CHAPTER III

ORNAMENTS

Like most minority groups which have immigrated from China, the Yao and Lisaw also intimately relate to silver ornaments and traditional jewellery. Silver is a major unifying signifier of the identity of all the Yao and Lisaw groups or sub-groups. Indeed, it creates their tribal statement instantly. As a matter of fact silver is often very evocative of its owner, his or her personality, social status, age, taste, economic level, the habitat of the tribal group and so on. Both Yao and Lisaw have always enjoyed a rich array of silver ornaments when it was economically feasible. Besides their decorative value, silver represents the economic level of the family, clan or sub-clan. It can be easily bought and sold as well as easily carried while migrating, and constitutes accepted tender wherever they live. Furthermore, since in general Yao and Lisaw do not own land, it is their main form of savings and assets. Often, in days of economic insecurity or for fear of robbery, the head of the family hides most of the silver outside the house. Thus sometimes in the event of a sudden demise of the patriarch, the whereabouts of the silver jewellery remain unknown. Among the hill tribes, the use of gold jewellery is not known. The Chinese always considered silver as an unimportant metal and as such to be used in conjunction with gold solely. Chinese value only gold as a precious metal and none other. The Yao and Lisaw and other minorities from southern China or Southeast Asia, on the other hand, value silver as a commodity and an asset, employing it as the basis for their jewellery, perhaps because gold was not available to them, while silver was easily obtained. Furthermore the difference in the face value of the two metals made it impracticable for an economy of their level to even envisage the
use of gold. Peoples from the Shan States in Burma, from the Sip Song Panna area in southwest Yunnan, from northern Laos and northern Thailand also use silver for decoration and ornaments. Silver ornaments also mark a difference between the clothing for everyday wear and the clothing for ritualistic or ceremonial occasions. For these both Yao and Lisaw women decorate themselves with a large amount of silver while the men of both tribes do not wear silver ornaments. However, on festive occasions the embellished jackets with red, black and white piping around the edges and having patches of embroidery, sometimes forming pockets, are worn by the Yao men, while many silver buttons are sewn on the velvet jackets of the Lisaw men.

An important reason for the use of silver is its easy availability, for in the last century assayed silver coinage was used as legal tender in the southern Chinese provinces as well as by the French and British governments in the territories they then controlled. For instance, the official French currency used in Indo-China between 1890 and 1950, was the silver piastre. One piastre coin and 50 cent coins were issued with a 90% silver content, while 20 and 10 cent coins had only a 68% silver content. In the 1800s, Chinese from Shanghai and Canton minted their currency in silver and imported vast quantities from abroad in order to supplement the mining from the Szechuan and Yunnan provinces. They also sold it in various ingot forms, the most common (and still being used to this day) being the boat-shaped ingot (weighing generally between 360 and 380 grams) widely found in Yunnan, Laos, Vietnam and Thailand. Quantities of the French coins can still be found in the same areas, even as recently fake French piastres of low silver content are being made in southern China for trading south of the border.¹

Some silver is worn daily while other pieces may be worn only on special occasions, such as for ceremonial occasions or even for going to
the weekly market in town. Nowadays, in some areas where public safety is in doubt, public displays of large silver ornaments are fewer, while in some instances, economic problems may encourage the substitution of aluminium replicas while real silver is kept at home. But until the late 1950s many hill tribes had enjoyed economic prosperity because of their engagement in opium cultivation and a good part of their earnings was invested in silver jewellery as an insurance against lean times. These silver ornaments were often treated as family heirlooms to be handed down through generations. Most of these heirlooms have intricate designs and symbols engraved on them, the significance of which has become obscure over the years. Even the contemporary silversmiths are unable to explain them satisfactorily. They can be fairly accurately dated however if the lineage of the family which posses them can be clearly traced.

Both Yao and Lisaw silver is particularly rich and varied, following a tradition which is still extant. And because of the wide geographical area which they inhabit, local influences and details have freely blended with traditional designs.

The silver among the hill tribes in Thailand and Laos has always been, and remains, of the highest quality, assisted by the very high grade local production. Over the centuries they have developed and refined their working technology to a high degree. They work mainly with cast or hammered silver, using a considerable amount of chiseling and repoussé work. For their basic material, the silversmiths melt down silver ingots (Figure 3.1, p. 132), unwanted old silver chains, and silver coins. They buy the silver ingots in town or from travelling suppliers, as well as buying spools of silver wire and silver in thin sheet form. Techniques used include casting, hammering, repoussé work in low relief, champlevé, chasing, and etching. After having taken a sufficient quantity
Figure 3.4 Beaten out by hammering into the intended form.

Figure 3.5 Quenching in water during the process.
Figure 3.6 The final process before the desired shape has been reached.

Figure 3.7 Tools of a silversmith. (From left to right) Wooden blocks with irregular holes, a hammer, a tweezers, a chisel, and a cutter.
The Yao Ornaments

All Yao groups and sub-groups are fond of silver ornaments. In general, Yao people purchase their silver ornaments from their own silversmiths. If there are none in the vicinity, they will occasionally order them from the forges of other tribes. It is significant to note that more than in the articles of apparel there is much more intermixing of influences between the patterns and designs of various tribal subgroups in silver jewellery. It can be seen thus that Yao silver from northern Thailand and northern Laos is somewhat similar to Yao silver ornaments from Yunnan, as are those from northwest Vietnam. On the other hand, Yao silver from northeast Vietnam is closer to Yao silver from Guangxi and to a lesser extent to that from Guangdong.

It must also be noted that often the main symbols used by them for decoration are not always specifically or originally Yao, but nevertheless have been adapted by them from cognate areas particularly from those such as have a concentration of the Yao. The symbols include the gourd and double gourd, the multi-pointed stars, umbrella, fishes, birds, butterflies, dragons. Once again these symbols are being engraved only as vestigial survivals and their significance has become obscured over these centuries of their migration from one area to the other. Despite pointed questions about the symbolism of these motifs, none of the clanmen could come up with a satisfactory response. In most cases they clearly stated their inability to explain these.

The Mien Yao women in Thailand bedeck themselves with many silver ornaments at the time of special occasions. These silver ornaments items with which they decorate themselves from head to toe are turban band, earrings, neckrings, silverchains, and bracelets. These ornaments are very popular and worn enthusiastically by them.
The Mien Yao wrap around their turbans an elaborate ornament. This ornament is essentially a gathering of silver chains. Often, a variant of the same ornament may be worn on the chest as well. Silver chains are very important items in Yao jewellery because many ornaments are made to hang from them. All Mien Yao tend to use a type of four-sided V-link chain of various sizes for all their pendants or streamers. The Mun use the same type of chain but with a looser setting for the V-links. This silver turban ornament is called **Yanlim**. This long band, which is time consuming to make, consists of alternating silver chains and silver coiled braids. A contemporary version of the Yanlim has, attached to it, several sets of silver leaves mixed with rounded bells, and oblong bells as well as recently aeroplanes pendants which are linked together. Fitted to the W-shaped turban, they accentuate its shape. Sometimes they are also used as a chest pendant. The figure 3.9 in page 138 shows a contemporary silver chain used as a chest pendant by the Mien Yao in Thailand today. It is a long beautiful silver chain, and reveals very fine repousse’ work with multiple designs and comprises of a large number of silver pendants. Several short chains superbly worked in the form of a butterfly, are attached to the chain hanging with a pendant set of leaves, bells, oblong bells, and also aeroplanes like the silver turban band. (Figures 3.8 to 3.10, p. 138-139)
Figure 3.8 The silverturban band of the Mien Yao in Thailand.

Figure 3.9 The silverchain used as a chest pendant.
Figure 3.10 A Mien Yao woman in Thailand decorates silverchains on the turban and tunic.

Earrings or Nomyoon of the Mien Yao are in the shape of a bent-arrow. The most frequently used pair of earrings in the Mien Yao group, it is clearly derived from a very old and universal Yao symbol, whose meaning is once again unclear. It somewhat resembles an arrow or a spear whose shaft has been rounded into a circle to hang on the earlobe. The flat triangle is arrow-shaped from which it derives its name. However, it could also represent a sword called San Yuan, the sword of the Taoist Three Generals or Three Officials, who come to the rescue of the believers. All Mien Yao are familiar this form of earrings wherever they be. About 50 or 60 years ago these earrings were usually large,
around 5-6 cm in diameter. Since then the size has shrunk by about half. The Kim Mun Lantien group has its own slightly different version of these earrings in which the shaft is either straight or rounded, but still might represent the ‘San Yuan’ sword. It is important to note that the symbol of the sword never features in Yao embroidery but only as an ornament. The parts of the earrings, consist of a round rod of silver shaped into a circle, a flat silver triangle with filigree pattern, three flat silver coils, one round silver bead and thin silver wiring have virtually remained unaltered for at least 150 years and probably longer. Only the diameter of the circle has reduced over the last 40 years or so, from as large as 7 cm as present in old family heirlooms to a size of 3-4 cm today. Such earrings are still being worn in Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Yunnan, Hunan, Guangxi, and Guangdong of China. However, little details vary from one country to the other. The figure 3.11 shows the earrings worn by the Mien Yao in Thailand today with a diameter of about 2-3 cm. (Figure 3.11, p. 140)
All Yao women and children wear necklaces, and some men may still do so. Essentially it is an open circular silver neckring, a basic design common to many ethnic groups in southern China from time immemorial. The Yao have personalized its details, and various groups and sub-groups have particular preferences regarding size, number of rings, engravings etc. The neckrings are always made in one piece, and beaten into a round (with sometimes a slight swelling in the centre) or sexagonal section, or, occasionally, a combination of the two. They can be worn as a single unit or in multiples of three, four or five strands bound together in decreasing size. Thin or thick, most of these are solid but a few may be hollow as well depending on the economic condition of the family. Generally the older ones are larger in diameter. Usually both ends are beaten flat and turned back like ‘ears’ with some fine engraving generally representing a bird or small animal. Some fairly old round neckrings found in Guangdong, Guangxi of China, and parts of Vietnam have overlapping ends which slide in a coil. The Kim Mun Shanzi Yao use sets of three of these which are almost flat, and heavily engraved. Neckrings can be plain or engraved, sometime with quite elaborate designs and possibly also with the maker’s name in Chinese or even with some wish. Enamel is never used. The Tsio Ban Dao Tien Yao also wear rows of porcelain beads as chokers. With one exception, Mien Yao wear theirs with the ‘ears’ towards the back while Mun wear them to the front for hanging pendants.
The figure 3.12 shows the silver neckring of the Mien Yao in Thailand today. It is called Chaowan, made of a large silver ingot. This neckring is a single strand for everyday wear with ears and retaining links, richly decorated all over, about 16 cm in diameter. (Figure 3.12, p. 142)

Figure 3.12 The neckring for everyday wear of the Mien Yao in Thailand.

The bracelet or Puachim is still widely used by Mien and Mun Yao of all groups and sub-groups particularly in Yunnan, Vietnam, Laos and Thailand. They are often worn in identical pairs, one of the pair being smaller in size in order that it may fit the lower part of the arm. As a rule, women, men and children can wear Yao bracelets, although women generally wear a large number. For the Yao, although they have absorbed outside stylistic influences, these bracelets nevertheless have a specific Yao identity. In the olden day it used to be engagement ornament. When
a man wanted to marry a woman he offered a bracelet to the woman. If she agreed to receive the bracelet it was taken as a token of acceptance.

The figure 3.13 shows the bracelets worn by the Mien Yao in Thailand today. These bracelets are made of flat rectangular silver, with equal sides. Attractive floral and other symbols are chiseled over the whole surface. Worn in pairs, the widths can vary, according to the group and sub-group traditions. (Figure 3.13, p. 143)

Figure 3.13 The bracelets of the Mien Yao in Thailand.
The Lisaw Ornaments

The primary difference between regular and formal dress among the Lisaw lies in the amount of ornamentation and jewellery worn by the tribal people. Silver jewellery takes many different forms according to the ethnic group and has become the most important possession of each family, which is inherited by generation to generation usually often by the youngest son of the family. The diversity of Lisaw silver applies to traditional silver pieces as well as contemporary renditions. The main symbols used by them for their silver ornaments are not always specifically or originally Lisaw, but nevertheless have been universally adopted by them since long. The symbols include the fishes, birds, butterflies, and bells.

The Yao wear silver ornaments as ornaments, but the Lisaw use them ornaments and also treat them as a part of their clothes such as the silver buttons, silver coins, silver plaques attached to the velvet vest of the Lisaw woman. Women's ceremonial clothes and turban tend to be heavier and multilayered, forcing an erect posture. In many cases the leggings, if worn, will also be highly ornate and decorated with many silver ornaments.

In the Lisaw world, silver remains both a strong tribal and social identifier as can be seen at a Lisaw New Year festival. The women bedeck themselves with massive amount of silver ornaments. They spend many hours and sums of money to the making of new outfits, and silver ornaments are cleaned. The women wear silver hook-shaped earrings called Nakho through her pierced ears, to which wool tassels are attached. The Pooja, a silver chain of several strands hangs from one earring and passing under her chin is attached to the other earring. (Figures 3.14 to 3.15, p. 145-146) The figure 3.14 in page 145 shows
another type of silver hook-shaped earrings worn by the Lisaw woman in Thailand today. It has many parts like a round silver rod shaped into a circle hung with a pendant set of three rectangular silver plates and two small bells.

A cloth collar with silver buttons and dangles called Akusulu attached to it is worn around the neck. (Figure 3.16, p. 146) The figure 3.16 in page 146 shows a cloth collar of the young Lisaw woman tunic worn by the Lisaw in Thailand today. Two rows of silver buttons are sewn on the cloth collar with a silver strip at each end. A number of large oblong bells are attached to the lower silver buttons row. The woman may add more collars, usually two or three, and layer by layer, until her chest is covered with silver. (Figure 3.17, p. 147)
The silver bracelets of the Lisaw called Yachu, unlike the Yao, are flat, plain or with engraved designs. (Figure 3.19, p. 149) Apparently today among the Lisaw new generation these bracelets are out of fashion and replaced by the Thai contemporary bracelets as well as the fashionable wrist watches.
Figure 3.19 Yachu, the bracelets of the Lisaw women.

Usually the Lisaw men do not wear silver ornaments, however, on special occasions a number of silver buttons are sewn on the velvet jacket. (Figure 2.32, p. 115)

Today the Lisaw silversmiths in Thailand produce the ornaments in their households. As with everything else, fashion plays a role in Lisaw silver. Certain designs and shapes, or types of jewellery, come in and out of favour, or a regional fashion for a certain item can spread to other places. The Lisaw silversmiths produce silver ornament items either by following the old patterns and create new designs.
A number of Lisaw silversmiths from Chiang Mai province, Thailand work for important Chiang Mai or Bangkok retailers these days producing not Lisaw silver only, but Thai silver, of excellence no less than that of the local one. For the first time they are also working in gold for these customers, and seem to be as good with this new material as they are with silver.

**Reference and Notes**

**Documents**

1. Pourret G., Jess.  

2. Ibid.  
   p. 157.

3. Ibid.  
   pp. 160, 162.

4. Ibid.  
   p. 155.

**Figures**

3.15, 3.17, 3.19  
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