birth, adoption or marriage. Elaborate supplication and divination rituals ensure the household's protection from harm or illness. An underpinning of primitive nature worship is also incorporated: spirits are the proprietors of nature, of streams, trees, villages and regions. An orderly relationship with the spirits must be maintained, with deference duly shown through propitiation and thanks. The shaman's job is to maintain cosmic safety and order.

Yao 'history' begins with Pan Gu, the first man in Daoism, born from the passive-active, feminine-masculine principles of Nature which existed in chaos before the creation of the world. Pan Gu built the earth and separated earth and sky. His body expanded to form the universe, sun, moon and stars. After his death his head became the mountains; his breath the clouds and wind; his limbs the four corners of the world; his blood rivers; flesh the soil; beard the constellations; skin and hair, herbs and trees; teeth, metal; bones and marrow, rocks and precious stones; sweat, the raindrops; and the insects creeping throughout his body, human beings.[2]

Robe details showing the Jade Pagoda or Palace: note the Jade Emperor (Yu Ti) peering through the window in the middle detail.

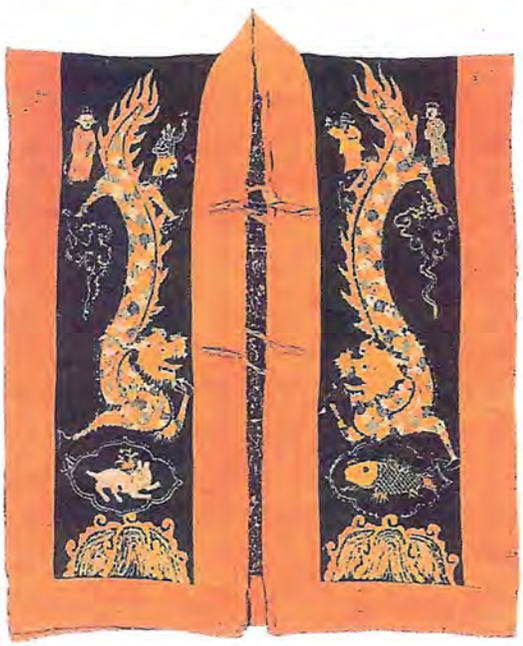
Pan Hu, the 'father' of the Yao people, represented as a talking dog in Yao legend and art, was a servant or member of a clan with a dog totem who killed the enemy of Emperor Gao Jixin (907–929 AD), the first monarch of the Gao dynasty, which ruled one of ten small kingdoms in southern China. Chinese sources mention Gao Jixin as one of the kings of the barbarians, a reference by the northern central government to the hill tribe minorities. For his loyalty Pan Hu was rewarded with the hand of the emperor's daughter in marriage. Their twelve children became the heads of the twelve Yao clans, one of which, the Lan Tan, later migrated into an area now in northern Laos and Vietnam, bringing their version of Chinese Daoism with them.

Several Yao clans may live in the same village, each retaining its own ritual and behaviour, clothing and hair style, but sharing the same legends and language.[3] Predominantly Lan Tan villages are usually located near water and consist of some twenty to seventy houses, each with two or three generations living together. Conditions are harsh and infant mortality high. Where ritual items required for ceremonies are not produced in the village they must be bought or traded from elsewhere, even though money is scarce, transportation unreliable, and often a trip to town means a long and gruelling walk. Sometimes shamans too must be brought in from other villages, causing delays and extra expense.

Becoming a shaman brings honour to a man and his family, and bestows a special title on the shaman's wife according to his rank. Boys or men, through

1. Left: Yao Lan Tan shaman's robe, Vietnam, ca.1900. Lan Tan robes from Vietnam are different in palette to Laotian ones, and generally more finely embroidered. Figuratively they also seem more culturally tied to China. There is a centre seam with two side panels that narrow as they carry over to the front.

A unique feature here is the fish on each side beneath the dragons' claws. Since dragons govern the water, all forms of aquatic animals are their subjects. In Chinese legend, the sturgeon in the Yellow River which "in the third moon of each year...succeed in passing above the rapids of *Long-men* (the Dragon Gate) become transformed into dragons". The Chinese word for fish has the same sound as the word for superfluity, making the fish also a symbol of wealth and abundance.



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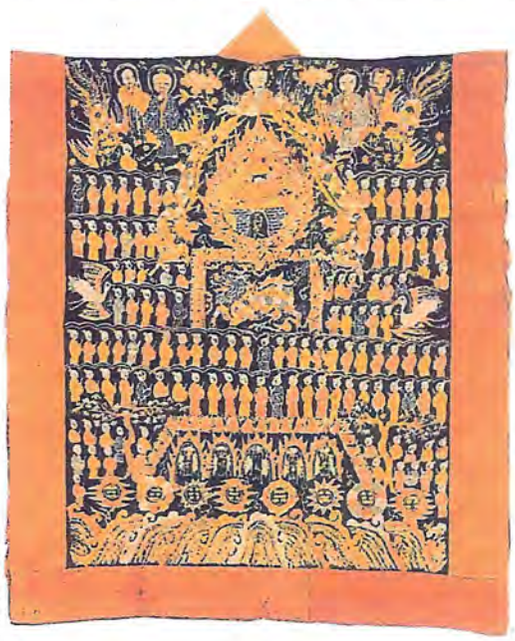
2. Yao Lan Tan shaman's robe, northern Laos, 19th century. On the front of this robe, within the frames of the double *ruyi* (sacred fungus, signifying 'every wish is granted'), are a hare with a sprig of vegetation to be pounded into the elixir of life for divinities on the moon, and a fish, symbolising wealth and abundance. The hare is also associated with long life, and is said, like the tiger, to live a thousand years, turning white at the age of five hundred.



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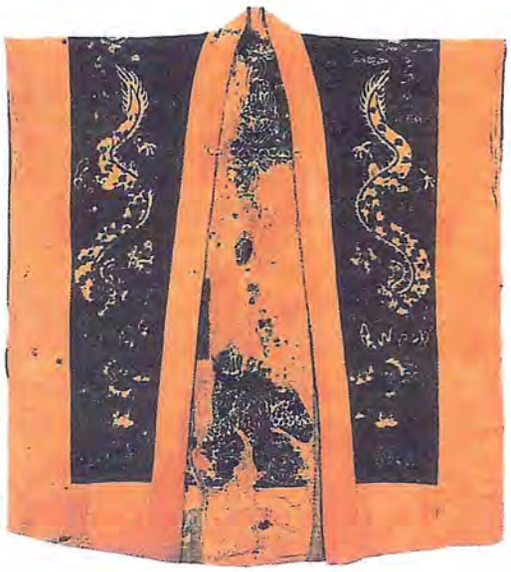

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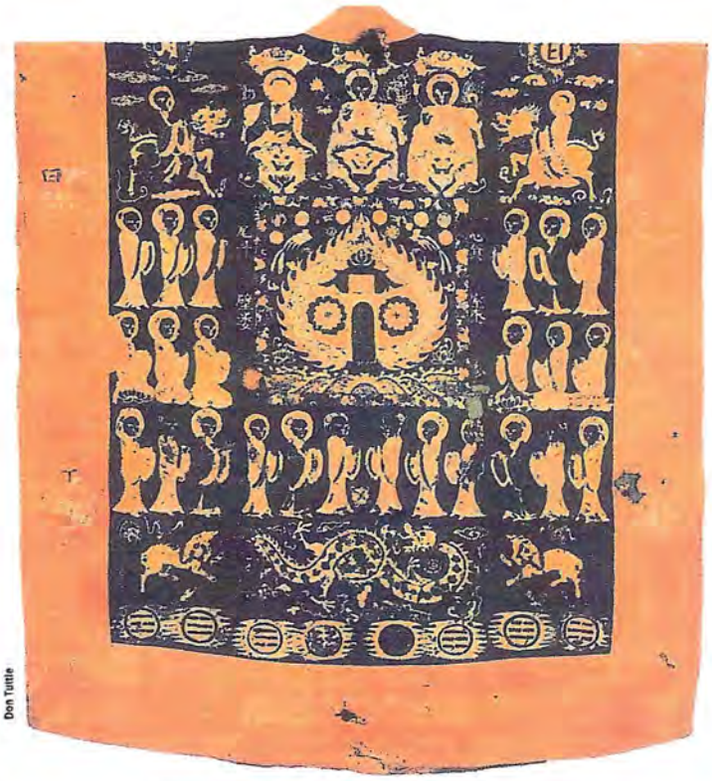

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3. Yao Lan Tan shaman's robe, northern Laos, 18th-19th century. This, the oldest of the Yao Lan Tan robes known to the authors, is the only one woven and sewn in three strips of cloth, with a centre panel at the back and the two side panels extending over the shoulders and down the front. In construction it is most like Chinese Daoist robes, which it also resembles in the separate wide and slightly curved border, probably embroidered by a Chinese woman, with Chinese characters and auspicious symbols. Both style and motifs show Chinese influence: they attest to the artistry of the maker and demonstrate elaborate yet restrained detail.

On the back of the robe the Three Pure Ones ride on lions, with spinning patterns on their hips and thick tails. Lions often appear on Chinese Daoist robes, symbolising bravery, power and intelligence.

The disposition of the Jade Emperor's palace and gate gives an unusual sense of distance: above the palace gold discs represent stars. Constellation names appear in pairs, although not all 28 constellations are represented. Some *xian* (divine figures) are standing; others are seated on the lotus, symbol of purity.

Beside the dragon are a pair of stylised Chinese tigers, symbols of courage, ferocity, magisterial dignity and sternness – fearsome (as are lions) to malevolent spirits. Characters on the left and right can be read interchangeably: 'honour-longevity', 'propriety-wisdom', and 'Dao, the path – happiness and light'. The *ba gua* are also in *yin-yang* pairs.

On the front of the robe are a pair of flying dragons, and in the borders Chinese characters are written in archaic form. Together they form a blessing: "Live in happiness for ten thousand years". Two emblems of the eight immortals, the fan and the gourd, also symbolise long life.

The only Yao Lan Tan shaman in Nam Dee village in Namtha Province, northern Laos, wearing the only robe in the village: it was sewn and embroidered relatively recently by a woman from Nam Chang village.

apprenticeship and the study of written Chinese, can achieve three ranks: *khwa tang*, *jiad fin*, and *tua sai*. Full-scale week-long ordinations are still performed among some Yao groups, but the Lan Tan have combined *jiad fin* and *tua sai*, and reduced the ceremony to a few days. Certain rituals are immutable: for example, the welcoming of the guardian spirit of a new-born child or calling back the spirit of the sick. The ritual for the dead is of paramount importance in determining the destiny of the soul and delivering it to a happy afterlife, and can be performed only by the highest level *tua sai* shaman.

Unlike other ceremonial objects such as masks and paintings, the shaman's robe is not thought to have supernatural qualities and can be shown to outsiders without losing its potency. It serves the function of distinguishing the shaman from others while at the same time surrounding him with holy and protective symbols. The style of robe shows the shaman's place in the Yao priestly hierarchy and the excellence of sewing and embroidery add to his status.

Lan Tan robes at the *tua sai* level are in some respects similar to the clerical robes of Chinese Daoist masters. Most are made from two pieces of narrow woven cloth sewn together in the back and open in front, with little or no cutting, reflecting the Daoist view that the natural state of things should not be altered, a belief akin to the Hindu taboo on cutting cloth. Lan Tan robes have a border of a different colour, sometimes embroidered; on Chinese Daoist robes the border is generally wider and is almost always embroidered.

Many of the same mythical creatures, plants and natural features occur on both types, though they differ in material, colour and sophistication. Chinese Daoist robes are of silk; Lan Tan robes of cotton with silk embroidery. The Chinese colours are more vivid, often using metallic gold or silver thread in the embroidery, which is more finely worked than in the Lan Tan.

Since many old Yao robes were sold and those remaining are very worn, it is extremely difficult for the Lan Tan to study the old embroidery techniques and iconography. In the Luang Namtha area of northern Laos we could find only one woman still carrying out this work. Embroidery on contemporary robes has become less sophisticated and some patterns have changed. Large, grossly executed stitches forming unrealistic looking creatures, such as tigers, horses and dragons, and stars in the form of asterisks, fill the fronts and backs of the robes. The constellation names and other Chinese characters are absent.

Shamans' robes, old and new, of the Yao in China and Vietnam differ from the early robes of the Lan Tan in Laos mostly in their choice of colour. Although indigo based, they have brighter colours: more red, pink

and violet, usually with a reddish-brown border. Antique Lan Tan robes from Laos use more yellow, light brown, green and blue, usually with a light brown or beige border. Contemporary Lan Tan robes, however, appear to be more influenced by Chinese and Vietnamese robes than by their own tradition.[4]

In old Lan Tan robes, the home-grown and spun cotton was dyed with locally cultivated indigo and other natural dyes. To achieve the deep dark blue ground colour, the cloth was dipped and dried repeatedly over about a two-month period. Some silk, famous for its soft, thick, naturally yellow thread, was produced in the Luang Namtha area, but most was acquired in local markets. Robes were made and worn according to Daoist liturgical requirements. Traditional rituals and rules were followed: during the sewing and embroidering the maker remained celibate and took great care not to touch or step on animal waste. Purification and cleanliness were of utmost importance. Both these strictures and the level of expertise required to produce the robes restricted the number of embroiderers, which may explain the striking similarity of both workmanship and design in some of the robes.

Robe details showing the peaceful *qilin*, emperor of the quadrupeds.

Lan Tan robes have a common iconography: the figures represent the Daoist heavenly court or hierarchy. The Three Pure Ones preside with Master Li and Master Zhang at their sides with the palace of the Jade Emperor, master of the saints, who rules heaven and earth, shown below. These major figures are attended by other divine figures (or *xian*) and guarded by the four great supernatural creatures: dragon, phoenix, *qilin* (or white tiger) and tortoise. Stars, mountains, seas and vegetation also appear. The divine figures remind the observer to pursue the discipline taught by the masters in order to find the Dao or 'true path'. Each figure and feature also has symbolic value relating to protection, beauty, longevity or good fortune.

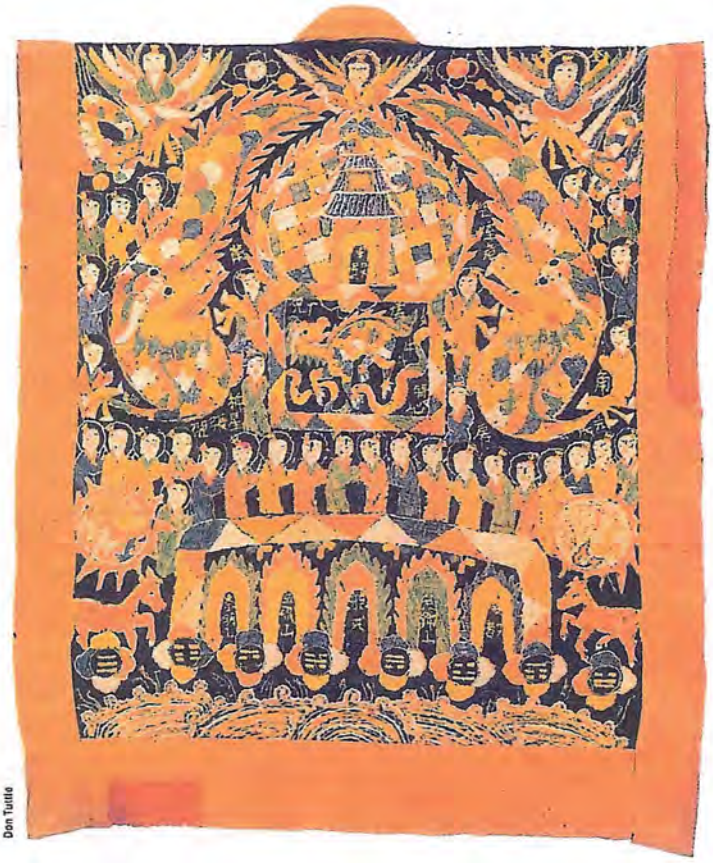
The Three Pure Ones, To Ta, Leng Si and Leng Pu, appear from left to right on the backs of the robes at the top centre. Some robes from Vietnam are embroidered with the names Taiqing, Yuqing and Shangqing, also known as the Most Superior Beings of Lan Tan Daoism. In China, they are the Three Immortals, personifications of *qi*, energy or breath of the Three Supreme Heavens: the Most Pure (Leng Si), the Mysterious (Leng Pu), and the Primordial Heavens (To Ta), separated from each other by the primordial cosmic ether before the earth was created.[5] Leng Si, dressed in a black robe, holds the cup of immortality in his right hand. Leng Pu often wears a blue or green robe. To Ta's hair is white; his right hand holds a magic fan, decorated with the sun and moon, which can beat off any devil with a single blow.

To the left of the Three Pure Ones is Master Li or Lei Din, who is identified with the Emperor of the North. His symbols are the tortoise and the snake. The Li Celestial Master has fair skin and is dressed in black,[6] while Master Zhang, to the right, may be shown in black and red robes with the eight trigrams. Zhang Dao-ling (35–157 AD) is known as the founder of Daoism. The philosopher Laozi is said to have appeared before him and to have handed him registers of good spirits, liturgical books, a sword and a seal, which became the tools

4. Yao Lan Tan shaman's robe, northern Laos, 19th century. Similar in age and iconography to robe 2, although with fewer *xian* and more emphasis on the rather rotund dragons. The robe is resplendent with colour, rendered in long embroidery stitches.

The five mountains are flanked by two horses, symbolising speed and perseverance. Below the mountains and above stylised clouds, the *ba gua* float like radiant petals.

On the front a pair of dragons fly above their own pearls, which also represent the moon and the sun. Below, a pair of horses mirrors the back; the bottoms of the panels are filled by flowering lotuses.



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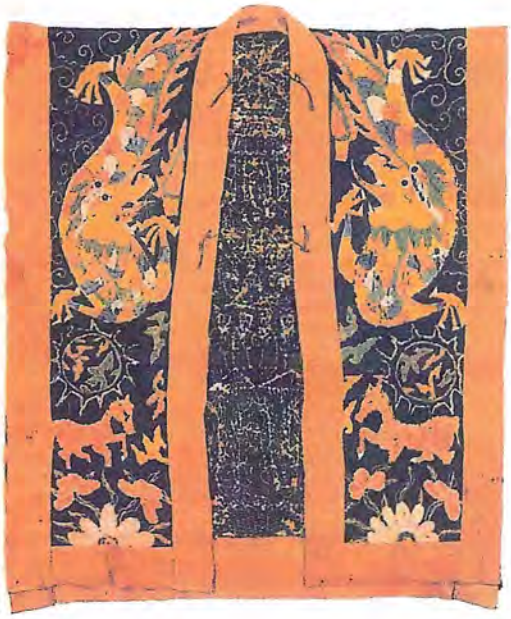

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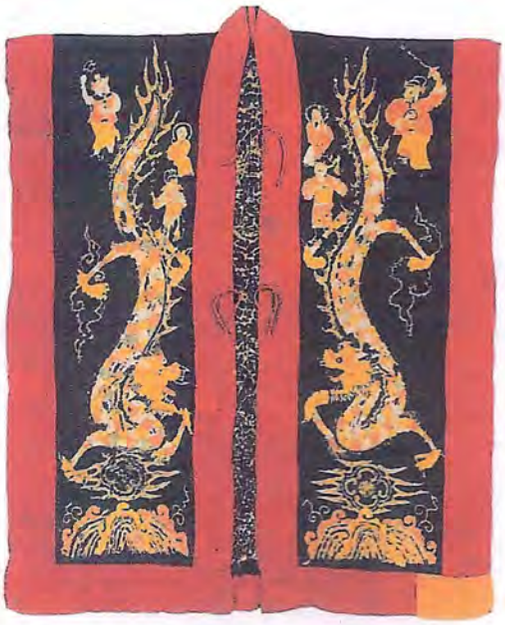

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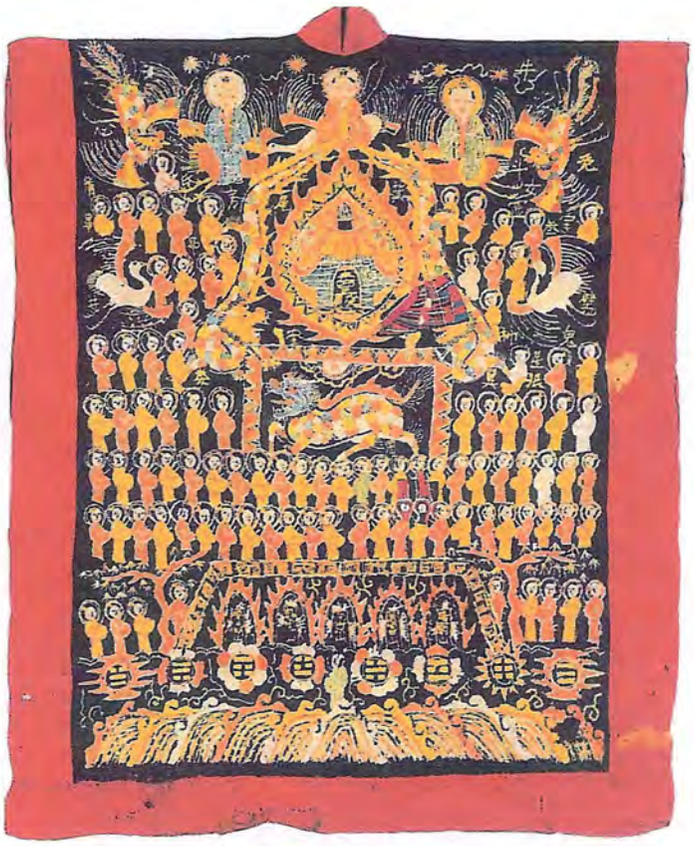

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5. Yao Lan Tan shaman's robe, Laos or Vietnam, 19th century. The phoenixes and cranes appear to be in flight. Bursts of petals, sun and stars envelop the eight trigrams. A single *xian* dressed in blue stands at the centre of the *ba gua* above or possibly in the endless sea. On the front the *ruyi* frames reflect the borders of the trigrams. The four marshals and officers Kang and Xin assume protective stances. The reverence in which the robes are held is indicated by careful repair in colours more appropriate to Vietnamese and later Laotian robes.

of the Daoist masters, including the Yao shamans. Master Zhang, who was said to be able to appear in several places at the same time, was believed to have distilled the secret of immortality through his alchemical studies.[7]

The Jade Emperor's palace, or Jade pagoda, appears at the centre of the robe below the Three Pure Ones. Daoist mythology contains a number of different narrative accounts of how the home of Long Huang, the Dragon King, became the divine abode, a pagoda with flame-like radiance – although it is also possible the Yao simply copied the pagoda from Chinese Daoist robes,[8] then, like the actual stitch work, embroidered a legend around it. The pagoda itself is reminiscent of the pearl on old Chinese temple carpets, which is shown flanked by a pair of five-clawed dragons.[9]

Guarding the palace and on the front panels of the robes are a pair of three or four-clawed dragons *(long)*, said to have been created by the legendary Emperor Fu Xi in the 3rd millennium BC as part of a drive to unite the kingdom. The creature was an amalgam of nine animal totems of nine powerful tribes. The celestial dragon *(tian-long)* guards the dwellings of the deities, including the Jade Emperor's palace. In Luang Namtha the Yao call the dragons *nagas*, Indian mythical serpents also believed by Tibetan lamas and Chinese Buddhists to be related to the dragon.[10]

Beneath the palace within a rectangle stands a five-coloured *qilin*, sometimes looking up at the sun or the Chinese character for the sun, symbolising authority. The peaceful *qilin* is a mythical hybrid with the body of a deer, the tail of an ox, the forehead of a wolf and hooves of a horse, embodying the best qualities of the animal kingdom. The third of the four great fabulous

Robe details showing various treatments of the dragon.

creatures, it presides over the West, and is often used interchangeably with the white tiger.[11] It is a multi-valent symbol whose meanings include grandeur, felicity, longevity and wise administration.Chinese characters around the palace and *qilin* name the 28 constellations, groups of stars representing animals, the sun and moon, and five elements.

The Three Pure Ones may be seated on cranes. The crane, *ho*, is said to be the ancestor of all feathered tribes, the aerial cruiser of the divinities and a symbol of longevity. In ancient times, the Chinese placed a model of a crane with its wings spread upon the coffin in funeral processions, believing it would deliver the spirit to the western heaven, the world of a happy afterlife.[12]

The phoenix, *feng huang*, is the emperor of all birds. Its feathers have five colours, symbolising the five cardinal virtues: benevolence, purity, propriety, wisdom and truth.[13] In combination with the dragon, the phoenix symbolises the masculine-feminine principles of the universe, an emblem of happy marital life.

The five mountains are the abodes of important deities, the four great supernatural creatures and the Jade Emperor (Yu Ti). Both real and imaginary, the mountains figure in Chinese history and Daoist legend: the direct descendants of Master Zhang, for example, are believed to have lived on Longhu Shan in Kiangxi, China, until recently.

The *ba gua* or eight trigrams, usually located across the lower back of the robes, originated from various arrangements of *yang-i*, whole lines symbolic of the male/active principle, and *yin-i*, broken lines symbolic of the female/passive principle. The Emperor Fu Xi is credited with creating the *ba gua* from observing

markings on a tortoise shell. The *ba gua* are regarded as the basis of all divination art and *feng shui* and are believed to be the key to understanding the elements and the secret of creation.[14] Below the *ba gua* are the nine symbolic mountains of longevity and the sea of boundless happiness and wisdom.[15] The *xian*, divine beings who also pay respect to the supreme immortals, occupy most of the rest of the backs of the robes.

Often found on the front of the robes are the Four Marshals, guardians of temple altars and shrines, and sometimes officers Kang and Xin. Marshal Deng, the thunder god, could be one of the sons of thunder, "hatched from an egg after a clap of thunder and found by the soldiers of Wen Wang". Marshal Zhao is worshipped by the Chinese as the god of riches. Marshal Zhang, born in 703 AD in Shandong, was "of keen intellect...an honoured and just administrator". Marshal Mao is described by the Yao as a powerful officer, "an avatar of the god Chih Miao-chi...so successful an interceder with Yu Ti that he is prayed to for all sorts of benefits".[16]

Political upheavals in both Laos and Vietnam have resulted in disruption and ongoing geographic displacement of many of the hill tribe minorities. Economic hardship has contributed to a steady erosion of traditional values and led to reduced independence and self-sufficiency. Recent 'progress' – better roads and improved communication – has placed further strain on their religion.

Robe details showing Leng Pu and Master Zhang (top): Master Li and To Ta (above).

Among the Yao Lan Tan, as self-sufficiency has declined, money has become less available and at the same time more important, often for food or medicine, some- times for opium, and as a necessity for the proper performance of Daoist rituals and ceremonies. Ironically, the need for money causes the Yao to sell their religious artefacts, including their shamans' robes.

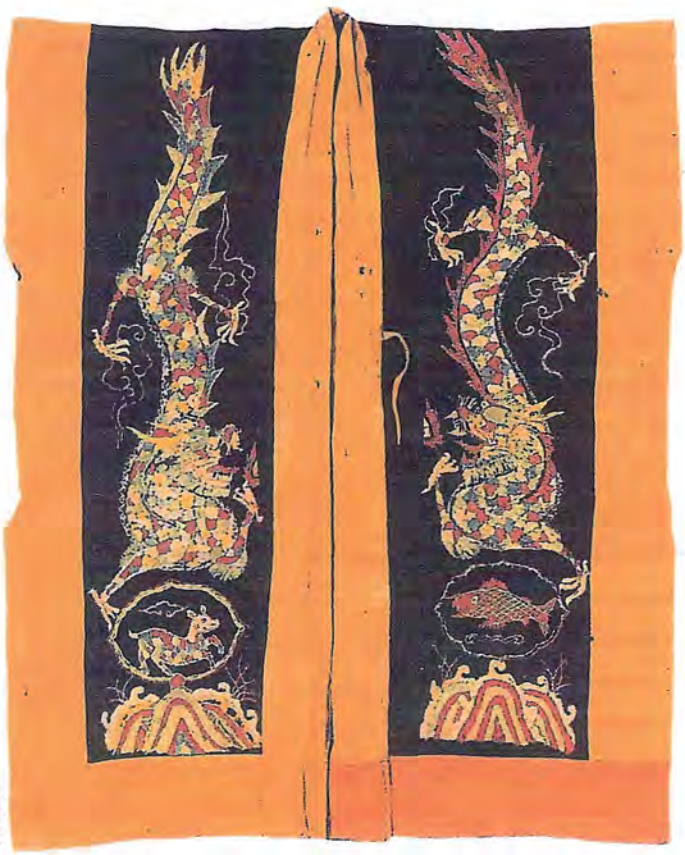
Every village tries to hold on to at least one robe for use in ceremonies, usually the newest, both for its good condition and because the maker is often known to the village. Harsh living conditions have made the old robes difficult to care for and many have disintegrated. Later robes thus become the source of reference for new robes, and in the process many details of earlier iconography are lost. Even so, elements remaining in the newer robes are thematically consistent with the old.

In a culture which treasures the wisdom of old age and shows great respect for elders, living or dead, it is not surprising that great value is placed on longevity. Protection and security are also embodied in the divinities and creatures who not only serve to protect the shaman from evil spirits during ceremonies, but help pave the way for others to achieve wisdom and happiness, also symbolically represented on the robes. Presumably with proper protection, one may attain the wisdom and happiness of old age. Thus layers of meaning are built into the production, construction and iconography of the robes. The heavens are layered with meaningful constellations, deities, ancestors and mythical beings. Each divinity, each creature and each part of nature plays a role in both myth and reality.

But however complicated in its cosmology and iconography, Daoism seeks ultimately to achieve simplicity and balance in nature. The apparent complexity of ritual and of the Yao Lan Tan robes discussed here, thus point beyond themselves to the true path, 'the eternal way'.

Notes see Appendix

6. Yao Lan Tan shaman's robe, north Laos, 19th century. The *qilin* prances within a rectangle on a platform in unusual placement below two long rows of *xian* and just above the five mountains. On either side divinities appear to peep out from beneath two trees symbolising longevity. Wisps of stylised clouds at the dragons' claws create an impression of the dragons in controlled flight.



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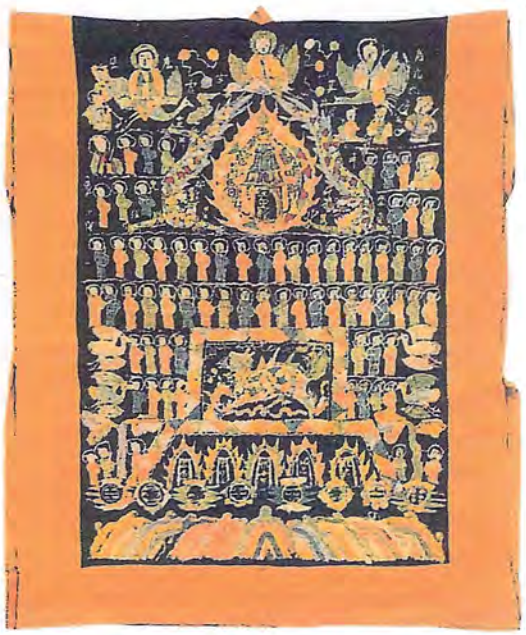

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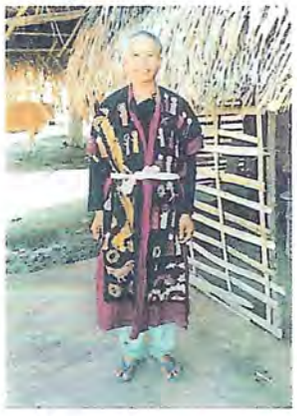
YAO SHAMANS' ROBES

NOTES

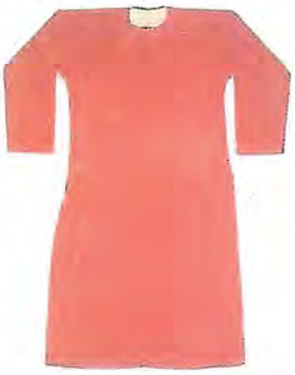
1 | Paul and Elaine Lewis, *Peoples of the Golden Triangle*, London 1975, p.156.
2 | Jacques Lemoine, *Yao Ceremonial Paintings*, Bangkok 1982, p.14, quoting E.T.C. Werner, *Myths and Legends of China*, London 1922, p.77. For further reading see: C.A.S. Williams, *Chinese Symbolism and Art Motifs*, Japan 1989, pp.313-4, quoting S. Wells Williams, *Middle Kingdom, Vol. II*, p.138, and H.A. Giles, *Chinese Biographical Dictionary*, 1607.
3 | Jacques Lemoine, *Montagnards des pays d'Indochine*, 1995, p.25, states that there are three linguistic families among the Yao clans.

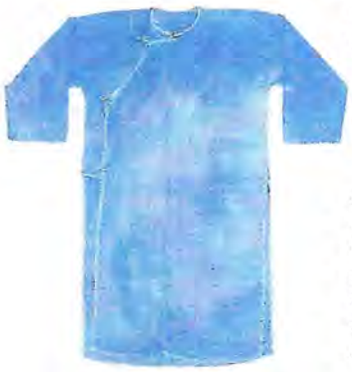
A *tua sai* shaman, one of three shamans in Nam Ler, a large and relatively prosperous village of over fifty houses in the Luang Namtha area of northern Laos.

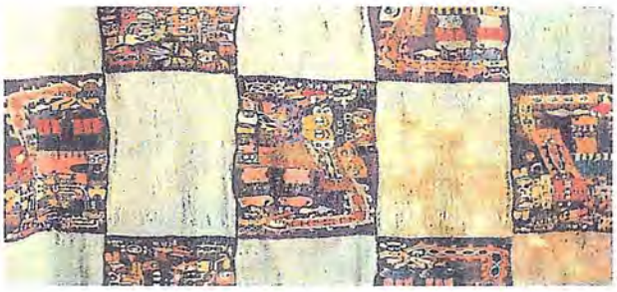


4 | Note the similarity between the later robes of the Lan Tan *tua sai* shaman from Nam Dee village and those of the Paik'u Yao, or White Trousers, in Jin-hsiu, 'China', in *China Minority Peoples* (Chinese Edition), Beijing 1994, pp.98 and 102; see also *Patterns on Textiles of the Ethnic Groups in Northeast of Vietnam*, Hanoi 1997, pp.30 and 42, and *Vietnam Museum of Ethnology Catalogue*, Ho Chi Minh City 1998, p.55.
5 | Lemoine 1982, op.cit., p.54. The Yao believe To Ta is the oldest because of his white hair.
6 | Ibid., p.69.
7 | Ibid., pp.75 and 78.
8 | Williams 1989, op.cit., example p.56; see also Keith Stevens, *Chinese Gods – The Unseen World of Spirits and Demons*, London 1997, for further stories about the Jade Emperor and Dragon King.
9 | *Chinese and Central Asian Textiles, Selected Articles from Orientations, 1983-1997*, Hong Kong 1998, photo p.142.
10 | Williams, op.cit., pp.133-136, 138.
11 | Ibid., pp.367 and 414.
12 | Ibid., p.101.
13 | Ibid., p.387; Jitra Konanthakiat, *Buang Su Ju-i*, Bangkok 1997, p.45.
14 | The study was not limited to the eight trigrams but actually involved 64 hexagrams, "accomplished by duplicating each of the original [trigrams] with itself and the remaining seven... A six-fold multiplication of these again gives the number 384, completing the number to which the diagrams are practically carried, although it is maintained that by a further process of multiplication a series of 16,777,216 different forms may be produced." (Mayers, *Chinese Reader's Manual, Parts I and II*, no.241). "Feng-shui is the term used to define the geomantic system by which the orientation of sites of houses, cities, graves, etc., are determined, and the good and bad luck of families and communities is fixed... It is the art of adapting the abodes of the living and the graves of the dead so as to co-operate and harmonize with the local currents of the cosmic breath, the YIN and YANG." Williams, op.cit., p.178.
15 | Konanthakiat, op.cit., pp.149 and 152.
16 | Williams, op.cit., p.151, quoting Kidd, *China*, p.288; on *xian*,: see *Sacred Symbol – Tao*, London 1996, pp.115, 118-119; E.T.C. Werner, *A Dictionary of Chinese Mythology*, Shanghai 1932, pp.42, 105, 302.

Undecorated first level *(khwa tang)* shaman's robes from northern Laos.







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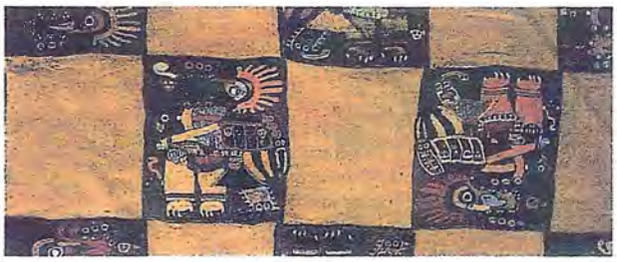

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PARACAS COLOUR BLOCKS

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14, 15. Details of Paracas Necropolis mantles with costumed anthropomorphs, Early Intermediate Period 2. Twenty-eight colour blocks arranged in four multicolour S and Z diagonals, seven tetracolour rows, and four heptacolour columns (if the pattern is extended to completion). Museo Nacional de Antropología, Arqueología, y Historia del Perú, 319-55 (top) and 318-8 (above).

A	B	C	D	A	B	C	D
	E	F	G	H	E	F	G	H
I	J	K	L	I	J	K	L
	M	N	O	P	M	N	O	P
Q	R	S	T	Q	R	S	T
	U	V	W	X	U	V	W	X
Y	Z	a	b	Y	Z	a	b

Colour block configuration in mantles 14 and 15.

NOTES

1 | See Paul 1990.
2 | The exceptions to this preference are discussed in Paul 1997, p.120.
3 | The pattern as it appears on the Royal Ontario Museum mantle is not perfectly worked out and has been reconstructed by the author based on a comparison with two mantles with a similar colour block configuration in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (numbers 16.31 and 16.33; see Stone-Miller 1992, pls.12, 13). Interestingly, all three mantles were purchased from Julio C. Tello in late 1915/early 1916 (see Paul 1991, p.33).
4 | See Paul 1997, p.125 for a list of these patterns.
5 | I use the term 'language' here in its broadest sense, as a system of symbols (the colour blocks) conceived as a means of communicating an idea (here, an internally coherent system of relationships that constitutes a specific type of logic).