

# The Traditional Textile Development in Nan Region

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## Abstract

Given the long history of Nan province, it is not surprising that many ancient traditions have been handed down through the generations, one of which is textile weaving. Working under the auspices of the Creative Arts Research Unit (Fashion Design) of the Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Chulalongkorn University, the researcher found that there are a number of problems affecting the textile industry in the Nan region today. The aim of this study is to investigate the Nan region's people, its environment, and the distinct traditions relating to the textile and garment industry in order to preserve the distinctive characteristics of traditional weaving by creating new patterns, and introducing them to new markets.

The study uses a method that combines quantitative research and design ethnography. The researcher observed the province from different perspectives such as weaving as art, the lifestyles of weavers, the history of textiles, arts and crafts, architecture, habitats, and mural paintings in local temples. It was found that the traditional Nan textile industry needs to adjust designs to meet the needs of the urban target group. The outcome of the research includes 15 printed textile designs and five examples of modern garments with new textile designs. The recommendations which follow the research results suggest that the Nan textile industry should keep its distinctive characteristics while developing fresh fashion and lifestyle products to attract new consumers.

**Keywords:** Lifestyle Product; Tradition; Garment; Weaving; Design

## Introduction

Nan, once an independent kingdom of northern Thailand, is now a remote province. It is a quiet and tranquil place with natural beauty, nestled in a verdant valley along the border of Laos. For centuries, tucked into Thailand's northeastern corner, Nan has been a relatively remote unexplored province waiting to be discovered.

There is much evidence of prehistoric habitation, but it wasn't until several small settlements (*mueang*) united to form Nanthaburi on the Nan River in the mid-14th century - contemporary with the creation of the Luang Prabang and the Lan Xang kingdoms in Laos - that the city became a power of significance. Associated with the mighty Sukhothai kingdom, the *mueang* took the title Wara Nakhon and played an important part in the development of early Thai nationalism (Songphan, 2004).

By the end of the 14th century, Nan was one of the nine northern Thai-Lao principalities that comprised Lan Na Thai (now Lanna). The city-state flourished throughout the 15th century under the name Chiang Klang (Middle City). Chiang Klang is a reference to its position roughly midway between Chiang Mai (New City) and Chiang Thong (Golden City, which is today's Luang Prabang). (Fine Arts Department, 2004)

In terms of its location, Nan is 668 km north of Bangkok. Its population exceeds 24,000. It is situated in the center of Nan Province, which bears its name, and of which it is the administrative capital. It covers all of Tambon Nai Wiang and parts of Tambon Pha Sing of Mueang Nan district, an area of 7.60 km<sup>2</sup>. As of 2010, it had a population of 21,333 and 30 *chumchon* subdivisions. It is spread out along the Nan River's right bank. (Lampan and Suthipong, 2003)

## Traditional Textiles in Northern Thailand

Northern Thai weavers are comprised of seven hill tribe groups and three lowland Tai groups. These weavers are highly skilled in elaborate decorative techniques including supplementary weft, weft brocade using gold and silver yarns, multi-shaft weaves, warp ikat, appliqué, and outstanding embroidery. The recent introduction of weft ikat, batik, printing,

and placement weaving has broadened the creative capacity of these artisans, and many skilled weavers are creating works of art (Office of the National Culture Commission, 1994).

Traditional textiles are related to the ways of Thai life from birth to death as depicted in the mural paintings at Wat Phumin. For example, when a woman knows that she is going to have a baby, she prepares clothes, diapers and blankets for her child. When a boy turns 20, he is ordained as a Buddhist monk and his parents are pleased because they share in the benefit of their son's meritorious deed. Thais still believe that the parents will go to heaven after death by holding on to the yellow robe of their monk-son.

Moreover, in the Thai marriage ceremony, the bride and groom each present a piece of cloth to the other's parents as a way to pay respect to them. Moreover, when somebody dies, a white piece of cloth is used to wrap the body, and their clothes are turned inside out, signifying death (Office of the National Culture Commission, 1994).

Textiles are woven for specific purposes and used to their fullest in the creation of garments that do not require cutting into the selvage. There are tube-skirts (*phaa sin*) and breast covers (*phaa sabai*) for women, and sarongs (*phaa nung*) or farmer pants (*tieo sador*) for men. To this day, people of Lanna still wear traditional clothes to official and festive occasions, including the hill tribes whose diverse identity is expressed through their colorful and varied clothing styles (Office of the National Culture Commission, 1994).

Most of the hill tribes still use the back-strap loom to create traditional narrow fabrics, but they have also fashioned innovative designs for modern living. The lowland frame loom is still popular in the villages using hand-shuttles for elaborate textiles and fly-shuttles for yardage in beautiful textures and natural fibers. Shawls, scarves, and fabric for clothing and upholstery are in demand by international designers for the overseas market.

### **Textiles and Garments in the Nan Region**

In human society, a garment is not only required but it is a significant indication of a particular tradition and history. For the people in the Nan

region, their textiles and garments have a distinct identity, which is the effect from the production of textiles and local traditions. Usually, the production of textiles is divided into two styles, which are the simple woven textile for daily use and an elegant and delicate woven piece for important ceremonies. These design and color combinations are the distinct characteristic of Nan textiles (Fine Arts Department, 2004).

The cloth for everyday use is usually simple woven cotton in black or navy blue with orange or red stripes. Another rough indigo-dyed cotton cloth used for shirts has other purposes such as bags and blankets. Materials used for special ceremonies and events are usually fine and delicate ones. There might be a unique woven design at the bottom of a woman's tubular skirt with vivid colors and delicately woven details.

In Nan, many traditional textile patterns are woven, such as hand-woven cotton, silk, *mud-mee*, *khit*, *nam-lai*, *pah-si*, and *pah-lab*. People in Nan province usually wear a piece of cloth as a tubular skirt, known as a "Pha Sin". Nowadays traditional Pha Sin in Nan province can be discovered mostly in the Nan Museum. However, the textile design of Pha Sin was developed mainly for daily use and sale.

Pha Sin in Nan is a kind of precious craftsmanship textile both in terms of design and the delicate process of production. It also reflects the lifestyle of local people, because Nan province consists of different groups of local populations such as Tai Lue and Thai Yuan. Pha Sin in Nan is categorized according to the following designs (Fine Arts Department, 2004):

#### 1. *Sin Man*

"Pha Sin Man" or "sin man" is a kind of cloth for use in daily life. The distinguishing design is the variations in size of the horizontal stripe. The background color is usually blue with pink and white stripes of different sizes. The locals usually wear *sin man* to attend important ceremonies such as ordinations. People pair *sin man* with a white long sleeve shirt and Sa Bai.



**Figure 1** Examples of Sin Man (left) and Sin Pong (right)

## 2. *Sin Pong*

*Sin pong* is usually made from silk and cotton. There is a special weaving technique called “*khit*” used in the production process. The repeated use of the *khit* technique throughout a piece of fabric creates the unique design. Also, gold and silver lamé are used to give a more beautiful expression.

## 3. *Sin Chiang San*

*Sin Chiang San* is a plain weave piece that usually appears in red, violet, or green. The name of the fabric represents the migration of Thai Chiang San people. This kind of fabric is not very expensive because it is cotton.

## 4. *Sin Kham Kerb*

In the past, *sin kham kerb* was restricted only to the high class and rulers. The design is complicated. There are gold and silver lamé woven throughout the piece. Moreover, some high-class women ordered *sin kham kerb* to be woven with genuine gold and silver fibers.



**Figure 2** Examples of Sin Chiang San (Left), Sin Kham Kerb (two in the middle), and Sin Kan (right).

### 5. *Sin Kan*

*Sin kan* is usually called Mud Kan or Kad Kan in local dialects. It is the fabric of Tai Lue who emigrated from Laos. The design varies according to the individual weaver's imagination. The colors, such as red, orange, and black are different due to the dying process. *Sin kan* usually appears in cotton and silk without the combination of silver or gold lamé.

### 6. *Sin Nam Lai*

The name *Sin Nam Lai* represents the flowing of the river. The design captures the flow of water, which is the weaver's imagination. The sizes of the patterns are different. Also, there might be the use of gold and silver lamé.



**Figure 3** Examples of Sin Nam Lai (Left) and Sin Lue (right).

### 7. *Sin Lue*

*Sin Lue* is a kind of Thai Lue design. It usually appears in colorful silk with a complicated weaving technique such as *khit* and *jok*. *Sin Lue* design varies according to the age of the wearer.

The use of Nan textiles in the past can be seen in temples paintings such as those at Wat Phumin in the Nan region. These historical paintings depict the traditions and lifestyle of people living in Nan. The King and royalty usually wore loincloths. They often appeared shirtless or in a mandarin-collared shirt. Most men had tattoos from the waist to below the knee. Male villagers appeared shirtless and in loincloths with a plain cotton girdle hanging in front. They used scarves called *Pah-Ched* for important ceremonies. In winter, a *Pah-Toom* was worn by both men and women (Viboon, 1987).

High-class women usually wore a *Sin* or a single-piece floor-length tubular skirt with elaborate detail at the bottom. Typical women villagers wore a floor-length tubular skirt in cotton with colored stripes at the bottom. Women also appeared shirtless with light colored scarves hanging down to cover their breasts. For ceremonies, women would wear elaborate tubular skirts in vivid colors (Withee, 2004).

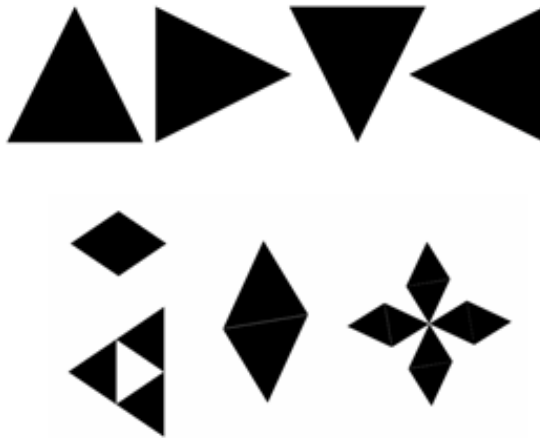
However, the style of dress changed when King Rama V introduced western fashions. Men began wearing a shirt with pants and women wore a plain loose cotton blouse with a traditional tubular skirt (Viboon, 1987). Unsurprisingly, the consumption of traditional Thai textiles started to decline after Thailand set off on the road of modernization. Not long after the reform, most Thai people except the elderly dressed exactly like Europeans. Moreover, people of younger generations regarded Thai textiles as out-of-date (Viboon, 1987).

### Research Methods

The study uses a mixed method that combines quantitative research and design ethnography. Various experts from different fields, such as garment production, textile design, fashion design, as well as the local cultural officer, and local people, participated in the research process. In

order to obtain the design elements, the researcher visited Nan province and collected data on important cultural capital such as mural paintings, architecture, and most importantly – traditional garments and textile design and usage. Then, the group of experts discussed what important elements should be kept and developed in the new designs.

One comment that arose frequently was that traditional textile designs in the Nan region usually consist of basic geometric shapes. An examination of the traditional roots of the textiles used by the Nan people found that the purposes of the garments and the uniqueness of the design of floor-length tubular skirts for women and loincloths for men had not changed much. However, the chief characteristic of the pattern was geometrical, most commonly triangular. Therefore, after consulting the experts, the researcher chose to use a triangle as the basic shape in the creation of new designs.



**Figure 4** Triangles and Stacked Triangles Forming Lozenges Are The Core Components of Traditional Textile Design Patterns.

The triangle was used to create 15 different textile designs. Each design consists of triangles of different sizes that move around the design area. This represents one of the most famous Nan textile designs – Lai Nam Lai – which represents the flowing river that passes through Nan province.

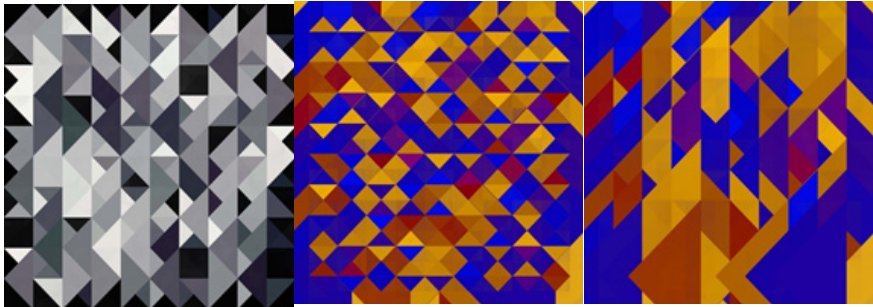




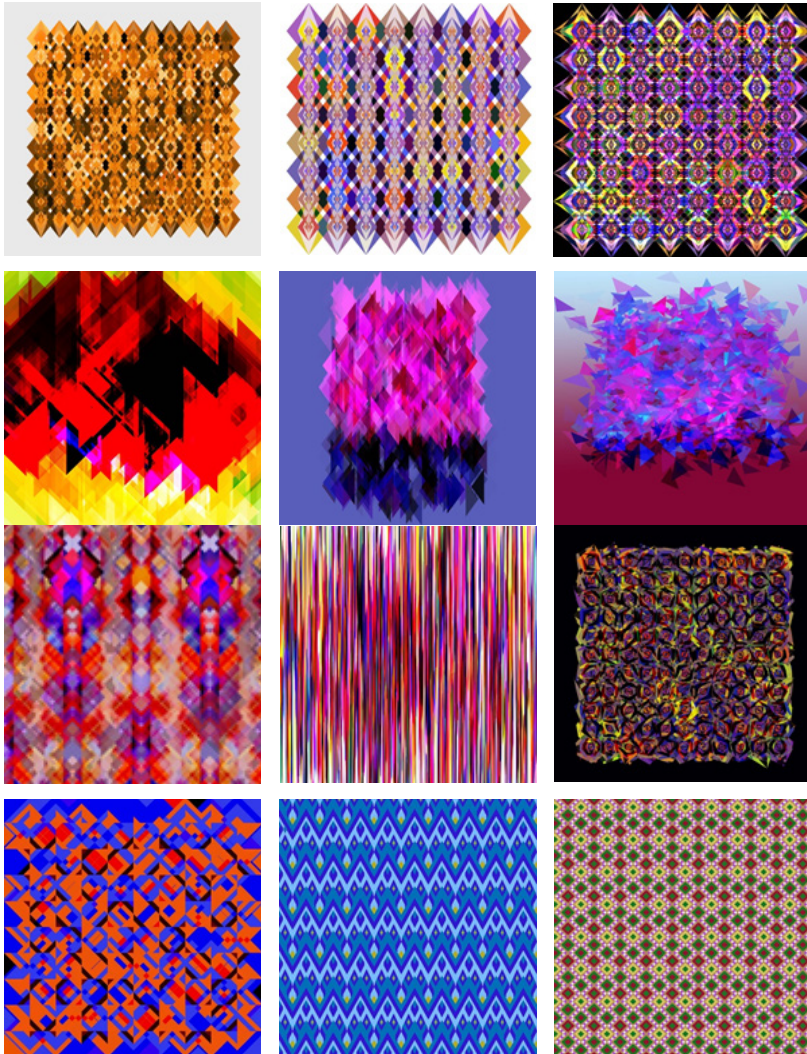
**Figure 5** Examples of New Traditional Textile Designs Using Basic Shapes, in This Case, Triangles.



**Figure 6** Examples of New Traditional Textile Designs Using Basic Shapes, in This Case, Triangles.



**Figure 7** Various Sizes and Arrangements of Triangles Form the Creative Textile Patterns. (3 Of 15 New Textile Designs)



**Figure 8** More Complex Use of Different Sizes and Arrangements of Triangles Form the Creative Textile Patterns. (12 Of 15 New Textile Design)

## Discussion

Thai textiles today have a long history from which they have evolved while still maintaining many of the ancient patterns and technical intricacy. However, the distinguishing elements of each area and ethnic group are fast

being replaced by the demands of the market for more standard products.

It is true that the consumption of traditional textiles has declined for several reasons such as globalization, modernization, and the unchanged designs and production methods of the textiles and garments themselves. However, it is important to investigate thoroughly the reasons for this decline, in order to create appropriate new designs that will attract a new market and customers.

The research found that, due to the influence of international fashion, people both in the Nan region and throughout Thailand are now adopting the western style of attire. Western clothing is very common, a fact which has led to the decline of traditional Thai textiles. In fact, this change has produced a downward spiral. First, the demand for traditional Nan textiles declined, and then the weaving villagers lost their income, so they tended find additional employment such as farming or working part-time job in new factory areas. This part-time employment led to a further drop in production.

Moreover, the researcher also found that most of the younger people being affected by the influence of globalization are not interested in learning to weave. They tend to look for job opportunities in the city. Thus, the number of village weavers is decreasing, and finding talented new people who are interested in weaving to replace them is very difficult. Therefore, the process of transferring and conserving knowledge from generation to generation is likewise in decline.

In terms of textile design, there are significant characteristics to Nan textiles. Since weaving is passed on through the generations as a precious form of craftsmanship, there has been almost no development in textile design. The researcher found that woven textiles usually feature the same designs but in different color combinations. This affects new product designs. When designs remain the same for a very long period, the knowledge to create new textiles slowly disappears. Furthermore, with the increasing availability of cheap, mass-produced alternatives, the decline in demand has been significant.



As the textile and garment industry does not serve as the primary occupation of the people of Nan, the number of village weavers has dwindled. Since the local weaving industry cannot provide enough income to support them, they tend to take other jobs to earn their living. One major problem further contributing to this situation is that the weaving process takes a great deal of time to complete because of the intricacy and complexity of the traditional designs. For example, a three-meter by one-meter piece of woven cloth may take three weeks to complete.

Moreover, the strength of the Nan region lies in the diversity of cultures and traditions, which gave the researcher numerous options for themes and stories to incorporate in textile and product designs. The local people also have good weaving and sewing skills; silk and cotton are abundant in the region, and there is an OTOP outlet based in the area.

To achieve the study's objectives, an in-depth analysis of the current situation in textile design in Nan province was conducted. The study found that local people usually preserve traditional textile patterns and designs without taking into account changes in the market and society.

Local and urban market research is important to develop new textile designs and products. Many people in Thailand are now interested in traditional Thai textiles, but they tend not to use them for many reasons. For example, the textiles are usually considered old-fashioned, as are the garment designs. According to observation and interviews, tourists are still attracted by the traditional textiles and designs. They are attracted because they are considered rare in their home country. Visitors are also interested in the lifestyle products made with traditional textiles and designs.

When the locals realize the potential of the textile and garment industry in their province, many of them will likely go back to this heritage occupation. They will return because of the suitable income that they can earn. The use of mass production makes it possible to raise job opportunities in the local area. However, development must go hand in hand with the preservation of traditional textiles so that we can keep the heritage of Nan as the focal point of products and designs developed in the future.

## **Conclusion**

According to interviews and observations, it is clear that traditional Nan textiles need an adjustment in terms of the design if they are to meet the needs of the urban target group. For tourists, there must be a variety of products designed for daily household use. The success of the research depends on our ability to get suitable products to the targeted consumers.

The new designs feature 15-printed textile designs, five examples of modern garments designed with those printed textile designs, two traditional weaving pieces, and one digital weaving piece. All of the initiatives are based on an in-depth study of Nan textiles, and the objectives are to keep the distinguishing characteristics of the traditional textiles and to develop new lifestyle products to attract more consumers.

The researcher found that combining modern markets with traditional textile designs represents the best possible solution to help keep the heritage alive while making effective use of the designs. The author hopes that this paper will benefit anyone who is interested in helping to alleviate difficulties in traditional textile development for other parts of the country. The adaptation can be done by using this paper as a role model and applying the context to the research process.

The research indicates that it is possible to introduce mass production to the villagers so that they can handle an increase in the number of orders due to changes in textile design and additions to the range of lifestyle products. However, the traditional part – the real and historic textiles and garments – should be kept and produced along with those mass produced to preserve Nan's heritage. The prediction is that after the changes have been introduced, many local people will be attracted by the stable work in the region. The younger generation will be more attracted by the job opportunities that emerge. The increase in jobs will help raise the desire of the people to preserve their heritage in textiles and garments while mass producing them to capitalize on the changes in consumption in the modern world.



**Figure 9** Garment Design with Developed Traditional Textile Patterns Look 1: Party Look (Dress)



**Figure 10** Garment Design with Developed Traditional Textile Patterns Look 2: Business Look (Cropped Jacket with Knee-Length Skirt)



**Figure 11** Garment Design with Developed Traditional Textile Patterns  
Look 3: Party Look (Cropped Blouse with Knee-Length Skirt)



**Figure 12** Garment Design with Developed Traditional Textile Patterns  
Look 4: Casual Look (Cropped Jacket with Knee-Length Skirt)





**Figure 13** Garment Design with Developed Traditional Textile Patterns  
Look 5: Party Look (Cropped Jacket with Knee-Length Skirt)

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