

tHEiR BLUE

她们的蓝

by Chuchu Li

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ABSTRACT

tHEiR BLUE(她们的蓝)is a thesis project dedicated to exploring, promoting, and honouring Miao Batik, one of the Intangible Cultural Heritages (as defined by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization in 2003) of China, and its inheritors—the Miao women. The Miao are one of the 55 recognized ethnic minorities in China. For more than two millennia of Miao Batik's existence, Miao women used beeswax to paint on cloth and dye it using indigo plants, thereby depicting and preserving the cultural and historical journey of the Miao people. Through this art form, they capture their reflections on life and convey hopeful wishes for future generations. This research project employs a multidisciplinary approach, including research-creation, storytelling, and interviews with inheritors of Miao Batik to explore the protective processes of Chinese traditional culture/intangible cultural heritage and the inadequate protection of women's social rights in Chinese (Miao) society. The project's creative output includes an artist's book, videos, illustration designs, and Miao Batik artworks. Moreover, due to the unique aspects of Chinese/Miao culture and language expression, this thesis is written in both Chinese and English, with translations of references first processed through translation software and then refined by me.

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DREAM BLUE

In my dream, a little girl once ran ahead, laughing and playing. At first, it seemed like I was her mother, anxiously following behind, worried she might fall or get lost. I chased after her and entered into a vast blue. Suddenly, I shrank and became that running little girl. I halted, looked around, and gazed up to find myself surrounded by hanging strips of blue and white cloth, leading to a blue sky with white clouds that seemed endless. A gentle breeze lifted the fabric, brushing against my face with the scent of herbal, as soft as my mother's touch. On the cloth were drawings of fish, birds, flowers, and many other peculiar patterns. Suddenly, I felt a tap on my shoulder, and the dream faded away...

Chuchu Li

CHAPTER 1 – WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

Origins

I'm a Chinese girl who ventured abroad to study at the age of fifteen. From high school to graduate studies, my educational journey has spanned nine years across the United States and Canada. Western culture significantly influenced my formative years, altering my perspectives and viewpoints. Growing up in such an environment, I noticed the changes in my attitude toward Chinese traditional culture. While studying in China, I once believed that excelling in English was more worthy of boasting than proficiency in Chinese. I also found myself drawn to many Western holidays and external cultures. This was because my former school placed a greater emphasis on English teaching and foreign cultural exchange compared to other Chinese schools. Moreover, it's easy for an individual to overlook a particular cultural background when immersed in it for an extended period. However, living far from home propelled a yearning for a sense of my native cultural identity, leading me to discover the allure of traditional Chinese cultures. I have come to appreciate how even inanimate objects can carry profound stories and

meanings, shaped by the dedication of generations. Many traditional Chinese cultural practices and Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) have endured through millennia of history, bearing strong national characteristics, and serving as reflections of the philosophical, moral, ethical, aesthetic, and artistic values of the Chinese nation throughout history. Compared to Western philosophy, Chinese tend to emphasize human society rather than nature.¹ However, ICHs are often constrained by many factors, such as limited raw materials and remote geographical locations, causing them to gradually take a diverging path in the face of the swift consumerism of Western capitalism. For example, being commercialized or appropriated by commercial culture, or adhering to traditional craftsmanship but gradually drifting away from the mainstream market. Realizing this, I was certain about my goal—uncover the connotations of Chinese traditional cultures, such as the Miao Batik culture, that have been forgotten by the evolution of time.

China's intangible cultural heritage is the essence of Chinese traditional culture. The term “Intangible Cultural Heritage” (ICH) first appeared in the announcement released by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2003.² The official definition of Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO is “traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts.”³ In the context of China, ICH signifies the expression of traditional culture and folk customs passed down through generations among various ethnic minority groups. These expressions typically encompass stories or legends with beautiful or profound meanings, reflecting the humanistic spirit of Chinese culture and representing the cultural identity of every Chinese individual.

Many have asked me, “Are you from the Miao?” My answer is no, so initially, most

¹ Zi, “The Relationship of Chinese Traditional Culture to the Modernization of China: An Introduction to the Current Discussion on JSTOR,” 444.

² Luo Li, Intellectual Property Protection of Traditional Cultural Expressions: Folklore in China (Cham, n.d.), 10.

³ “UNESCO - What Is Intangible Cultural Heritage?”

couldn't comprehend why I chose Miao Batik from various Chinese ICHs as the subject of my research. Do you remember *Dream Blue*? It was an experience from when I was three or four years old. I remember many things from that time, recalling it happened in my father's hometown. Later, my mother took me to visit an old lady next door who was dressed in vibrant clothing (now I realize she was wearing Miao attire). I watched her using wax to paint on cloth, dyeing it into vivid blue, and hanging it piece by piece. However, the name escaped me because she spoke in the Miao language. It wasn't until I mentioned it to my mother the next day that I learned it was called Miao Batik. My father's hometown is in Guangxi, one of the provinces with a significant Miao population, which led to this unique experience. The beauty of Miao Batik left a profound impression on my young self. Now, looking back, my affinity for the colour blue can be traced back to that moment. Unconsciously, even during my graduate studies, I found myself choosing to photograph the “blue” that I saw on my chosen route in downtown Toronto within one hour in a project for the Research Methodology course in Fall 2022 (see fig.1-4)



Figure 1, Chuchu Li, “Blue” in downtown Toronto, 2022



Figure 2, Chuchu Li, "Blue" in downtown Toronto, 2022



Figure 3, Chuchu Li, "Blue" in downtown Toronto, 2022



Figure 4, Chuchu Li, “Blue” in downtown Toronto, 2022

In the Winter 2023 term, I embarked on preliminary secondary research into Miao Batik, drawn by the “feminine trait” that it holds. This trait stems from the four elements that the past Chinese women’s education consisted of: “womanly virtue, womanly word, womanly deportment, and womanly work”, these were first formulated in Ban Zhao’s (45–116 C.E.) (Dong Han historian, literary figure, politician, and China's first female astronomer and mathematician)⁴ *Admonitions for Daughters*.⁵ In Chinese ancient times, unlike men, women were not privileged with literacy and education. Instead, the emphasis was placed on women restraining themselves in thought, speech, demeanour, and action while respecting men. “Womanly work” referred to engaging in textile work with silk and hemp, which was one of the primary occupations for Chinese women.⁶ Miao Batik has passed down through generations of Miao women, not only shapes Miao

⁴ “Ban Zhao: 班昭.”

⁵ Liu, Karl, and Ko, *The Birth of Chinese Feminism: Essential Texts in Transnational Theory*, 148

⁶ *Ibid*, 130

culture, influencing attire, wedding ceremonies, social life, funeral customs, and other folk cultures but more significantly showcasing their wisdom and their knowledge in material practice.⁷ Miao Batik was included in China's first batch of national intangible cultural heritage in 2006.⁸

My interest in Batik intensified through the text, *An Aesthetic Study on Traditional Batik Design of Miao Ethnicity in China*, which provides an introduction to Batik techniques and the meanings behind traditional Miao patterns.⁹ I purchased Batik tools and dyes from China, designing a series of creative illustrations based on traditional patterns. Later I transformed these designs into a Batik piece titled *Sheng 生*, and showcased it in my Winter 2023 IAMM Studio Exhibition (details of which will be explained further in Chapter 4). The creative process of *Sheng 生* for me is both research for creation and knowledge acquisition in the process of creation. To design the illustrations, I studied and understood the meanings and uses of several main traditional patterns of the Miao ethnic group, thereby discovering thought-provoking issues embedded in Miao culture — the cultivation and protection of women's rights. Additionally, during the production process, I became aware of the impact of materials, dyes, and the environment on the outcome, which also sparked my contemplation on the factors influencing the development of the Batik industry. Thus, I decided to focus on Miao Batik as the central topic of this thesis project.

Seeking Root

I believe craft practices like Miao Batik should not be confined to museums for people to admire from behind glass or be known solely through books and the internet. Instead, they should be active parts of people's lives because we gain insights from firsthand experience and practical engagement. As John Dewey, a philosopher and educator,

⁷ Qianru Yang, Jingrong Hu, and Yaping Xie, "Chapter 1," essay, in Fei Chang Yi Chan Zhongguo Yuan Su: Chuan Tong Shou Gong Ji Yi (Guiyang: Guizhou ren min chu ban she, 2017), 7.

⁸ Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China, "苗族蜡染技艺: Miao Batik Technique."

⁹ LYU Zhennan and Siti Rohaya Yahaya, "An Aesthetic Study on Traditional Batik Design of Miao Ethnicity in China," KUPAS SENI 9, no. 2 (August 2021): 12–25.

articulates, “Experience is a necessary component in education, and the quality of the experience is vital”.¹⁰ Influenced by Dewey, Edgar Dale, an American educator, developed the Cone of Experience.¹¹ Dale believed that “learners benefit from abstract instructional activities once they have concrete experiences to give meaning to them,” which include field trips and exhibits.¹² To better understand, learn, and experience Miao Batik, and to showcase it more effectively in this research, I decided to visit its birthplace. I became acquainted with Master Zhang Shixiu (张世秀) through online news during my initial research. She is a certified ICH inheritor of Miao Batik recognized by the Chinese government, dedicating herself to promoting Batik and selflessly teaching interested visitors.¹³ The village where Master Zhang resides, Paimo Village (Danzhai County, Guizhou Province, China), is renowned as the “Hometown of Batik Art” and holds the reputation of being the “Eastern Premier Dyeing” location. I reached out to her through social media (XiaoHongShu) expressing my interest in learning Batik from her.¹⁴ In April 2023, I travelled from Canada to Guizhou, China, to “seek root” and conduct field research. During the week spent in Paimo Village, I witnessed the original form of Miao Batik, saw the land that nurtured it, and met its “mothers.” This project aims to bring this culture out of the mountains, enabling more people in China and worldwide to appreciate and understand the beauty of Miao Batik.

Touched

After leaving the Paimo Village, I contemplated how to promote Miao Batik using innovative artistic forms while respecting Miao's culture during the Summer 2023 term. However, a lingering question troubled me deeply. Before creating *Sheng 生*, I learned

¹⁰ Garrett, “Dewey, Dale, and Bruner: Educational Philosophy, Experiential Learning, and Library School Cataloging Instruction,” 129–30.

¹¹ Wikipedia contributors, “Edgar Dale.”

¹² Garrett, “Dewey, Dale, and Bruner: Educational Philosophy, Experiential Learning, and Library School Cataloging Instruction,” 130–31.

¹³ Gui, “传统文化商业化:如何留住那一抹‘贵州蓝’?: Commercialization of Traditional Culture: How to Preserve the Essence of ‘Guizhou Blue’?”

¹⁴ Peng, “‘法治宣传+非遗蜡染’ 丹寨县法院唱响非遗保护好声音: ‘Promotion of Rule of Law + Intangible Cultural Heritage Miao Batik’ - Danzhai County Court Sings the Praises of Protecting Intangible Heritage.”

about the symbolism behind traditional Miao patterns—fish and birds intertwined to represent marital harmony and gender equality.¹⁵ However, the reality I witnessed in Paimo Village contradicted this optimistic vision; gender equality was far from real.

In *Cocoon to Butterfly: Cultural Memory of Women in the Western Guizhou Miao* (化茧成蝶: 西江苗族妇女文化记忆), Miao researcher Zhang Xiao engages women's oral history and fieldwork to vividly portray the experiences of Miao women. Through anthropological observations and interviews, Xiao articulates how Miao women's rights in marriage, sexuality, childbirth, and career were significantly weaker compared to men.¹⁶ Taking the traditional Xijiang Miao ethnic group (before 1950) in this book as an example, their social concept was male-dominated, where males regarded females as tools for reproduction and ignored the difficulties and sufferings of females.¹⁷ Additionally, in terms of economics, men are considered the main productive force, while women are seen as their dependents and thus lack economic rights; In terms of education, males have the privilege of prioritizing cultural learning; In terms of marriage and family, fathers/husbands are regarded as the heads of households.¹⁸ These traditional notions have subtly influenced modern Miao communities, which is reaffirmed in interviews later with Master Zhang. At this juncture, I realized my pursuit wasn't solely about Miao Batik itself but also about Miao women and their stories, their struggles, and the meanings imbued by Batik and its creators upon each other.

By creating artwork/designs based on my research and engagement with Miao Batik, I aim to convey the history of Batik and the stories of Miao women to the audience, which could be people who love art, enthusiasts of folk culture, or advocates for the advancement of women's rights. In doing so, I hope to raise awareness and appreciation of Miao Batik and contribute to the protection of the social rights of Miao women and the

¹⁵ LYU Zhennan and Siti Rohaya Yahaya, "An Aesthetic Study on Traditional Batik Design of Miao Ethnicity in China," KUPAS SENI 9, no. 2 (August 2021): 18

¹⁶ Zhang, 化茧成蝶: 西江苗族妇女文化记忆: Cocoon to Butterfly: Cultural Memory of Women in the Western Guizhou Miao.

¹⁷ Ibid, 180

¹⁸ Ibid, 153

development of the Batik industry.

CHAPTER 2 – CONTEXT & THEORY

The Miao & Miao Batik

The history of the Miao people can be traced back to the time of the Yan Emperor and the Yellow Emperor (ancestors of the Chinese people) in ancient China (circa 2700 BC). One of the Miao people's ancestors is Chi You, who is mentioned alongside the Yan Emperor and the Yellow Emperor as one of the “Three Ancestors of China.”¹⁹ Due to Chi You's defeat by the Yan Emperor and the Yellow Emperor, the Miao tribal communities embarked on a long journey of five major migrations, leaving their footprints across the central plains, central and southern China, and various provinces in the southwest.²⁰ During those migrations, they lost their own written language, and the origins of Miao Batik and its patterns are largely rooted in this history.²¹ According to Batik scholar Xueyan, “the ancestors of the Miao people sang history through ancient songs, passed down civilization through embroidery, and depicted hope through Batik patterns... Under the wax knife, they poured their hearts out, creating splendid attire.”²² The history of Miao Batik can be traced back to over two thousand years ago during the Western Han Dynasty, making it the unwritten history book of the Miao people.²³ The art of Batik, as a technique of wax-resist dyeing applied to the whole cloth, is widely used in various parts of the world, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Japan and beyond. However, what distinguishes Miao Batik and is of primary concern to this thesis project is its specificity of traditional patterns. Within various patterns such as butterfly motifs, bird motifs, and “Wotuo” (whirlpool) motifs, each pattern carries unique symbolic meanings, representing a story or a historical period. For example, the most common “Wotuo” (see fig.5) motif has a story like this:

¹⁹ “蚩尤: Chi You.”

²⁰ Shi, “Five Migration Waves in Miao History: 苗族历史上的五次迁徙波.”

²¹ Xueyan 雪燕, 苗族蜡染纹样研究: *The Study of Miao Batik Patterns*, 2.

²² Ibid, 2

²³ Ibid, 2

“It is said that a girl fell ill, and they squeezed the juice out of that herb(whirlpool-shaped) to drink, which turned into a potion. After she drank it, the illness was cured. The Miao people didn't know how to express their gratitude, so they painted it on clothes to wear. Now, that wave pattern has evolved from that story from a long time ago.” - Yang Naijin, an ICH inheritor of Miao Batik.²⁴

“传说一个姑娘生病了，就拿那个草药挤出来汁液喝，变成那个药水，喝了病就好了。苗家人也不知道怎么感谢它，所以画在衣服上来穿，现在那个涡妥纹也是由很久以前那个故事演变出来的。”——苗族蜡染技艺传承人杨乃金



Figure 5, Master Zhang Shixiu, The Miao Batik piece of “Wotuo” Pattern, 2023

“Wotuo”(涡妥) is another term for Batik because in the Miao language, “wo”(涡) means clothes, and “tuo”(妥) means Batik, therefore, “Wotuo” refers to a piece of Batik

²⁴ Gao, “苗族蜡染设计师成昊：在蓝白世界里行走的‘小裁缝’：CCTV.Com(Video)”Miao Batik Designer Cheng Hao: A ‘Little Tailor’ Walking in the Blue and White World”.

clothing.²⁵ The basic process of Batik involves using a unique wax knife to dip into melted beeswax and draw on the fabric. The fabric is then repeatedly dipped into a dye made from indigo plants, and the beeswax is melted away with boiling water. Finally, the fabric is washed clean, revealing the white patterns against a blue background. One crucial aspect of Batik materials is the production of dyes. The traditional process of making blue dye includes planting, harvesting, fermenting, precipitating, and then mixing the indigo plants with water, soda ash, and rice wine to create the dye.²⁶ Both dye production and Batik pattern drawing are time-consuming processes, requiring practitioners to start learning Batik techniques from a young age and continuously practice to become masters of the craft—enabling them to draw with wax confidently without needing drafts or making mistakes. Since Miao Batik was listed as an ICH of China in 2006, it has gradually become a characteristic souvenir in Miao areas, often marketed to tourists. However, with the increasing demand in the market, there has been a surge in the production of poor-quality Batik products. Many factories have turned to using chemical blue dyes to pursue efficiency and production volume, posing a threat to the inheritance of traditional Batik craftsmanship.²⁷

What is inheritance? In the context of China's ICH, inheriting folk customs preserve the ancient cultural memory and unique cultural characteristics of a nation, which symbolize human wisdom and creativity. This allows a nation to distinguish itself from others by possessing unique cultural identities.²⁸ Due to China's turbulent modern history, marked by invasions, internal conflict, and upheaval including the Opium Wars and the devastating impact of the Cultural Revolution after the founding of the People's Republic, the Chinese government recognized the importance of protecting and reviving traditional culture and intangible heritage starting in 2001.²⁹ China's preservation of ICH is

²⁵ Xueyan 雪燕, 苗族蜡染纹样研究: *The Study of Miao Batik Patterns*, 13.

²⁶ Xueyan 雪燕, 苗族蜡染纹样研究: *The Study of Miao Batik Patterns*, 15

²⁷ "Miao Batik Technique," Guizhou Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Center, n.d.

²⁸ Li, "Intellectual Property", Preface vii

²⁹ Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China. "40年,从自觉到自信!非遗为民族立魂、为生活点睛: 40 Years, from Awareness to Confidence! Intangible Cultural Heritage Enlivens the National Spirit and Embellishes Life," n.d. https://www.mct.gov.cn/whzx/bnsj/fwzwhycs/201901/t20190107_836819.html.

advantageous not only for the entire nation to reclaim its self-awareness and confidence but also as a way of discovering and understanding historical and cultural roots.³⁰ Consequently, inheritance plays a pivotal role in enabling future generations to not only comprehend the rich history and diverse cultures of China's ethnic groups but also in perpetuating and sustaining the preservation of these cultural and material traditions. As a result, the responsibility of ICH inheritors is significant. According to the regulations issued by the Chinese Ministry of Culture and Tourism in 2020 regarding inheritors of intangible cultural heritage, Chinese citizens looking to qualify and be recognized as inheritors need to master the knowledge and core techniques of a specific ICH project proficiently, have regional representativeness and influence and should be committed to conducting inheritance activities to cultivate practitioners, such as participating in ICH promotional activities and offering ICH courses.³¹

For the Miao people, inheriting Batik is a matriarchal custom, where “all Miao women have the obligation to inherit Batik skills, and every mother must teach her daughter how to make Batik.”³² This is one of the reasons why most Batik practitioners are women, which also aligns with the traditional concept in Miao culture and even across China, known as “men plow, women weave.” In ancient China, women were considered subordinate to men, primarily responsible for chores and weaving, while men were responsible for earning money to support their families. Consequently, women had no voice and were obligated to submit to men. In 1978, the Chinese Communist Party launched the Reform and Opening-Up policy, which propelled the rapid economic development of China.³³ With industrialization in China (the 1960s to 1990s) many rural men migrated for work, allowing women to undertake tasks that were previously considered men's responsibilities such as farming, individual entrepreneurship, and contributing directly to wealth creation, which in turn has caused women's status within

³⁰ Zhang and Zhou, “Introduction: The Essentials of Intangible Cultural Heritage Practices in China: The Inherent Logic and Transmission Mechanism of Chinese Tradition on JSTOR,” 137.

³¹ People's Republic of China, Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the. 国家级非物质文化遗产代表性传承人认定与管理办法, 2020. https://zwgk.mct.gov.cn/zfxxgkml/zcfg/bmgz/202012/t20201214_919516.html.

³² Xueyan 雪燕, 苗族蜡染纹样研究: *The Study of Miao Batik Patterns*, 13.

³³ Wikipedia contributors, “Chinese Economic Reform.”

the family structure to gradually improve.³⁴

Master Zhang, a Miao woman, stands as a prominent example of such courage and entrepreneurial spirit. At the age of 46 at the time of writing, she started learning Batik from her mother at the age of five or six, but it was always for personal use. Previously living in poverty, she supported herself through farming and running a small shop selling daily supplies. Over a decade ago, occasionally, some government officials and scholars would come to Paimo Village for interviews and research. They were interested in buying some Miao Batik pieces as souvenirs, but no one was selling them. Master Zhang noticed that and began making Batik handkerchiefs in the shop when it wasn't busy. She found that the visitors from outside really liked this handicraft. With the help of government subsidies, she established a dye workshop in 2014 and invited Miao women from the village to join her. In order to introduce more people to this ICH, Master Zhang made great efforts to learn how to use online shops, social media, and live streaming, which she had no prior knowledge of. Gradually, she attracted individuals fascinated by Batik and artists from both domestic and international origins to come to the village to learn Batik and also received many orders from both domestic and international customers.³⁵ Not only did she lift herself and other women in the village out of poverty through Batik, but she also made significant contributions to the inheritance of this ICH, such as participating in exhibitions worldwide to promote Miao Batik and voluntarily teaching people who come to learn Batik techniques out of admiration. From Master Zhang's efforts, the development of Batik inheritance and the Batik industry has provided job opportunities for many Miao women, thus enhancing their social rights and status.

Miao Batik Culture Preservation: Revival or Loss

Why has Miao Batik, listed as a Chinese intangible cultural heritage since 2006, still developed slowly and lacked recognition? Literary scholar and cultural theorist Rey Chow once raised the question, "How to strive for authentic originariness, when the

³⁴Zhang, "Hua Jian Cheng Die", Page 145

³⁵ Yang, "贵州丹寨:老技艺描绘新画卷: Danzhai County, Guizhou: Old Technique Depicts New Painting."

history of China in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is inundated with disruptive contacts with the West? Where could authentic origins possibly come from?”³⁶ Chow's inquiry sheds light on the complex interplay between Chinese traditional culture and the transformative impacts of Western influences. It draws attention to tensions between what is understood as authentic Chinese cultures and global histories of contact and trade with Western cultures and influence, as well as their respective cultural value and influence in Chinese society. The valorization of Western industrialization and cultural beliefs exacerbates this tension, which has greatly influenced younger generations' perspectives of Chinese traditional cultures, and they are often overlooked or undervalued. Additionally, in the context of China's “Westernization,” certain characteristics inherent to Miao Batik, as an ICH, have also influenced its development. Firstly, it is challenging to truly commercialize Miao Batik due to its strong cultural attributes, such as the religious beliefs of the Miao people and the artist's personal aesthetics and emotional expression, making standard production like assembly line goods difficult and inappropriate. This slower rate of production and materially specific practice means that ICH inheritors are the primary driving force in maintaining and developing Miao Batik crafts. In addition, most inheritors are older and struggle to find successors, as modernization has dissuaded the younger generation from staying in rural areas to pursue agricultural or artisanal work, opting for opportunities and higher incomes in urban settings.³⁷ This diminishes the number of Batik practitioners and makes replication increasingly difficult. Secondly, Miao Batik workshops are often located in rural areas and thus constrained by geographical limitations, which also speaks to the geographical and material specificity of these practices and processes. Specifically, Miao Batik requires the mass cultivation of indigo plants, good ventilation for the dye-making process, wax-painting, soaking, dyeing, waxing, boiling, and drying. These processes may not be easily carried out in urban settings and may necessitate a significant amount of space, which can be challenging to find in urban environments. Places where Chinese customers can acquire Miao Batik products are mainly tourist spots, specialty stores, or partly available online. Although many inheritors promote Batik works online, people

³⁶ Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading Between West and East*, 28 .

³⁷ Li, *Intellectual Property Protection of Traditional Cultural Expressions: Folklore in China*, 16

might be discouraged due to the inconvenience of transportation to remote mountainous regions, and those who go there are mostly researchers. Lastly, there is a dearth of publicity for Miao Batik, which could be seen as a result of the previous two points. Due to the lack of inheritors and various restrictions, avenues for people to learn about Miao Batik culture are limited. Without awareness or understanding, generating interest becomes challenging.

It is worth mentioning that China has implemented a nearly 30-year family planning/one-child policy since 1980.³⁸ Although this policy is slightly relaxed for ethnic minorities such as the Miao people—they are allowed to have two children—it still has potential implications for the inheritance of Miao Batik.³⁹ Additionally, due to the preference for having boys influenced by traditional Chinese beliefs, some families may choose to have abortions or kill female infants.⁴⁰ This poses a certain threat to the craft of Miao Batik, which is passed down through the maternal line.

When discussing the protection and revival of Miao Batik as one of China's ICHs, it can be understood as two interconnected levels—national and individual (or organizational). The Chinese government's protective measures include initiating various local development projects within Miao communities, enforced under various banners like “cultural protection,” “intangible cultural heritage protection,” “cultural industry,” “rural tourism,” and “precision poverty alleviation;” however, local governments often lack the financial support needed to complement these centrally funded projects.⁴¹ The primary issues arising from the implementation of these projects revolve around incongruent ideologies with the local community and excessive commercialization, often neglecting the real situations and needs of the local villagers while aiming to achieve certain goals (economic and reputational).⁴² This contradiction arises due to the poverty prevalent in

³⁸ “BBC News | ASIA-PACIFIC | China Steps up ‘one Child’ Policy.”

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Chen, Ren, and Zhang, “Cultural Heritage as Rural Economic Development: Batik Production amongst China's Miao Population,” 187.

⁴² Ibid, 187-188

the rural areas where many ethnic minorities and many ICHs reside. The government, seeking to improve rural economies while developing heritage, positions it as “extracting resources” and “symbolic capital,” thereby making heritage a form of rural economic development.⁴³ Once a folk craft is listed in the Intangible Cultural Heritage directory, the local area often transforms into a tourist attraction, driving the local economy.⁴⁴ This might lead to the commercialization and superficial portrayal of ICH, potentially affecting its authenticity and originality. A distressing example is the increased demand for Miao Batik pieces resulting in businesses opting for machine-made standardized Batik materials instead of handcrafted ones, altering the traditional approach.⁴⁵ So, is this kind of protection a cultural revival or a cultural loss?

Moreover, excessive commercialization might also manifest in the exploitation of Miao Batik practitioners by business owners. Some entrepreneurs benefit from government support for heritage industries while engaging in low-price purchases from Miao women and reselling at higher prices.

A Miao village cadre lamented,

They (merchants) are very clever and greedy. They help us sell Batik pieces, but they only care about money. They don't understand how difficult it is to make this cloth; it's something my grandmother made. They buy it at relatively low prices and then sell it in urban markets at more than three times the price. I see them collecting thousands of beautiful traditional Miao Batik and embroidered works and exporting them. We now realize how precious they are! This is a huge cultural loss! (Chen, Ren, and Zhang 2021)

These observations illustrate the challenges faced by the Chinese government in the protection process of traditional/heritage culture and the issues that need attention, namely, understanding the needs of ICH practitioners and communities deeply to devise project plans. It's also essential to prevent the loss of cultural respect that can result from excessive

⁴³ Ibid, 184

⁴⁴ Sherman, “Who Owns Culture and Who Decides?: Ethics, Film Methodology, and Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection on JSTOR,” 231.

⁴⁵ Chen, Ren, and Zhang, “Cultural Heritage as Rural Economic Development: Batik Production amongst China's Miao Population,” 191.

commercialization during economic development.

On the other hand, how can individuals contribute to the development of Miao Batik culture? Through a news broadcast on the Chinese Central Television website, I got to know Cheng Hao, a non-Miao fashion designer who was attracted to the Miao Batik culture; by residing in Danzhai, Guizhou, China, he collaborated with Miao Batik artisans to create numerous Batik clothing pieces and participated in the London Fashion Week in 2020, successfully taking Miao Batik beyond national borders.⁴⁶ Cheng Hao mentioned in an interview, “While inheriting the classic patterns of the (Miao), these works also depict some of our country's mountains, rivers, and some cultural symbolism, stories, characters, and so on, using a new format of Batik.”⁴⁷ Cheng Hao's story as a fashion designer is a great role model for me, which led me to think about what kind of response could a multidisciplinary designer and artist like me provide. In the initial stages of my research, my conceptualization revolved around designing a series of creative cultural innovation products using Miao Batik culture. However, discussions with my advisors made me realize that besides considering the quality of the work itself, ethical aspects needed consideration, such as cultural appropriation. A product's design, to some extent, intertwines with commercial and financial gains. Even if it enhances people's understanding of Miao Batik, it doesn't directly benefit Miao women; instead, I might profit by appropriating Miao Batik culture.

As the project evolved, I decided to create educational materials and works to increase awareness about Miao Batik culture, aiming to enhance people's awareness of Miao Batik and the social rights of Miao women while respecting the original culture. Master Zhang mentioned in the interview that the most feared loss is not the Batik technique but the traditional patterns of the Miao. If the historical Miao patterns that record history cease to exist or undergo significant alterations, it will severely impact Miao culture. My solution is to incorporate these patterns and their underlying meanings and stories into my designs,

⁴⁶ Gao, “苗族蜡染设计师成昊：在蓝白世界里行走的‘小裁缝’：CCTV.Com(Video)”Miao Batik Designer Cheng Hao: A ‘Little Tailor’ Walking in the Blue and White World”.

⁴⁷ Ibid

not by altering the culture but by employing forms of presentation that are more readily accepted by modern society, making heritage culture more accessible and integrated into people's lives.

Chinese Feminism & Female Social Rights

This section traces and details some of the historical roots and contemporary manifestations of gender inequality in China, and analyzes some of the cultural, socio-economic, and political factors and beliefs to comprehend and address the inequality and lack of social rights protection faced by Chinese women, as represented by Miao women in this project.

China's history endured thousands of years of feudal monarchy. In traditional Chinese society, men regarded women as private property, confining them to household chores and child-rearing, thereby depriving them of fundamental freedoms.⁴⁸ An illustrative example is the Chinese term for "Family Name" ('姓'), composed of the character '女' (woman) as a radical and '生' (life), signifying "women/life," representing a family surname.⁴⁹ Chinese great families of remote antiquities, eminent figures, and legends like Shennong and the Yellow Emperor used maternal surnames, indicating a period where the concept of male dominance over females had not yet emerged and maternal descent was practiced; however, wars among totemic groups led to the enslavement of defeated women, marking the beginning of their subjugation and the transfer of the father's surname to their offspring.⁵⁰ From around 5000 years ago in the late Neolithic period to the emergence of the Xia Dynasty around 4000 years ago, the matrilineal clan commune of primitive society in China gradually gave way to the commune.⁵¹ Similarly, the Miao (Xijiang area), has historically practiced a paternal naming tradition for over five millennia, wherein the father's first name is appended after that of the children, illustrating their patriarchal societal structure, which in other words "The bloodline

⁴⁸ Liu, Karl, and Ko, *The Birth of Chinese Feminism: Essential Texts in Transnational Theory*, 53.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 109-110

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁵¹ "父系氏族公社: Patrilineal Clan Commune."

belongs solely to men; each man has his line, while women have none, despite each line being forged by women and each man being born of women. Women have no history; history does not acknowledge them.”⁵²

Another reason for the disregard of women and their rights in Chinese society stems from the Confucianism philosophy that has profoundly influenced Chinese culture and society, with its central tenet being “elevating men and deprecating women.”⁵³ He Yinzhen, a Chinese early 20th-century feminist, in her 1907 work *On the Revenge of Women* detailed numerous doctrines regarding women's obedience and standards in ancient texts including “men first, women last”, “the husband is the heaven of the wife”, and “when a husband dies, do not remarry,” which propagated male supremacy and reinforced patriarchal norms.⁵⁴ As another dominant philosophical system of China, Taoism similarly linked female principles with “silence” and “negativity,” coexisting and collaborating with Confucian aversions to women, which caused Chinese women to face not only oppression but also propagated feelings of spiritual subservience through everyday practices in Chinese society.⁵⁵ During an interview, Master Zhang mentioned how it was historically women who engaged in Batik-making—enacting the Chinese traditional concept of “men plow, women weave.” As mentioned earlier, Dong Han scholar Ban Zhao was exceptionally talented in history, literature, political science, astronomy, and mathematics, but the teachings she advocated for women were particularly absurd.⁵⁶ For instance, in her *Admonitions for Daughters*, she extolled the virtues of women being lowly and weak, humble and respectful, enduring accusations and insults, and respecting and serving their husbands.⁵⁷ He Yinzhen once said, “That the rights and power of women failed to develop can be attributed to the fact that women are well versed in Ban the traitor’s book; once her teaching becomes entrenched, nothing else could penetrate the mind.”⁵⁸ The reason Ban Zhao became “a slave of men” and “an

⁵² Zhang, 化茧成蝶:西江苗族妇女文化记忆: Cocoon to Butterfly: Cultural Memory of Women in the Western Guizhou Miao, 38.

⁵³ Liu, Karl, and Ko, *The Birth of Chinese Feminism: Essential Texts in Transnational Theory*, 123.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 124-146

⁵⁵ Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading Between West and East*, 10.

⁵⁶ “Ban Zhao: 班昭.”

⁵⁷ Liu, Karl, and Ko, *The Birth of Chinese Feminism: Essential Texts in Transnational Theory*, 145

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 146

archtraitor to women” is because she became so enamored with Confucian books and was severely confined by Confucian ideology.⁵⁹

In addition to suppressing women in behavioural guidelines, ancient Chinese men also deprived women of three rights: the right to “bear arms and command armies”, the right to “hold political power”, and the right to “be educated”.⁶⁰ The deprivation of the right to education is particularly salient for the Batik artisans in Paimo Village; Master Zhang mentioned the traditional belief of favouring males among the Miao people, and had it not been for her father's illiteracy causing many hardships, she would not have had the opportunity to go to school. The *History of the Later Han* records Empress Deng, who read history and classics in her youth, yet her mother criticized her, emphasizing she should practice household chores; from then on, many parents held this belief—when daughters displayed talent, they were seen as ominous and were feared to have short lives.⁶¹ Ultimately, lack of talent became a virtue for women—a stark validation of the phrase “a woman without talent is virtuous.” However, uneducated women struggled to find work and relied on men for sustenance, indirectly contributing to China's poverty.⁶² Liang Qichao, a crucial intellectual in early 20th-century China during the late Qing Dynasty, recognized the above fact when China was invaded and reduced to semi-colonial status, concluding that “Women were seen as insignificant and were not to be educated. And without education, it was not possible for women to have occupations.”⁶³ When women couldn't generate wealth themselves, they became easily subjected to men, as “Women can be privately possessed because men have power over money and can thus control the fate of women.”⁶⁴

Ironically, *The Women's Bell*, published in 1903 and likely “the first systematic championing of women’s rights to education, to suffrage, to employment and livelihood,

⁵⁹ Ibid, 145-46

⁶⁰ Liu, Karl, and Ko, *The Birth of Chinese Feminism: Essential Texts in Transnational Theory*, 147.

⁶¹ Ibid, 149.

⁶² Ibid, 191

⁶³ Ibid, 187,191

⁶⁴ Ibid, 93

and to human dignity”, was authored by a male figure, the renowned educator and revolutionary in the late Qing Dynasty, Jin Tianhe.⁶⁵ In her 1907 publication *On the Question of Women’s Liberation*, He Yinzhen mentioned that the fundamental reason for Chinese men advocating women's rights and liberation was the protection of their self-interest, which specifically were three reasons: firstly, “Chinese men worship power and authority. They believe that Europeans, Americans, and the Japanese are civilized nations of the modern world who all grant their women some degree of freedom”; secondly, as the pressure on Chinese men increased to earn a livelihood for their families, they sought to alleviate their burden by granting women the right to be educated and find jobs; and thirdly, Chinese men “view the family as their personal property and treat having progeny as a top priority” but they were unwilling to undertake household chores and childcare, thereby shifting this responsibility onto women.⁶⁶ Regardless of the initial motivations of Chinese male scholars who voiced their support in the early stages of the rise of Chinese feminism, they also contributed to the development of Chinese feminism and women's rights. Moreover, voices like He Yinzhen's, a female scholar, should not be overlooked by future generations but should instead be regarded with dialectical consideration of diverse perspectives.

What is the relationship between Miao women, as ICH inheritors of Miao Batik, and Chinese feminism? Miao women, using Batik as a means, have created wealth for themselves, enhanced their family and social status, and their sense of life value, while contributing to the protection and development of Chinese traditional culture/ICH. Consequently, they've maximized women's self-recognition, no longer dependent on men but aiming for an equal coexistence. This embodies He’s viewpoint that “The cause of women’s rights must be won through women’s own efforts. It must not be granted by men. If we allow women’s rightful role to be imposed by men, we are renouncing our freedom; and if we allow ourselves to look up to men and ingratiate ourselves to them, whatever rights we obtain in this way are handed to us from above.”⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Ibid, 1, 7

⁶⁶ Liu, Karl, and Ko, *The Birth of Chinese Feminism: Essential Texts in Transnational Theory*, 60-61.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 63

Based on the context research on Miao Batik culture, its preservation and development, and the status of Chinese feminism and female social rights, I attempt to find answers to the following research questions.

Research Questions

- What challenges exist in reviving and protecting ICHs like Miao Batik in China?
What considerations need to be addressed?
 - a) How can Chinese artists and designers respectfully engage in promoting, enhancing, and bringing attention to Miao Batik culture through creative practices?
 - b) What kind of narratives, information, and spirit can these design practices convey?
 - c) What aspects of Chinese feminism are conveyed through Miao Batik's cultural production?

Seeking answers to these questions in this thesis project can help me achieve the goal of promoting the culture of Miao Batik. Additionally, I hope to clarify the role I play as a Chinese designer/artist in this research, as well as my future research directions.

CHAPTER 3 – METHOD & METHODOLOGIES

This chapter discusses the methods and methodologies employed in this thesis project, which include research-creation, interviews with human participants, and storytelling.

Research-Creation

“Research-creation is an emergent category within the social sciences and humanities that speaks to contemporary media experiences and modes of knowing. Research-creation projects typically integrate a creative process, experimental aesthetic component, or an

artistic work as an integral part of a study.”⁶⁸ Research-creation methods combine theoretical research and practical creation to generate knowledge and insights in innovative ways. This method allows for multidimensional exploration of knowledge and enables researchers to think from both theoretical and practical perspectives.

According to Chapman and Sawchuk, research-creation has four distinct approaches or subcategories: “research-for-creation,” “research-from-creation,” “creative presentations of research,” and “creation-as-research.”⁶⁹ “Research-for-creation” means “any creation, even (and especially) creation that is pursued as a type of research in and of itself, involves an initial gathering together of material, ideas, concepts, collaborators, technologies, et cetera, in order to begin.”⁷⁰ All the methods mentioned above for gathering information are collectively referred to as “research.” This may involve reading and analyzing books and journals, with the arguments and knowledge obtained serving as the basis and inspiration for creation. “Research-from-creation” involves gaining insights during the process of creating a work, such as analyzing responses from both the work itself and the audience to gather research data. In this understanding, “Research is not only part of developing art projects that then stand on their own; rather, performances, experiences, interactive artworks, et cetera can also be ways of generating research data that can then be used to understand different dynamics.”⁷¹ The third subcategory “creative presentations of research” refers to a “presentation of traditional academic research in a creative fashion”, which the academic performer Jackie Orr (2005) writing papers using collage and language to convey the panic disorder she describes is a great example.⁷² The last but not least is “creation-as-research”, which “involves the elaboration of projects where creation is required in order for research to emerge. It is about investigating the relationship between technology, gathering, and revealing through creation ...while also seeking to extract knowledge from the process.”⁷³ Sawchuk and

⁶⁸ Chapman and Sawchuk, “Research-Creation: Intervention, Analysis and ‘Family Resemblances,’” 5.

⁶⁹ Chapman and Sawchuk, “Research-Creation: Intervention, Analysis and ‘Family Resemblances,’” 15

⁷⁰ Ibid, 15

⁷¹ Ibid, 16.

⁷² Ibid, 18

⁷³ Ibid, 19

Chapman clarify that “Clearly, these categories are not easily separated, and each is connected to the others. Further, they do not merely occur in a linear sequence, but can be ongoing, and happen simultaneously.”⁷⁴ This thesis utilizes the first three subcategories of research-creation methods. From the Winter 2023 to the Summer 2023 term, to delve deeper into Miao culture, seek theoretical support, and conceptualize the artwork, I conducted research through reading, watching, and engaging with journals, books, news, video interviews, and other resources related to Miao Batik culture and Miao women. From the Fall 2023 to the Winter 2024 term, the focus shifted predominantly to the design and creation of the artwork. I viewed this process, along with the resulting exhibition, as a means of generating new research directions and uncovering potential issues. For instance, while designing the artist's book, I placed myself in the perspective of someone unfamiliar with Miao culture and Batik. Through this, I realized that audiences lacking background knowledge would struggle to fully grasp the intended message. Similarly, when encountering an exhibition rooted in history or culture I didn't comprehend, I often needed extensive time reading annotations and seeking additional information to comprehend it fully. Consequently, I aimed to craft illustrations within the book that even children could easily understand, reducing the proportion of text within the images to enhance readability and engagement. This approach was intended to serve the purpose of promoting Miao Batik culture. Additionally, I utilized various artistic forms to showcase my research findings, intending to prevent Batik from becoming lifeless museum artifacts. This rationale led to my decision to design an artist's book, free from established constraints, thereby challenging conventional perceptions of traditional books. Audiences of different age groups can gain an understanding of Miao culture and Batik through an interactive reading of this artist's books. It is worth noting that for children, this book is primarily a children's picture book, narrating the culture and knowledge of a nation through illustrations and storytelling, thus ensuring the continued inheritance of the intangible cultural heritage of Miao Batik from generation to generation.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 21

Interviews with Master Zhang Shixiu

After completing a week-long Miao Batik Study with Master Zhang, I determined that a formal interview with her would be essential for this project. Her experience and insights as a Miao woman and an inheritor of Miao Batik were valuable primary resources for this study. With the Research Ethics Board (REB) approval, I conducted two interviews with Master Zhang. Analyzing her responses aided my understanding of the current challenges in Miao Batik heritage and the predicaments faced by Miao women, potentially revealing solutions. The following offers a summary and overview of the two interviews conducted with Master Zhang. Please refer to the whole interview in Appendix A.

My interviews with Master Zhang were conducted in two sessions: the first over the phone (Nov 07, 2023) and the second via text messages as a follow-up (Nov 23, 2023). During the telephone interview, I inquired about her experience in establishing her dyeing studio, the difficulties that she met, the meanings of Miao Batik patterns, the use of Batik, her reasons for choosing to specialize in Batik, and relevant issues regarding Miao women's rights. When designing these interview questions, I considered what aspects of questioning could reveal Master Zhang's story as an inheritor of Miao Batik as an ICH, her experiences as a Miao woman, and her knowledge of Batik culture. By analyzing her answers, I hope to transform the stories into knowledge and inspiration while preserving her voice and ultimately gaining a deeper understanding of Miao Batik culture and Miao women.

During her many years of practicing and preserving Miao Batik culture, Master Zhang encountered issues including economic hardships and the threat of the craft dying out. She mentioned, “What I fear the most about it being lost is our old patterns. Nowadays, young people are not fond of drawing our old patterns; they find them dull, and intricate. They learn the entire Batik process but might innovate new patterns.”

When I asked Master Zhang about the meanings of some common Miao Batik patterns and the traditional uses of Batik, she mentioned content related to marriage and childbirth. For example, patterns like fish, birds, and pomegranate flowers on the Miao

women's wedding attire symbolize the Miao people's worship of reproduction. Besides being used for festive attire, Miao Batik is also widely used to make baby carriers. I also asked Master Zhang why it is women who do Batik, as mentioned earlier, her response was due to the traditional concept of “men plow, women weave.” Master Zhang also mentioned that the Miao people heavily favor males over females. If it weren't for her father's illiteracy causing him losses, she wouldn't have had the opportunity to attend school.

Master Zhang had the opportunity to work in big cities due to her education, and it is through these experiences that she deeply appreciates the simplicity and kindness of the villagers. While solving her own poverty issues, she was also assisting the villagers. For example, before opening the dyeing workshop, she educated and celebrated International Women's Day with the other Miao women, aiming to recruit Batik artisans and enlighten Miao women about their rights. Furthermore, by providing job opportunities in the dyeing workshop, she helped herself and other women create wealth, improve their family and social status, and enhance their economic rights. Master Zhang also shared a story about one of the Batik artisans in her workshop: This artisan had bought a bunch of fruit for the New Year, but she was so busy during the holiday season that she forgot to eat them. When her husband saw the spoiled fruit, he scolded her for wasting money. She confidently told him not to worry, explaining that she would make the money back once the dyeing studio resumed work after the holidays. Master Zhang commented, “If she couldn't earn, she wouldn't dare say that. Therefore, I told all these elderly women at the workshop that if they can earn and sustain themselves, their status in the family naturally rises. Previously, depending on men for food and drinks while serving them led to a low status.”

The second round of text-message-based interviews was prompted by my experience in Canada, where I noticed the different impacts of dyes on the outcomes of Batik. The process of dyeing posed the greatest challenge during my creative journey because Miao Batik is a highly regional craft, and many raw materials need to be sourced from China, which isn't easily accessible to me in Canada. Additionally, through multiple attempts at

dyeing, I discovered that the Miao women, represented by Master Zhang, use pure natural traditional plant-based indigo dye, whereas the indigo dye kits available in the market are chemical-based. Setting up and preparing a vat for traditional plant-based indigo dyeing is complex, requires experience, and demands precise control of temperature and subsequent care, which I currently lack the resources to achieve. Therefore, I opted for the quicker chemical-based indigo dye, deepening my appreciation for the challenges in spreading Miao Batik culture.

Through the follow-up interview with Master Zhang and several other research, I learned about the differences between traditional plant-based indigo dyeing and chemical indigo dyeing. Traditional indigo dyeing involves using one of four plants—*Persicaria tinctoria*, *Isatis indigotica*, *Polygonum tinctorium*, or *Indigofera tinctoria* - collectively referred to as *lan dian cao* (蓝靛草) (translation: indigo plants) by the Miao people.⁷⁵ These plants are soaked and fermented with water, lime/wood ash, and rice wine in a container for several days to a week, resulting in the precipitation of *lan dian ni* (蓝靛泥) (translation: indigo paste).⁷⁶ To obtain a dye solution for Batik, water, wine, and natural soda ash are added to the indigo paste, allowing them to react together.⁷⁷ Chemical indigo dyes mostly use reducing agents containing chemical components. For example, the indigo dye kit produced by JACQUARD I used, supplies Sodium Hydrosulfite as a reducing agent and the pre-reduced indigo dye (see Appendix B). During the process of preparing the chemical dye solution, I need to wear gloves and a mask to protect my skin and respiratory system from damage, as the strong irritant odours of Sodium Hydrosulfite can cause skin irritation and respiratory discomfort with low toxicity.⁷⁸ Furthermore, according to Mr. Zhang's description and experiments with the Batik pieces of this project, chemical indigo dyes not only pose a certain risk to the human body but also result in lighter colours on fabrics and may have impurities, while the colours of the fabric from traditional plant-based indigo dyeing are very pure and with deeper blue.

⁷⁵ Xueyan 雪燕, 苗族蜡染纹样研究: *The Study of Miao Batik Patterns*, 14

⁷⁶ Zhang et al., "Island Blues: Indigenous Knowledge of Indigo-Yielding Plant Species Used by Hainan Miao and Li Dyers on Hainan Island, China," 5.

⁷⁷ Xueyan 雪燕, 苗族蜡染纹样研究: *The Study of Miao Batik Patterns*, 15

⁷⁸ "Sodium Dithionite," Wikipedia, n.d., https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sodium_dithionite.

Storytelling/Narrative

This thesis utilized the method of storytelling/narrative, in which I transformed the information and inspiration I gained from my research on Miao Batik culture, interviews, and personal experiences into narrative illustrations in an artist's book, individual stories in this thesis, and a documentary short film. By telling stories, I can vividly present the cultural details and deep emotions of Miao Batik, making these complex cultural and social phenomena more understandable and relatable.

Roland Barthes, French literary theorist, essayist, philosopher, critic, and semiotician, once said, “Narrative begins with the very history of humanity”.⁷⁹ Meanwhile, Alfred Schutz, an Austrian philosopher and social phenomenologist, and Thomas Luckmann, an American-Austrian sociologist, also believe that “Narrations represent meaning-contexts or life-worlds, which consist of an aggregation of experiences, orientations, principles, values, and norms which have been and always will be related to each other by subjects in such a way that they function as the foundation of meaning for thinking and doing.”⁸⁰ In book chapter “Storytelling As A Cultural Practice And Life Form” of *The Narrative Subject*, the author Christina Schachtner mentions that “we are born into a world of stories which are told to us and which we tell to Others... Narrative acts as a means with which to understand the world; storytelling acts as a means of conveying that understanding and[...]as an instrument for configuring the world.”⁸¹ What is the specific difference between narrative and storytelling? When telling a story, the emphasis is on “how,” whereas in narration and narrative, the method (how) and content (what) are inseparable.⁸² My understanding of this is that storytelling emphasizes the story itself, while narrative involves selecting key points of the story and can transform the story into knowledge. Taking the interview with Master Zhang as an example, the answers she gave me are “storytelling,” while the analyzation and reflections based on the answers are

⁷⁹ Wikipedia contributors, “Roland Barthes”; Schachtner, “Storytelling as a Cultural Practice and Life Form,” 29.

⁸⁰ Wikipedia contributors, “Alfred Schütz.”; Wikipedia contributors, “Thomas Luckmann”; Schachtner, “Storytelling as a Cultural Practice and Life Form,” 29.

⁸¹ Schachtner, “Storytelling as a Cultural Practice and Life Form,” 30

⁸² Ibid, 30

“narrative.”

Furthermore, narrative can be performed “by image, fixed or moving, by gesture, and by the organized mixture of all these substances,” meaning we can find narration in various places such as casual conversations, films, comics, advertisements, literature, and more.⁸³ Therefore, I chose illustrations and videos as the mediums for narration, aiming to present the world of Miao Batik in a more three-dimensional and diverse way to the audience. This method not only enhances the effectiveness of information transmission but also allows the details and deeper meanings of the culture to be more widely and deeply understood and appreciated.

In conclusion, the various research methods and methodologies mentioned above have provided solid support and foundation for this study the resulting design and creative process, especially the part concerning the information obtained from interviews and my field trip experience.

CHAPTER 4 – PRACTICES

What Can I Do?

- Artist’s Book

When I first encountered the art form of artists' books, one of the collections at the Bainbridge Island Museum of Art, *Paean to Place*, stood out to me (See Appendix C). Similar to Miao Batik, the “book” was a cotton scroll dyed with indigo, and the author used hand-sewn text on the fabric. Seen in this light, Miao Batik itself becomes an artist's book. Although the Miao people have lost their written language, they use the wax knife as a pen, beeswax as a medium, indigo dye as ink, and fabric as paper to record their religious beliefs, totem worship, local customs, production and livelihood, and gender

⁸³ Ibid, 30

relations.⁸⁴ Miao Batik patterns reflect the historical changes and social development of the Miao people over thousands of years. Master Zhang also mentioned in the interview, “You can tell the era of our patterns because they change in different eras.” For example, the patterns of mountains, roads, and rivers in Miao Batik have been passed down since thousands of years ago when Miao tribes migrated.⁸⁵ Without a written language, Miao women at that time could only use lines to record how many mountains they crossed and how many rivers they waded through.⁸⁶ After settling down following the migration, due to warfare and severe population loss during the migration, Miao ancestors began to contemplate issues of reproduction and procreation, which patterns of animals such as fish, birds, and butterflies emerged due to the Miao people's reverence for reproduction.⁸⁷

The primary creative output of this research is an artist book, with the same title as the thesis, *tHEiR BLUE*. In Mandarin Chinese “Their Blue” is “她们的蓝,” where “她们的” denotes the possession of many females (specifically referring to Miao women), while in English, “their” is gender-neutral. This caused me considerable distress until I visited the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) and watched the collective exhibition “Life Between Islands,” particularly Isaac Julien's film *Territories*, which inspired me. In the film, there's a line about telling a story concerning “history” and “herstory.” While the etymology of “history” isn't related to the pronoun “his,” “herstory” carries a distinct female connotation.⁸⁸ I realized that within “their,” there's the ability to denote femininity through “her,” prompting me to capitalize “her” in the title (tHEiR).

⁸⁴ Xueyan 雪燕, 苗族蜡染纹样研究: *The Study of Miao Batik Patterns*, 13.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 356

⁸⁶ Xueyan 雪燕, 苗族蜡染纹样研究: *The Study of Miao Batik Patterns*, 356

⁸⁷ Ibid, 220

⁸⁸ Jane Mills, “Womanwords: a dictionary of words about women”, 1992, ISBN 0-02-921495-5, p. 118



Figure 6. Chuchu Li, *tHEiR BLUE*, Artist's Book, Mixed Media, 2024

tHEiR BLUE combines various art forms and media, including Batik (fabric), illustrations, collages, sculptures, creative writing, and storytelling (see fig. 6). It consists of four chapters: “Legend,” “Creation,” “Patterns,” and “Them.” The stories in this book are mainly narrated through illustrations and Batik, with limited textual content to make them easily understandable for children. Before the start of each chapter, I designed transitional page illustrations based on the content of the chapter, and they are made into Batik (see fig. 7-10).

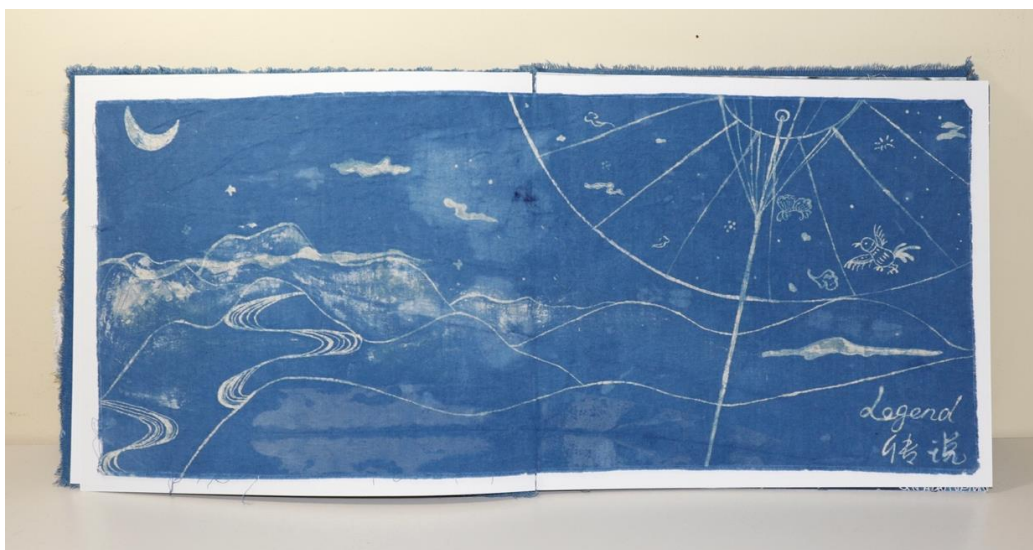


Figure 7, Chuchu Li, Legend 传说, Miao Batik, Chemical Indigo Dye, 2023



Figure 8, Chuchu Li, Creation 诞生, Miao Batik, Chemical Indigo Dye, 2023



Figure 9, Chuchu Li, Patterns 纹样, Miao Batik, Chemical Indigo Dye, 2023

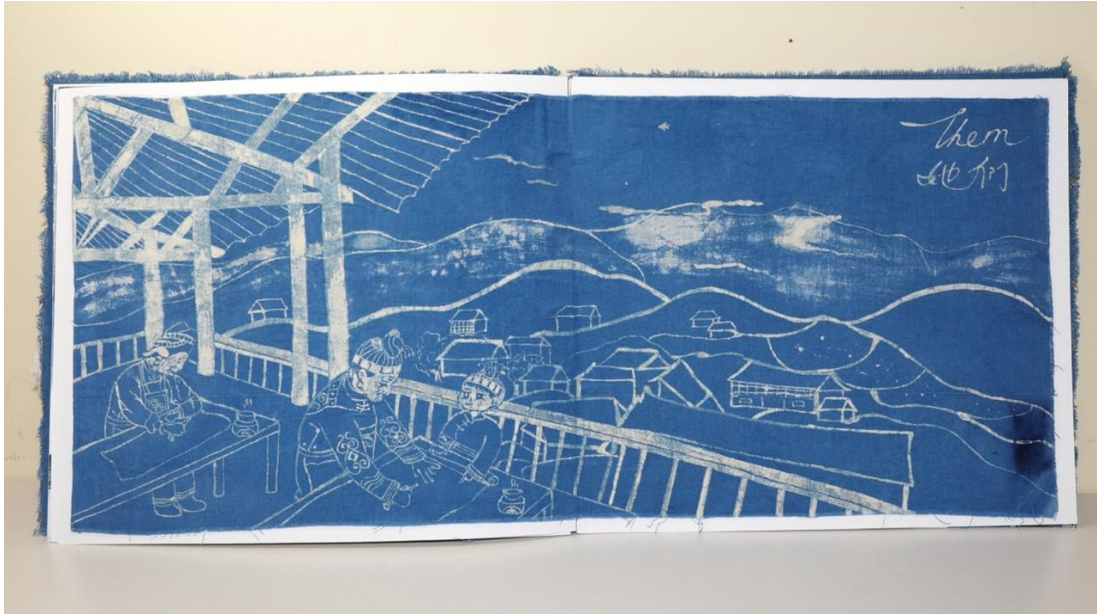


Figure 10, Chuchu Li, *Them 她们*, Miao Batik, Chemical Indigo Dye, 2023

The first chapter, “Legend,” narrates the origin legend of Miao Batik — the story of the goddess Wa Shuang and the sky umbrella (see fig. 11-12):

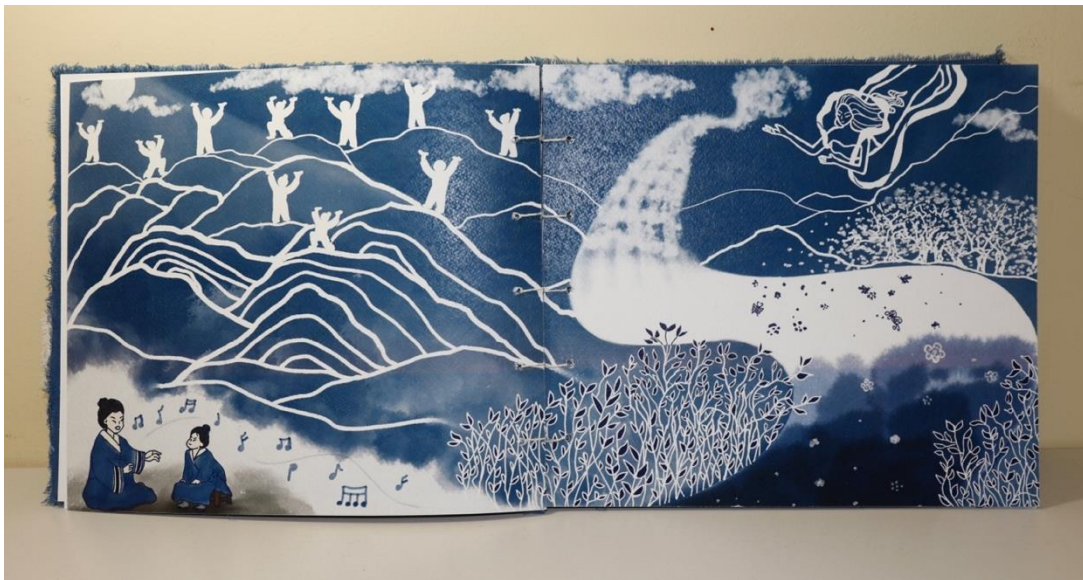


Figure 11, Chuchu Li, Chapter 1 of *THEiR BLUE*, Page 1-2, 2024



Figure 12, Chuchu Li, Chapter 1 of *tHEiR BLUE*, Page 3-4, 2024

*In areas where many Miao people live, there is a story about the origin of Batik told in the **Batik Song**, which has been passed down since ancient times, and Miao children grow up listening to the old people sing it this way: In ancient times, there were ten elders of the Miao who built the sky and ground. However, as the sky was unstable and often collapsed, the elders had to use their own bodies to hold the sky up, they were so tired that their backs ached, and it was difficult for them to insist. Thus, they asked the goddess Wa Shuang to help them find a solution, and Wa Shuang agreed eagerly. She used her divine power to bring together the clouds and fog in the sky and weave them into a white cloth. She dried the woven cloth under the pear trees, and the pear blossoms blown by the wind fell onto the cloth. When the bees came to collect honey from the fallen flowers, they dabbed beeswax onto the cloth and printed the outlines of the flowers. The sap from the indigo grass on the ground dyed the white cloth blue. Wa Shuang was very anxious to see the hard-earned cloth being stained, and quickly took it to the stream for rinsing. The Fire King (the sun) told her not to worry and melted the wax on the cloth, so the white cloth became a beautiful blue and white flower cloth. Wa Shang sewed the cloth into a big sky-supporting umbrella, the blue background became the blue sky, and the white flowers became the moon and the stars. Wa Shuang taught this discovery to the Miao sisters, and*

*from then on people wore beautiful dresses made of Batik. This is the legend of Batik.*⁸⁹

在很多苗族聚居的地方，有一首自古流传的《蜡染歌》里讲述了一个有关蜡染起源的故事。苗族孩子们从小就听老人们这样唱着：古时候苗族有十个老人造天开地，天由于不稳固而经常垮下来，老人们只好用自己的身躯把天顶住，累得腰酸背痛难以坚持。于是他们请来了女神娃爽想想办法，娃爽痛快的答应了。她用神力将天上的云和雾汇聚起来织成了白布，她将织好的布晒在梨树下面。被风吹落的梨花掉到了布上，蜜蜂来到落花上采蜜的时候将蜂蜡沾到了布上印出了花朵的轮廓。地上的蓝靛草分泌出的汁液又把白布染成了蓝色。娃爽看到辛苦织出的布被弄脏了十分焦急，赶快拿到溪水里漂洗。天上的火王（太阳）劝她不要急，赶忙帮她晒化了布上的蜡，于是白布变成了漂亮的蓝底白花布，娃爽用布缝成了一把撑天大伞，蓝底变成了蓝天，白花变成了月亮和星辰。娃爽又把这个发现传授给了人间的苗族姐妹们，从此人们穿上了蜡染做成的美丽衣裙，这就是蜡染的传说。

The second chapter, "Creation," depicts the process of Batik production. The content uses cute and simple illustrations, for children's accessibility as I mentioned in the previous chapter, along with brief textual descriptions to outline the nine main steps of the process (see fig. 13-18). The content of this chapter is based on the process of Batik-making that I learned from Master Zhang in Paimo Village, as well as information from the book *The Study of Miao Batik Patterns*.

⁸⁹ 中国贵州民族民间美术精粹-蜡染: The Essence of Ethnic Folk Art in Guizhou, China - Batik, 9.



Figure 13, Chuchu Li, Chapter 2 of tHEiR BLUE, Page 1, 2024



Figure 14, Chuchu Li, Chapter 2 of tHEiR BLUE, Page 2, 2024



Figure 15, Chuchu Li, Chapter 2 of tHEiR BLUE, Page 3, 2024



Figure 16, Chuchu Li, Chapter 2 of tHEiR BLUE, Page 4, 2024

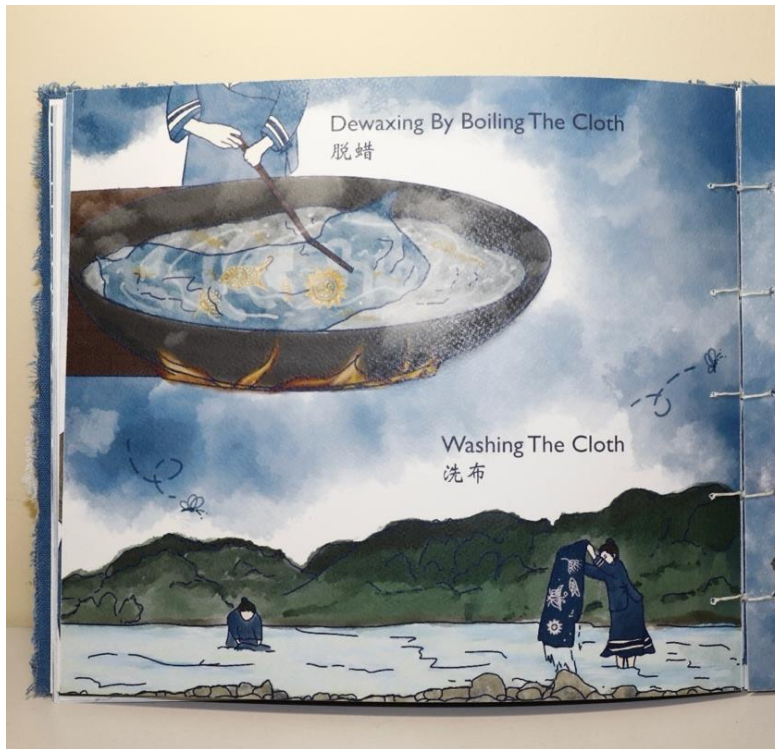


Figure 17, Chuchu Li, Chapter 2 of tHEiR BLUE, Page 5, 2024



Figure 18, Chuchu Li, Chapter 2 of tHEiR BLUE, Page 6, 2024

The third chapter, “Patterns,” is somewhat unique compared to the other chapters because it does not use digital illustrations. Instead, it transforms six major traditional Miao Batik patterns into actual Batik fabric pieces that are cut and pasted onto the pages of the book in the form of collages. Accompanied by a small amount of text, this format allows the audience to better understand the symbolic meanings of each pattern (see fig. 19-25).



Figure 19, Chuchu Li, Chapter 3 of tHEiR BLUE, Page 1, 2024



Figure 20, Chuchu Li, Chapter 3 of tHEiR BLUE, Page 2, 2024

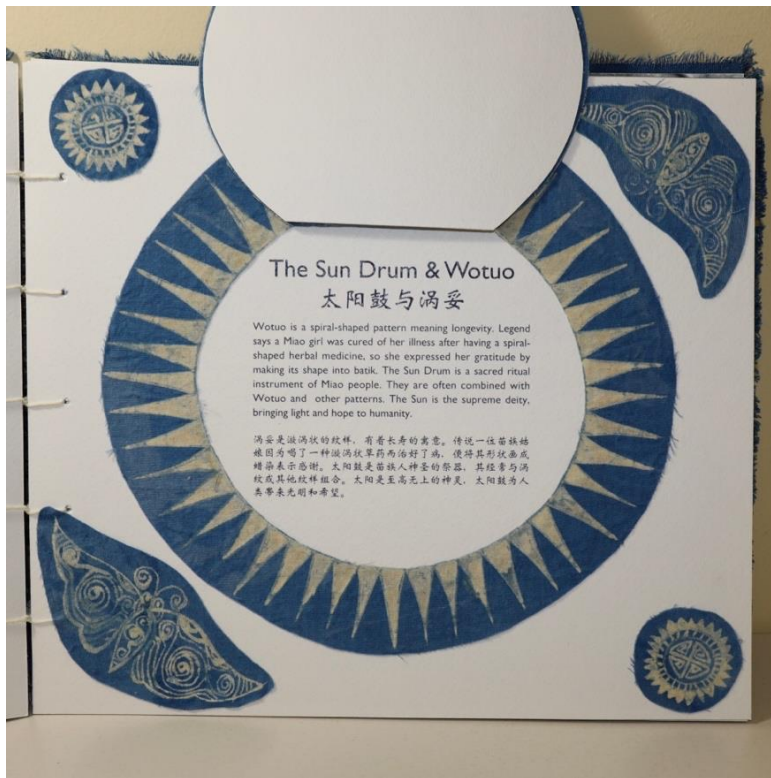


Figure 21, Chuchu Li, Chapter 3 of tHEiR BLUE, Page 2 text part, 2024



Figure 22, Chuchu Li, Chapter 3 of tHEiR BLUE, Page 3, 2024



Figure 23, Chuchu Li, Chapter 3 of tHEiR BLUE, Page 4, 2024



Figure 24, Chuchu Li, Chapter 3 of tHEiR BLUE, Page 6, 2024

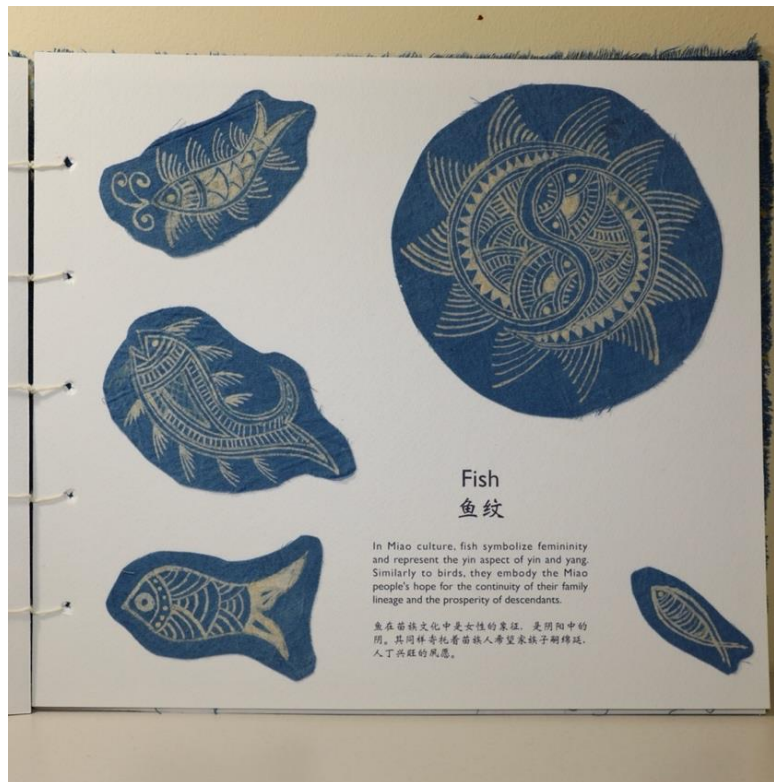


Figure 25, Chuchu Li, Chapter 3 of tHEiR BLUE, Page 6, 2024

The fourth chapter, “Them,” is a series of illustrated stories depicting the growth of Miao Batik artisans. These illustrations are designed based on my interviews with Master Zhang, research on Miao Batik culture, and personal experience in the Paimo village (see fig. 26-30). The following is the storyline I conceived before designing this chapter. It does not represent any specific individual but is a fictional story derived from analyzing the above research and practice.

When she was young, she didn't have the opportunity to go to school with the boys. Instead, she had to help with household chores and learn Batik, preparing for her own wedding dress. After getting married and having children, she often longed to be like the birds soaring freely in the sky, watching them fly out of the mountains. She also wanted to see the outside world, but the burdens at home, the hungry children, and the seemingly endless mountains made her feel timid. One day, a sister from the same village started a dye workshop, allowing her to earn money using her skills in Batik. Finally, she had the opportunity to create beautiful artwork with her expertise in Batik, earn money, and have a direction for the future.

她小的时候没有机会和男孩子们上学，而是需要帮助家里做家务并学习蜡染，准备为自己做嫁衣。在结婚生子后，她时常会向往那些能够在天空中自由翱翔的鸟儿们，看着鸟儿们飞出大山。她也想去看看外面的世界，但是家中的重担，嗷嗷待哺的孩子，和一眼望不到头的山峰令她心生胆怯。有一天，有一个同村的姐妹开起了染坊，她终于有机会能够用自己擅长的蜡染创造出一幅幅美丽的艺术品，赚到了钱，也有了未来的方向。



Figure 26, Chuchu Li, Chapter 4 of tHEiR BLUE, Page 1, 2024



Figure 27, Chuchu Li, Chapter 4 of tHEiR BLUE, Page 2, 2024



Figure 28, Chuchu Li, Chapter 4 of tHEiR BLUE, Page 3, 2024



Figure 29, Chuchu Li, Chapter 4 of tHEiR BLUE, Page 4, 2024



Figure 30, Chuchu Li, Chapter 4 of *tHEiR BLUE*, Page 5-6, 2024

In the final part of the fourth chapter, the book includes some photographs taken during my time in Paimo Village, as well as images of Master Zhang's Batik works (see fig. 31-34).

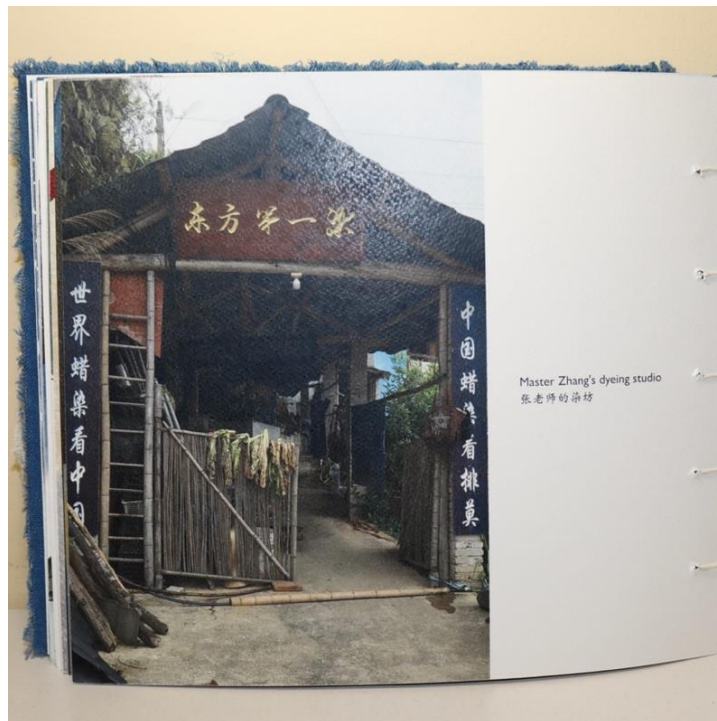


Figure 31, Chuchu Li, Chapter 4 of *tHEiR BLUE*, Page 7, 2024



Figure 32, Chuchu Li, Chapter 4 of tHEiR BLUE, Page 8, 2024

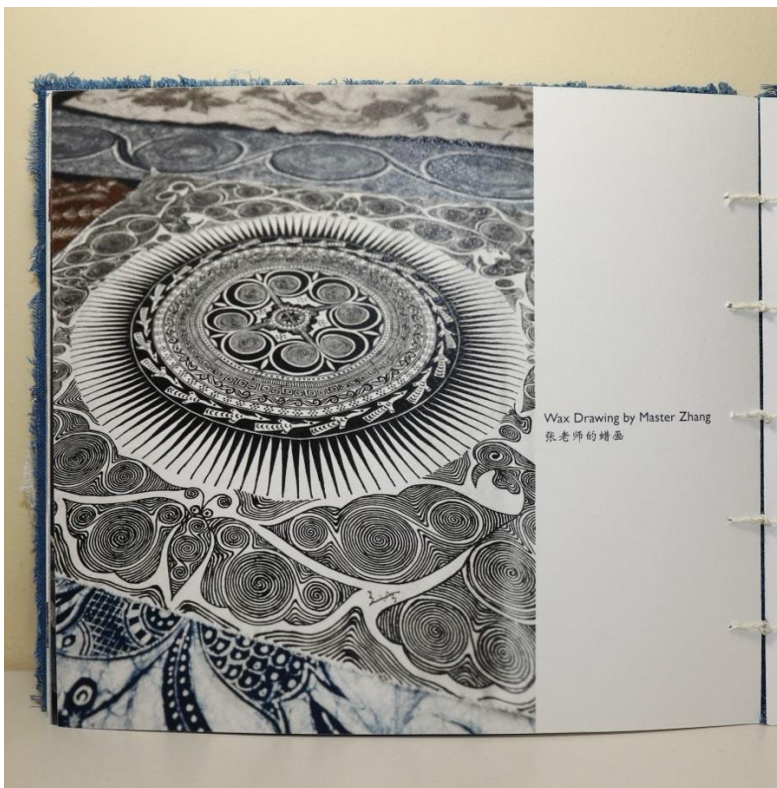


Figure 33, Chuchu Li, Chapter 4 of tHEiR BLUE, Page 9, 2024

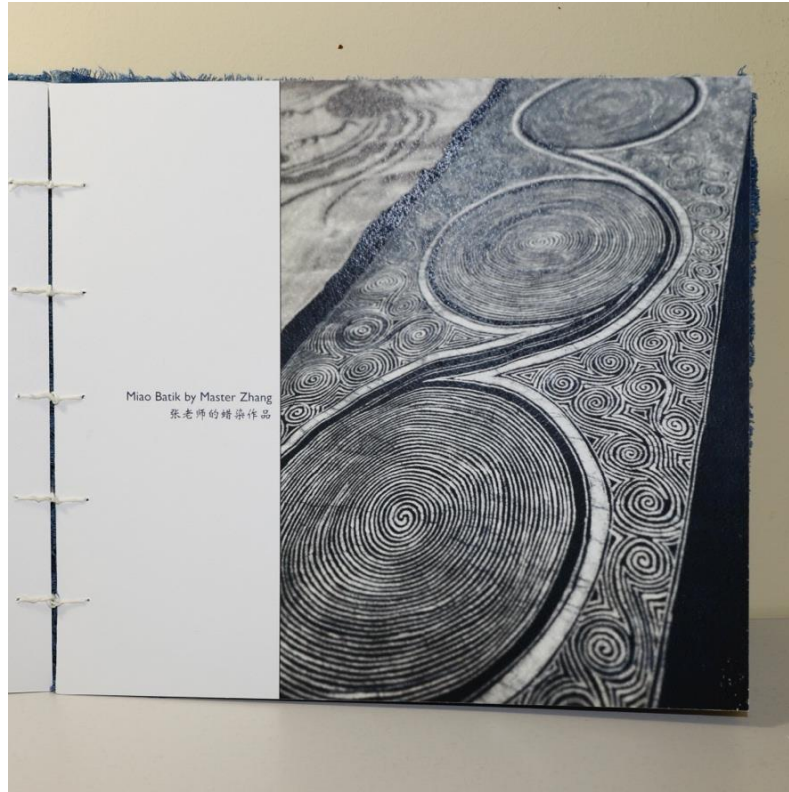


Figure 34, Chuchu Li, Chapter 4 of tHEiR BLUE, Page 10, 2024

The purpose of creating this book is to creatively educate more people about Miao Batik culture and the stories of Miao women behind it, thereby enhancing awareness for the protection of Miao Batik and female social rights. I hope to make it easier for the audience to understand Miao Batik and Miao women through a format similar to a children's picture book. The presence of a large amount of handmade content makes this book a unique edition. Therefore, I photographed the pages of this book to create a video to show in the exhibition.

- Miao Batik Works

Chronologically, my Batik works are divided into three stages: initial experimentation (before visiting Paimo Village), systematic learning (during my time in Paimo Village), and subsequent creative development (after returning to Canada).

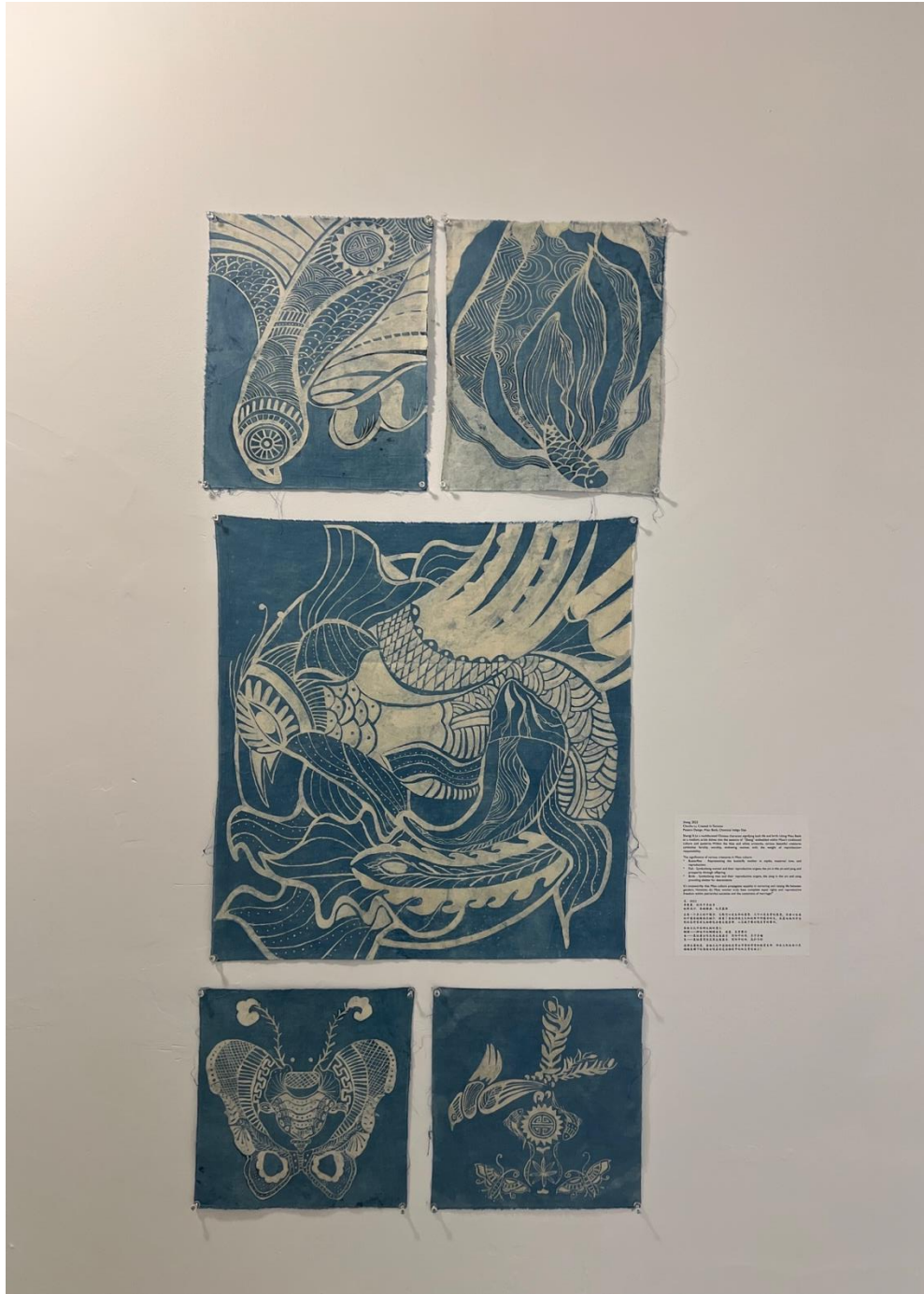


Figure 35. Chuchu Li, *Sheng 生*, Miao Batik Pattern Design, Chemical Indigo Dye, 2023

Sheng 生 represents my initial experimentation phase, a series of creative illustrative designs exploring several typical Miao traditional patterns and their underlying meanings, based on research and personal interpretation. Here's an introduction to this piece displayed in April 2023:

Sheng 生 is a multifaceted Chinese character, signifying both life and birth. Using Miao Batik as a medium, I've delved into the essence of " Sheng " embedded within Miao's traditional culture and patterns. Batik reflects the diligence, wisdom, and imagination of Chinese Miao women. Yet, within the blue and white artworks, various beautiful creatures symbolize fertility worship, endowing women with the weight of reproduction responsibility.

The significance of various creatures in Miao culture:

**Butterflies - Representing the butterfly mother in myths, maternal love, and reproduction*

**Fish - Symbolizing women and their reproductive organs, the yin in the yin and yang, prosperity through offspring*

**Birds - Symbolizing men and their reproductive organs, the yang in the yin and yang, providing shelter for descendants*

It's noteworthy that Miao culture propagates equality in nurturing and raising life between genders. However, do women truly have complete equal rights and reproductive freedom within patriarchal societies and the confines of marriage?"

Untitled 1, **Wotuo** 涡妥, and **The Sun** (see fig. 36-38) are works from the "Systematic Learning" phase, presenting unaltered traditional Miao patterns. During my learning phase under Master Zhang in Paimo Village, my focus was on experiencing the original form of Miao Batik, hence no innovation was applied to the traditional patterns.

The **Batik pieces within the artist's book tHEiR BLUE** and **The Light** belong to the "Subsequent Creation" phase.



Figure 36. Chuchu Li, Untitled 1, Miao Batik, Traditional Indigo Dye, 2023



Figure 37. Chuchu Li, Wotuo 涡妥, Miao Batik Shirt, Traditional Indigo Dye, 2023



Figure 38. Chuchu Li, *The Sun*, Miao Batik, Traditional Indigo Dye, 2023

The Light is a Batik lantern that I created using a rectangular piece of Batik fabric and tree branches (see fig. 39). The patterns on the Batik fabric represent my heartfelt wishes for the Miao women — Batik is like a beam of light that brings them courage and hope. The literal translation of 山止川行，风禾尽起 (Shan Zhi Chuan Xing, Feng He Jin Qi) is “the mountains remain silent while the rivers flow incessantly.” It is often used to describe something indestructible and unstoppable, which is also the quality I see in Master Zhang and other Miao Batik artisans.



Figure 39. Chuchu Li, *The Light*, Miao Batik Lantern, Chemical Indigo Dye, 2023

Additionally, the above Batik works could also be divided into using traditional plant-based indigo dye and using chemical indigo dye. *Sheng* 生, the Batik portions of the artist's book, and *The Light* were created using chemical indigo dye, while the rest, completed during my time in Paimo Village, were done using traditional plant-based indigo dye.

- Documentary Short Film—*Seeking Blue*

The short film *Seeking Blue* is divided into two parts: the first half depicts my experiences in Paimo Village, offering viewers a vivid understanding of Batik-making, and upon returning to Toronto, I document the process of creating artwork. Due to differences in environment and resources, there are noticeable disparities in the Batik-making process. The second half of the film showcases pages from the artist's book *tHEiR BLUE*.

CHAPTER 5 – EXHIBITION DOCUMENTATION

In the abstract, I mentioned that this thesis is written in both Mandarin Chinese and English. The reason behind this choice was my realization during the research process that English, in some contexts, fails to convey specific meanings, and many of the books I referenced were in Mandarin Chinese. Furthermore, as Miao Batik is a traditional ICH of China, I plan to describe this research in the most accurate form for Chinese audiences, especially in terms of context and theoretical aspects. As a result, not only this thesis paper but also the text parts of the artist's book and exhibition are written in both Mandarin Chinese and English. I initially wrote the thesis in Mandarin Chinese, then translated it into English using ChatGPT 3.5, and manually edited it myself (See Appendix D). Another reason for using both languages was to widen the reach of this project, allowing people who understand Chinese and English to learn about Miao Batik and Miao women.

- **Exhibition Promotion**



Figure 40, Chuchu Li, Exhibition Poster, 2024

- **Exhibition information**



Figure 41, Chuchu Li, Exhibition Title, 2024

tHEiR BLUE explores the culture and history of Miao Batik (苗族蜡染), along with herstories of the Miao women. The Miao is one of the 55 recognized minority ethnic groups in China. Their traditional craft Miao Batik was inscribed as a part of China's Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). For more than two millennia of Miao Batik's existence, it has been a skill passed down through generations of Miao women. They used wax to draw on cloth as dye-resistant and dyed the cloth with indigo, later boiling the wax off to attain meaningful patterns.

The artist is not of Miao background, but her connection with Miao Batik originated in childhood and was further deepened by its cultural significance in adulthood. Drawing upon her personal experience in the Miao village of Paimo, interviews with Master Zhang (Zhang Shixiu), an ICH inheritor of Miao Batik, and studies on Miao Batik culture, she dedicates herself to raising awareness of the complexities and challenges existing in the development of Batik culture and the protection of Miao women's social rights through her artworks.

This exhibition invites you to read, touch, smell, watch, listen, and feel the stories of Miao Batik culture, Miao women, and the artist.

“她们的蓝”探索了苗族蜡染的文化和历史，以及苗族妇女的故事。苗族是中国 55 个被认证的少数民族之一，他们的传统工艺苗族蜡染被列入了中国非物质文化遗产。苗族蜡染已经存在了两千多年，是苗族妇女代代相传的技艺。她们用蜡在布料上绘制防染图案，然后用靛蓝染料将布料染色，最后用沸水煮布脱蜡，以获得富有意义的图案。

艺术家没有苗族背景，但她与苗族蜡染的缘分起源于幼时，成年后又被其文化内涵所打动。基于她在苗族排莫村中的经历，对蜡染非遗传承人张世秀的采访，和对苗族蜡染文化的研究，她致力于通过自己的艺术作品提高人们对蜡染文化发展以及保护苗族妇女社会权益所存在的复杂性和挑战的认识。

本展览邀请您阅读、触摸、闻嗅、观看、倾听和感受苗族蜡染文化、苗族妇女以及艺术家的故事。

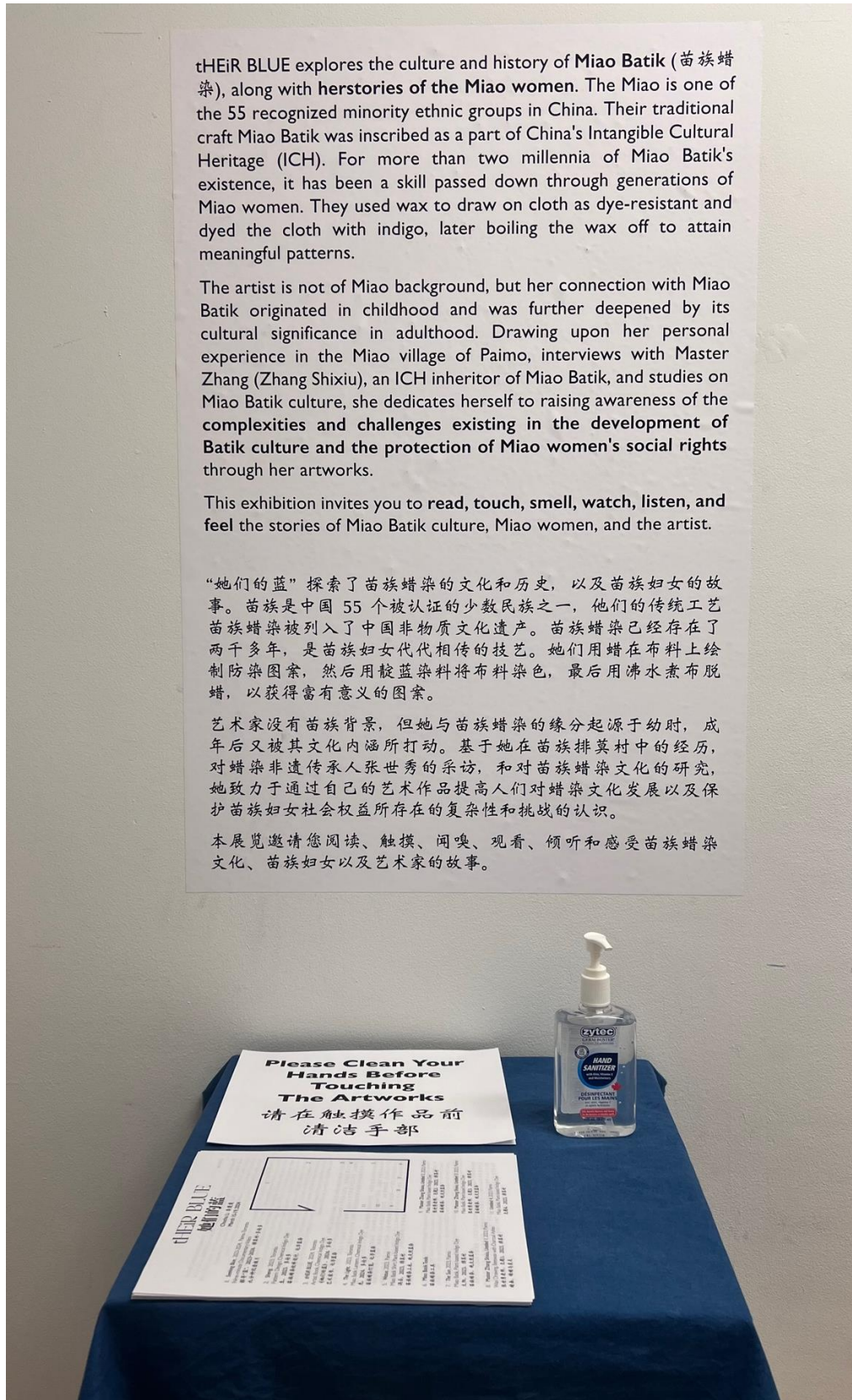


Figure 42, Chuchu Li, Exhibition Text, 2024

Artists

Chuchu Li is an interdisciplinary designer and artist whose creative endeavors encompass a diverse range of mediums, including painting, textile art, photography, installation art, and digital art. Born and raised in China, She brings a rich cultural background and diverse influences to her work. Li holds a BA in Graphic Design from Lehigh University in Pennsylvania in 2022 and currently pursuing an Interdisciplinary Master's in Design at OCAD University. Li lives and works in Toronto.

Li's interdisciplinary research focuses on the protection, promotion, and innovation of traditional Chinese culture, as well as the advocacy for women's rights. Over the past decade, her experience of living far from her homeland has deepened her yearning for a cultural identity rooted in her origins, leading her to pay attention to China's Intangible Cultural Heritages and traditional cultures. Li has come to understand that through the passage of time and the dedication of generations, even inanimate objects like Miao Batik can carry a profound "soul" — encapsulating stories and meanings worth exploring. She believes that such cultural treasures should not gradually disappear with the development of the times. Furthermore, her personal experiences have fueled a strong interest in feminism, particularly concerning issues such as women's reproductive rights, economic rights, rights to speak, and freedom of dress in patriarchal societies.

李楚楚是一位跨学科设计师和艺术家，她的创作涵盖了绘画、纺织艺术、摄影、装置艺术和数字艺术等多种媒介。出生并成长于中国的她将丰富的文化背景和多样化的影响融入到自己的作品中。李于2022年获得了宾夕法尼亚州理海大学的平面设计学士学位，目前正在加拿大安大略艺术与设计大学攻读跨学科设计硕士学位。李生活和工作在多伦多。

李的跨学科研究聚焦于保护、宣传和创新发展中国传统文化，并致力于促进女性权益的保护。近十年的远离家乡的经历，加深了她对本源文化认同的向往，让她开始关注中国的非物质文化遗产和传统文化。李逐渐意识到，经过时间的流逝和几代人的奉献，即使是无生命的物体也可以承载深刻的“灵魂”——蕴藏着值得探索的故事和意义。而这样的文化不应该因为时代的发展而逐渐消亡。另外，李的自身经历让她对女权主义产生了浓厚的兴趣，特别是在父权社会下女性在生育，经济权，话语权，以及穿衣自由等方面的权利缺失。

Master Zhang Shixiu is a certified inheritor of Miao Batik, an intangible cultural heritage recognized by the Chinese government. In April 2023, Chuchu Li went on a field trip to Paimo Village, Danzhai County, Guizhou Province, China, where Master Zhang resides, to learn Batik from her. After obtaining approval from the Research Ethics Committee of OCAD University, Li interviewed Master Zhang. In order to showcase authentic Miao Batik to the audience, Li exhibited three pieces of Master Zhang's work in this exhibition with her consent.

张世秀老师是中国政府认证的苗族蜡染非物质文化遗产传承人。李楚楚曾在2023年4月时前往张世秀老师所在的中国贵州省丹寨县排莫村实地考察，并向她学习蜡染，并后经过安大略设计与艺术大学的研究伦理委员会批准对其进行了采访。为了向观众展示真正的苗族蜡染，李在获得张世秀老师同意后在此展览中展示了她的三幅作品。

Figure 43, Chuchu Li, Exhibition Information Sheet (Back), 2024

● Exhibition Layout

tHEiR BLUE 她们的蓝

Chuchu Li 李楚楚
March 15-19, 2024

1. *Seeking Blue*, 2023-2024, Paimo-Toronto
Nine-minute Documentary Video
探寻“蓝”，2023-2024，排莫村-多伦多
九分钟纪录短片

2. *Sheng*, 2023, Toronto
Pattern Design, Chemical Indigo Dye
生，2023，多伦多
苗族蜡染纹样设计，化学蓝染

3. *tHEiR BLUE*, 2024, Toronto
Artist Book, Chemical Indigo Dye
《她们的蓝》，2024，多伦多
艺术家书，化学蓝染

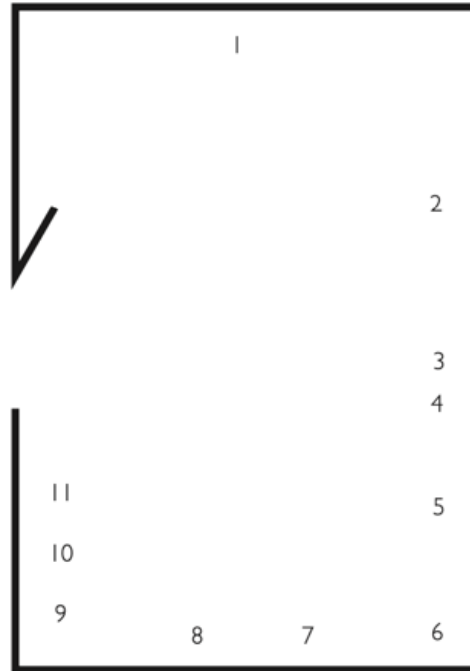
4. *The Light*, 2023, Toronto
Miao Batik Lantern, Chemical Indigo Dye
光，2024，多伦多
苗族蜡染灯笼，化学蓝染

5. *Wotuo*, 2023, Paimo
Miao Batik Shirt, Plant-based Indigo Dye
涡妥，2023，排莫村
苗族蜡染上衣，纯天然蓝染

6. *Miao Batik Tools*
苗族蜡染工具

7. *The Sun*, 2023, Paimo
Miao Batik, Plant-based Indigo Dye
太阳，2023，排莫村
苗族蜡染，纯天然蓝染

8. *Master Zhang Shixiu, Untitled 1*, 2023, Paimo
Wax Drawing, Beeswax with Charcoal Ashes
张世秀老师，无题1，2023，排莫村
蜡画，蜂蜡与炭灰



9. *Master Zhang Shixiu, Untitled 2*, 2023, Paimo
Miao Batik, Plant-based Indigo Dye
张世秀老师，无题2，2023，排莫村
苗族蜡染，纯天然蓝染

10. *Master Zhang Shixiu, Untitled 3*, 2023, Paimo
Miao Batik, Plant-based Indigo Dye
张世秀老师，无题3，2023，排莫村
苗族蜡染，纯天然蓝染

11. *Untitled 4*, 2023, Paimo
Miao Batik, Plant-based Indigo Dye
无题4，2023，排莫村

Figure 44, Chuchu Li, Exhibition Information Sheet (Front), 2024



Figure 45, Chuchu Li, Gallery Left (Work 1-2), 2024

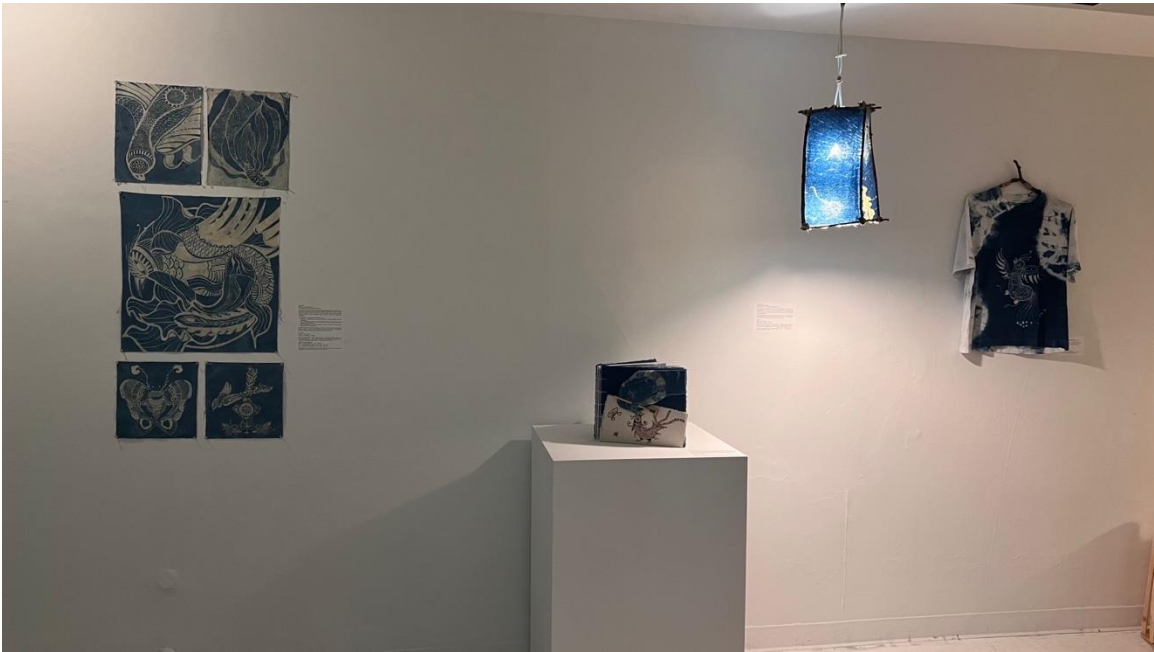


Figure 46, Chuchu Li, Gallery front (Work 2-5), 2024



Figure 47, Chuchu Li, Gallery Right (Work 5-7), 2024



Figure 48, Chuchu Li, Gallery Right (Work 8-11), 2024

The gallery is a rectangular space (see fig. 44). Due to the inward-opening door, the space is reduced for a bit. Therefore, I decided to place fewer works on the left side of the gallery—only the documentary video *Seeking Blue* and *Sheng* (see fig. 45). Considering that the artist's book *THEIR BLUE* is the centrepiece of my entire thesis project, I

positioned it in the middle of the gallery, complemented by the Batik lantern *The Light* for illumination (see fig. 46). On the right side of the gallery, I displayed works of traditional indigo dyeing, Miao Batik tools, and three pieces of Master Zhang Shixiu's works (see fig. 47 - 48). I arranged tools such as indigo paste for traditional indigo dyeing and materials for chemical indigo dyeing, wax knives, beeswax, and wax melting stoves, allowing the audience to gain a visual understanding of the Batik production process. Additionally, to enable the audience to see authentic Miao Batik, I included three of Master Zhang's works after obtaining her permission. In Figure 48, the three Batik cloths hanging on bamboo poles simulate the drying scene of Miao Batik. Furthermore, this exhibition invites the audience to interact with the artworks, such as browsing the artist's book, touching the Batik fabrics, and smelling the scent of indigo paste.

CHAPTER 6 – FINDINGS & REFLECTIONS

In the text above, I mentioned the importance of experience and practice for education and research. During my research-creation process, by making Batik, I realized the significance and value of Miao Batik as a handicraft, and why it should not be mass-produced commercially. In the aforementioned research, I learned that Miao Batik carries cultural symbols and spiritual meanings of the Miao people, and the creation process made me understand that these meanings are infused into the works through the personal feelings and creative expressions of Batik artisans. Each piece of Miao Batik is unique because it reflects the personal style, experiences, and creative context of the artisan. Even the same artisan will produce different Batik works at different times, and even the same patterns may vary slightly due to the artisan's different interpretations. By comparing my beginner's Batik works with those of Master Zhang, I also realized that the gap between her and me is not only in her superior skills but also in the understanding of patterns and culture and the fine handling of details that time and experience have brought her. This individualization, diversity, and cultural accumulation are something that mass production cannot provide.

Furthermore, because my Batik-making process was divided into using traditional natural indigo dyeing techniques in Paimo Village and using chemical indigo dyeing in Canada, I experienced different mentalities and experiences as a creator. The materials used in traditional indigo dyeing are natural, pollution-free, and of high quality and authenticity. While making Batik in Paimo Village, I could concentrate on the Batik tools, Batik patterns, natural dyes, and the natural environment, enhancing my creative desires, as Batik is an integral part of the traditional Miao lifestyle. However, in Canada, using chemical indigo dyeing was not ideal for me due to environmental and pollution constraints and is disrespectful to the traditional Miao lifestyle and natural resources.

The design of the content of my Batik works, as another major aspect of the research-creation process, benefited greatly from the information I gathered from interviewing Master Zhang. Her responses provided material for the stories of Batik artisans in my artist's book and other Batik works, enriching the narrative of this project and bringing authenticity and emotional depth to the artworks. Master Zhang is like a living storybook, her words revealing deep insights into the dissemination of Miao Batik culture and the protection of Miao women's rights. In Miao society, the prevailing gender biases greatly limited the educational opportunities of women of Zhang's generation. However, through Batik, these Miao women gained the opportunity to inherit handicraft skills, which largely became their only "education." These experiences and stories not only highlight their ability to achieve economic independence through Batik but also underscore the importance of education and self-awareness and inspired the chapter "Them" in my artist's book. Master Zhang and the Batik artisans showed the unity and self-value of women, and their stories teach us that women's achievements can be measured not only through academic knowledge. Although they are not as widely known as celebrities or great figures, they also created beautiful artworks with their own hands, paved a bright path out of the mountains for themselves, and brought Miao Batik culture to the world. Moreover, the cultural and technical knowledge about Batik mentioned by Master Zhang in the interviews supported the content of my research and works, ensuring that the stories in my works respect Miao culture and are rich in content.

In narrating the stories of Miao Batik and Miao women in different ways in the artworks, I deeply felt the power of cultural inheritance and the vulnerability this tradition faces. Each story is a vivid interpretation of tradition, also revealing the danger of disappearance if the culture is not valued. Stories not only bridge the past and present but also connect people of different cultures and backgrounds. Through stories, audiences from different cultural backgrounds can understand and appreciate the uniqueness and aesthetic value of Miao Batik, which will become one of the main methods for me to continue promoting Miao Batik culture in the future. By transforming research and personal experiences into narrative content, I discovered my ability as a narrator and faced the creative challenge of telling stories authentically and effectively. For example, my exhibition aimed to emulate a journey through the history and culture of Miao Batik. Each chapter of the artist's book serves as a physical and narrative station in the exhibition space; the use of video adds a dynamic layer to the exhibition, allowing visitors to see the Batik-making process and hear the sounds of making and traditional Miao musical instruments directly. Every piece in the exhibition, whether it be Batik cloth, an artist's book, or a map, tells part of the story of the Miao, aiming to convey specific aspects of Miao culture, history, and environment. Besides the directly narrated stories, the artworks themselves also became a visual narrative method.

It is worth pondering that during the exhibition, I found that although I used simple and easy-to-understand methods to explain Miao Batik culture in the stories and labels of the works, it is not easy for an audience completely unfamiliar with Miao culture to fully receive and understand this information in a short time. However, through interactions with the audience, I learned that most people liked the narrative form of my artworks and found the content understandable. Additionally, due to the awe of the artwork, they might also overlook some indicative information and miss the opportunity to interact with the works. This situation may be due to the limitations of the exhibition gallery environment, but it also reminded me to pay more attention to this issue in future exhibition designs to help the audience gain a complete experience.

CONCLUSION

This thesis project covers the significance of preserving Chinese traditional culture /ICH and highlights the challenges it faces. It emphasizes the roles of both the government and individuals in this process, particularly addressing issues such as avoiding excessive commercialization and lack of cultural respect in ICH preservation. Furthermore, it delves into the historical, current, and evolving status of the social position and rights protection of Chinese women. Overall, this study and practices provide a comprehensive understanding of various facets of Miao Batik preservation while emphasizing the importance of safeguarding women's social rights and interests. By gaining a deep understanding of the history and techniques of Miao Batik, I realized the significant responsibility that cultural communicators and protectors have in promoting and safeguarding this unique art form. They need to be mindful to how to balance the protection of tradition with adapting to modern needs, and how to innovate and pass on culture without sacrificing its essence. Additionally, they need to respect and value the contributions of every artist and maintain the uniqueness and vitality of culture against the backdrop of globalization. These experiences and knowledge will guide how I should collaborate with Miao Batik artists like Master Zhang in the future, allowing me to play a greater role in respectfully promoting and protecting this precious cultural heritage. In the future, I may collaborate with Master Zhang to create and promote Miao Batik through exhibitions and potential auctions that could provide economic support for its development. Additionally, I am considering opening a studio to offer hands-on experiences and workshops to teach the knowledge and skills of Miao Batik.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interviews with Master Zhang

Initial Interview (via phone call):

Me: When did you open the dyeing studio?

Master Zhang: The workshop opened to the public in 2014. Before that, I used to make Batik for personal use without selling them.

Me: Did you face any difficulties in your process of engaging in Batik and/or opening the workshop?

Master Zhang: There were many difficulties. For instance, I was from a poor household. To open this workshop, I needed to gather people to work, but a person from a poor household lacked that capability. So, convincing people posed some difficulties. Additionally, I considered the issue of Miao Batik being lost. Over these years, I've trained people from both our village and neighboring ones. I've also trained some highly educated learners and taken some people on as apprentices. In recent times, teachers from universities came to learn from me and then taught their students when they got back. This way, the risk of the Batik technique being lost is reduced. However, what I fear the most about it being lost is our old patterns. Nowadays, young people are not fond of drawing our old patterns; they find them dull, and intricate. They learn the entire Batik process but might innovate new patterns. We Miao people do not have our written words, but we have our culture. Our patterns signify different eras because different eras witnessed variations in these patterns.

Me: Miao Batik patterns are rich in symbolism. Can you elaborate on the different meanings and cultural significance of these patterns within the context of Miao culture?

Master Zhang: In our Miao culture, patterns are mostly inherited from our ancestors. They mainly include insects, birds, flowers, fish, and some geometric patterns. For flower patterns, pomegranate flowers are commonly depicted. The geometric patterns vary widely, all handed down from our ancestors. These inspirations originate from

surrounding flora and fauna or elements from nature. Therefore, many things haven't changed much, retaining their traditional patterns.

Me: *I've researched online; some sources suggest that birds represent males, fish represent females, and butterflies represent mothers. Is this true?*

Master Zhang: *Yes, indeed. Fish, being prolific in the animal kingdom, are often depicted on beddings and clothes. For instance, when preparing wedding garments for a new bride, they would include fish motifs, symbolizing fertility. Similarly, flowers like pomegranate flowers symbolize fertility.*

Me: *Could you share with us the traditional usage and significance of Miao Batik for Miao women?*

Master Zhang: *Traditional attire (wedding clothes/festival garments) is the most basic. Additionally, there were back-carrying clothes for babies, blankets, and bedding, all made using Batik.*

Me: *From what I understand, Miao Batik, being passed down through generations, has primarily been carried out by women. Is that accurate? Are there any specific implications to this?*

Master Zhang: *Yes, that's correct. There are no particular implications. It's a part of the historical culture that women engage in crafts, while men farm. Handicrafts are considered women's work and unrelated to men's.*

Me: *Miao Batik transitioned from a skill passed down generations to a cultural heritage of the Miao and even China and seems to carry significant responsibility and dedication for women who pass it down. Can you tell us why you chose to practice and inherit this art form? Were there any specific experiences or influences that led you to make this decision?*

Master Zhang: *Initially, I made fabrics for personal use. Later, in a remote place like Paimo Village with limited transportation, about ten years ago, there were occasional interviews and research visits from outsiders. Some were keen on taking products out as*

souvenirs but returned empty-handed as there were no sales. Because I had a small convenience shop, during lean times, I began making Batik. I thought others could buy Batik products I made, so I started producing small squares. Even though I wasn't producing in large quantities, whenever people visited, they bought them for 20 or 30 RMB each, which I thought was good. In 2014, due to national policies supporting micro-enterprises, I applied and started this business. Handling all the work alone was difficult, so I wanted to gather people to join. How would I gather them? After receiving the subsidy, I thought about how to promote it in the village, explaining that if Batik is done well, it can be sold. Our craft could be monetized. So, on March 7th (the day before International Women's Day), I thought about this issue. I asked a person in the village in a louder voice to notify everyone that they could come to my place with their ID to register and receive 20 RMB. In this village with over 600 households, there are many women. Within no time, tens of thousands of RMB were distributed. The next day, I informed them to come over for International Women's Day. I would promote some things as Miao women didn't know about this holiday; I was the first to celebrate it with them. Later, I used the remaining money for training, though it was more like discovering talent. At that time, the women in the village weren't aware that our skills could be monetized. Therefore, I invited them over to identify who had good skills and selected some to stay and work on Batik. As the funds were almost depleted by these two activities, and being from a poor household, it was challenging to recruit people. Many around me didn't believe in my efforts, fearing I couldn't pay them. Initially, only two or three people came, but gradually, it increased to around ten or twenty people.

Me: *How did the development of your dyeing studio impact the female community in your village? Could you discuss the positive changes brought for the village and women by establishing the dyeing workshop and promoting Batik as an inheritor?*

Master Zhang: *Initially, it wasn't so noble because I didn't care about myself, so I didn't have such thoughts. However, I do have such thoughts now, especially for the village, as I've worked outside before and felt that outsiders differ from people in our village. Outsiders might find use for you only if they benefit from you. For instance, they might work with you in a company but hurt you in the back. Some may seem nice on the faces,*

but they're not genuine inside. However, rural people are very simple because there's no conflict of interest. For instance, in Paimo Village, you can eat at anyone's house without prior notice; they'll invite you for meals and drinks whenever you pass by. They won't evaluate your worth or exploit you for their benefit, unlike city dwellers, at least they maintain the human touch. Furthermore, the Miao people have always had a low status from ancient times to the present. Many women, even if they rear pigs, don't dare sell them independently; they have to wait for approval at home. Therefore, I believe that by earning money and taking charge, one gains a voice. Also, there was the eldest woman at the dyeing studio who mentioned that last year, she bought a lot of fruits but forgot to eat them during the busy Chinese New Year time, resulting in the fruits rotting. When her husband scolded her for wasting, she confidently replied that she could earn that money back by spending some time making Batik in the studio. If she couldn't earn, she wouldn't dare say that. Therefore, I told all these elderly women at the workshop that if they can earn and sustain themselves, their status in the family naturally rises. Previously, depending on men for food and drinks while serving them led to a low status. Also, there's a severe bias toward men over women. My father allowed us to attend school because he faced setbacks due to being uneducated. Originally, they wouldn't let girls go to school.

Follow-up Interview (via WeChat messaging):

Me: *What are the differences between the ancient plant-based indigo dyeing you use and the chemical indigo dyeing available in markets? Why do you persist with ancient plant-based dyeing?*

Master Zhang: *Ancient plant-based indigo dyeing is all-natural, which differs from chemical indigo dyeing in terms of its scent. The fabric colours dyed with chemicals tend to be brighter (lighter), while those dyed with plant-based dyes are purer (deeper). Additionally, chemical dyes (due to the addition of chemical substances), can be harmful to the human body, which is why I always opt for plant-based dyes.*

Appendix B: Chemical Indigo Dye Kit



Appendix C: Artist's book collection at the Bainbridge Island Museum of Art, *Paean to Place*



Katherine Kuhn (Portland, OR) and Lorine Niedecker (1903-1970), *Paean to Place*, 2000, handsewn and indigo-dyed cotton scroll, 19" W x 32'1, unique, Cynthia Sears Artist's Books Collection, photo by Ann Welch

Appendix D: ChatGPT Version Number and Prompts

- **ChatGPT 3.5: The free version that great for everyday tasks.**

I gave a prompt about “what can ChatGPT 3.5 do?” and here is its answer:

As an AI language model, ChatGPT 3.5 can perform a wide range of natural language processing tasks. Some of its capabilities include:

1. Answering Questions: It can answer factual questions by providing information from its training data.

2. Generating Text: It can generate coherent and contextually relevant text based on prompts or questions provided by users.

3. Language Translation: It can translate text from one language to another.

4. Summarization: It can summarize long passages of text into shorter, more concise versions while preserving key information.

5. Conversation: It can engage in conversation on various topics, providing responses and maintaining context over multiple turns.

6. Creative Writing: It can generate creative content such as stories, poems, or dialogues.

7. Coding Assistance: It can provide code snippets, explanations, or debugging help for programming-related queries.

8. Educational Assistance: It can provide explanations, answer queries, and assist with learning across various subjects and domains.

9. Content Generation: It can help generate content for articles, essays, or reports based on given prompts or topics.

10. Customer Support: It can provide automated responses and assistance in customer

*support scenarios, helping users troubleshoot issues or find information.*⁹⁰

- **Prompts I gave:**

- 1) Translate this paragraph into English
- 2) What do you mean by (a word, phrase or sentence)?
- 3) Can I use (a word, phrase or sentence) to describe (a concept in Chinese)

Appendix E: Accompanying Digital Materials

- Title: tHEiR BLUE 她们的蓝 (Chinese Version 中文版)

File Name: Li_Chuchu_2024_MDes_IAMD_thesis (Chinese version).pdf

File Type: PDF

Description: This is the Chinese version of this thesis project, for a more inclusive purpose.

Date: May 01, 2024

- Title: *Seeking Blue*

File Name: Li_Chuchu_2024_MDes_IAMD_thesis (Video).mp4

File Type: MP4

Description: This is the short documentary video explained above and shown during the exhibition.

Date: March 14, 2024

⁹⁰ OpenAI's ChatGPT AI language model, responses to questions from Chuchu Li, 13 March, 2024: <https://chat.openai.com/c/a9bc1d9b-9b5f-453d-8b1a-ac038dda616d>