

Miao Baby Carrier Crafting Techniques and Pattern Analysis in Liping, Southeastern Guizhou

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Abstract: This study adopts field research as the primary methodology, conducting on-site visits to Miao ethnic communities in Liping and comprehensively collecting data through observations of baby carrier production processes. Building on this foundation, the paper analyzes the crafting techniques of Miao baby carriers in Liping, elaborating on their operational procedures and artistic effects from three dimensions: "stacking" fabric, "coiling" threads, and "weaving" patterns. Furthermore, by integrating these techniques, the study deciphers the compositional elements of the patterns on Liping Miao baby carriers, such as natural motifs and geometric designs. It explores the cultural significance embedded in these patterns from perspectives including mythology, nature worship, and totemic beliefs, thereby comprehensively presenting the unique cultural connotations and artistic allure of the Liping Miao people.

1. Introduction

As a distinctive childcare tool of Miao women, the baby carriers of Southeastern Guizhou integrate exquisite handicrafts such as embroidery, paper-cutting, and brocade, serving as iconic representations of the Miao sub-group's clothing culture. Current academic research on these carriers predominantly focuses on structural techniques, aesthetic symbolism, and formal characteristics. However, studies examining the pattern features manifested through the crafting techniques of Liping Miao baby carriers remain relatively scarce. Liping County, situated in Southeastern Guizhou at the tri-provincial junction of Guizhou, Hunan, and Guangxi, is home to over ten ethnic groups, including the Dong and Miao peoples [1]. Historically, migration has been a defining trait of the Miao, who are often termed "mountain migrants" or "highland nomads" due to their frequent relocations. These migrations facilitated the absorption of diverse regional cultural elements, resulting in the pluralistic characteristics of Miao patterns and forms today. From the Yuan Dynasty's implementation of the Tusi system in Southeastern Guizhou to the Ming Dynasty's establishment of garrison-militia settlements, Han Chinese migrants began settling in the Miao-dominated highlands, initiating cultural exchanges between Miao and Han communities. During the Yongzheng era's "Opening of the New Frontier", six administrative subprefectures were established in Miao territories. By the Qianlong era, military garrisons and Han settlements further solidified a pattern of mixed habitation -Miao villages interspersed with Han forts, fostering economic and cultural interactions despite periodic conflicts. The Miao adopted advanced Han

production tools and techniques, while Han communities assimilated Miao survival strategies suited to mountainous environments. In Liping's multiethnic milieu, Miao baby carriers exhibit unique and diverse stylistic and ornamental features, reflecting this cultural syncretism. To address existing research gaps, this study conducts field investigations across Liping County, extensively documenting pattern characteristics of local Miao carriers. Using carriers from Diping Township as core samples, the research systematically examines stacking fabric, coiling threads, and weaving patterns alongside their corresponding motifs, supported by material artifacts and historical texts. Through a comprehensive analysis of Liping Miao carrier techniques and patterns, this paper aims to enrich studies on Miao clothing culture in Southeastern Guizhou and provide actionable insights for preserving and transmitting Miao craftsmanship.

2. The Form and Characteristics of Miao Baby Carriers in Liping, Southeastern Guizhou

2.1 Overview of Miao Baby Carriers in Liping, Southeastern Guizhou

The baby carrier, known as *xiu xia* in the Miao language of Liping and historically referred to as *qiangbao* in ancient China, is a traditional tool used by local women to carry infants while engaging in daily labor, akin to the Western "baby sling." The earliest documented mention of baby carriers in China appears in *Records of the Grand Historian: Biographies of General Wei and the Swift Cavalry General*: "Though my son Qing was still in swaddling clothes and had not yet contributed labor, His Majesty graciously granted him land and the title of a triple marquis". *Classified Anthology of the Qing Dynasty* further notes: "Swaddling clothes originated in the Three Dynasties period and persist today. Qiang refers to a cloth strip eight inches wide and twelve feet long, used to secure a child to the back; bao is the child's blanket" [2]. These records confirm that *qiangbao* served the same purpose as modern baby carriers. Regionally, the earliest visual depiction of baby carrier use in Southwest China is found in *Illustrated Tributaries of the Qing Empire: Volume 4*, which portrays a Shanzi Yao woman from Luchuan County carrying a child (Figure 1).



Figure 1: A Shanzi Yao Woman from Luchuan County Carrying a Child [3]

The structural composition of Liping Miao baby carriers (Figure 2) includes the carrier foot, carrier heart, carrier straps, base cloth, and edging. This design evolved from the Miao people's long-term adaptation to their productive and social environments. Initially devised to meet the

practical need of carrying infants during labor, the carriers gradually incorporated cultural beliefs, aesthetic values, and folk traditions, transforming into objects of both utility and symbolic significance. Located on the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau, Liping is home to multiple ethnic groups, including the Miao, Buyi, Dong, Shui, and Yi, many of whom have histories of migration within or beyond the region. Diverse natural environments and cultural practices have fostered a rich variety of carrier styles. Over time, Liping's baby carrier artistry has assimilated elements from neighboring cultures, culminating in a distinctive style characterized by "multiplicity," "density," "beauty," and "abundance"-achieving a planar yet three-dimensional structure through layered stacking. As an integral part of Miao attire, Liping baby carriers epitomize the region's cultural and aesthetic identity. Their patterns, craftsmanship, and symbolism not only document the Miao's history and aspirations for prosperity but also reflect cross-ethnic artistic exchanges.



Figure 2: Layered Structural Analysis of a Liping Miao Baby Carrier

2.2 Form and Characteristics of Liping Baby Carriers

The baby carriers of Liping's Miao communities are distinguished by their multi-layered stacking, composite craftsmanship, and blue-green-dominated color schemes. Beyond their utilitarian role, they embody profound emotional and cultural meanings. As Lü Shengzhong observed in *Farewell to Tradition*: "The baby carrier is the mother's familiar warmth, a cozy cradle, a bond connecting the child to its maternal lineage after birth, and a symbolic 'placenta' for nurturing her offspring" [4]. Historically, Miao women in Liping began embroidering carriers during adolescence, imbuing each component with anthropomorphic names: carrier heart, carrier foot (or carrier tail), and carrier straps.

Liping carriers exemplify sophisticated geometric arrangements governed by ancient Miao mathematical principles and aesthetic norms. For instance, four identical geometric motifs at the carrier foot often symbolize the four directions and four seasons, constructing a stable spatial metaphor. The floral core of the carrier heart typically radiates six or eight petals from a circular center, signifying auspiciousness, prosperity, and harmony.

The embroidery techniques are equally elaborate, with each carrier combining three to four stitch types per panel and up to twenty distinct stitches overall. Common methods include flat stitches for smooth surfaces and oblique stitches for dynamic textures. These techniques, paired with

natural-dyed silk threads of varying thicknesses, produce intricate patterns ranging from fine outlines to bold fills.

As vessels of Miao historical memory, spiritual beliefs, and aesthetic ideals, Liping baby carriers play an irreplaceable role in preserving and transmitting Miao cultural heritage.

3. Comparative Analysis of Crafting Techniques in Liping Miao Baby Carriers

3.1 The Art of "Stacking Fabric" in Liping Miao Baby Carriers

Within the Miao cultural framework, the baby carriers of Liping stand out for their unique crafting techniques and symbolic patterns, serving as vital cultural artifacts. Among these, the "stacking fabric" technique (Figure 3) is pivotal, characterized by a complex stitching system that includes flat embroidery, seed stitching, stem stitching, appliqué and layered fabric stacking. The "stacking fabric" technique involves meticulously layering fabric pieces of varying textures, colors, and shapes to achieve a three-dimensional structure. Precision is paramount:

Variations exist among Liping's Miao subgroups. Some prioritize geometric fabric pieces, while others favor organic, nature-inspired shapes, reflecting differences in local environments, livelihoods, and aesthetic traditions. Compared to other Miao regions, Liping's carriers emphasize multi-layered stacking and stem stitching, contrasting with techniques like seed stitching or counted-thread embroidery prevalent elsewhere [5]. Regional distinctions also manifest in color coordination, as noted in historical texts: "Five colors may dazzle, but a dominant hue must anchor them, with others subordinate" [6].

In contrast, neighboring Dong ethnic carriers favor flat appliqué with subdued palettes, prioritizing planar decoration, pattern continuity, and holistic unity. These stylistic divergences underscore distinct cultural identities and aesthetic preferences.



Figure 3: Partial Illustration of the "Stacking Fabric" Technique in Liping Miao Baby Carriers

3.2 The Art of "Coiling Threads" in Liping Miao Baby Carrier Crafting

The "coiling threads" technique (Figure 4), a pivotal method in crafting Liping Miao baby carriers, is predominantly applied to the carrier's hemming. While the fundamental structure of coiling threads -comprising outer wrapping threads and inner core threads -shares similarities

between Liping Miao and Han Chinese traditions, their material choices and technical executions diverge significantly.

The Liping Miao prioritize multi-strand fine threads or narrow fabric strips for the inner core, ensuring structural stability. These cores are then enveloped with silk threads using a knotting method, which not only enhances three-dimensionality but also imbues the threads with a distinct textural quality. In contrast, Han Chinese artisans employ a more diverse and flexible material palette, utilizing natural fibers such as cotton, hemp, silk, and wool to accommodate varying embroidery needs and stylistic preferences. This material diversity facilitates the application of intricate techniques like random-stitch embroidery, where threads of differing materials are coiled in multiple directions and angles to achieve dynamic visual effects.

Though both traditions exemplify exceptional craftsmanship, their approaches to coiling threads reflect distinct cultural identities. For the Liping Miao, the technique serves as a vital medium for cultural continuity and emotional expression, while Han Chinese practices highlight adaptability and technical innovation.



Figure 4: Partial Illustration of the "Coiling Threads" Technique in Liping Miao Baby Carriers

3.3 The Art of "Weaving Patterns" in Liping Miao Baby Carrier Crafting

Within the rich tapestry of Miao weaving and embroidery traditions, the "weaving patterns" technique of Liping baby carriers stands out as a distinctive hallmark. Liping Miao artisans employ thin tin foil strips cut into thread-like strands as warp threads, interlacing them with silk weft threads. The resulting visual and textural effects -marked by the metallic sheen and rigidity of the tin foil -differ markedly from those produced by other ethnic groups using conventional silk or plant-fiber threads, forming a defining characteristic of Liping carriers (Figure 5).

As both a utilitarian object and a cultural artifact, Liping baby carriers serve dual roles in daily life and traditional ceremonies. The "weaving patterns" technique applied to the carrier's edges integrates decorative motifs tightly with the base cloth, enhancing durability while fulfilling aesthetic demands. These patterns, often abstract or figurative, synthesize cultural elements drawn from mythological narratives, totemic worship, and communal symbolism, functioning as vital markers of ethnic identity. Through this technique, the carriers transcend mere functionality, becoming material vessels of Miao cultural transmission that bear witness to historical evolution and continuity.



Figure 5: Partial Illustration of the "Weaving Patterns" Technique in Liping Miao Baby Carriers

4. Pattern Analysis of Liping Miao Baby Carriers in Southeastern Guizhou

The patterns of Liping Miao baby carriers, often grounded in natural forms, serve as vessels for the Miao people's aspirations for prosperity and auspiciousness in daily life and labor. As the Miao possess a spoken language but no written script, their oral epics -regarded as the "mother source" of Miao patterns -preserve collective memory through generations of auditory transmission, codified in narrative works like the Miao Ancient Epics [7]. Consequently, Miao women have transformed these auditory traditions into visual artistic motifs, reimagining historical narratives through material culture.

Liping Miao baby carriers feature diverse patterns composed of natural elements (flora, birds) and geometric designs, rendered in vivid contrasts of red, blue, and yellow to create dazzling visual effects. These motifs are both decorative and culturally symbolic, exemplifying the Miao's unique artistic ingenuity. For instance, the fish-dragon motif, symbolizing fertility and lineage proliferation, is prominently embroidered on the carrier heart and carrier foot. These motifs often appear in pairs, with variations such as same head and tail, same head with different tails, same tail with different heads, or distinct heads and tails, adapting to compositional needs. Rooted in the Miao's cosmological duality of yin-yang and gender distinctions, fish-dragon motifs also carry gender-specific symbolism: boys in Liping are predominantly carried in fish-dragon-patterned carriers, reflecting cultural norms of lineage continuity.

Historically, migration and folk rituals have profoundly shaped Liping carrier patterns. During the Miao's migratory journeys, motifs became a means to memorialize ancestral homelands and historical continuity. Rituals like ancestral worship further imbued patterns with sacred meanings. In Liping's historically isolated communities, these folk-influenced motifs have been remarkably preserved, retaining ancient customs and serving as vital emblems of ethnic identity. As carriers of cultural memory, these patterns reflect the Miao's collective consciousness, aesthetic values, and worldview, while their execution remains inseparable from crafting techniques. This paper analyzes three emblematic motifs: Solar motifs (Figure 6a), crafted through stacking fabric, symbolize vitality and cosmic order. Ruyi (auspicious S-shaped) motifs (Figure 6b), formed via coiling threads, represent harmony and prosperity. Spiral motifs (Figure 6c), achieved through weaving patterns, evoke ancestral connections and cyclical renewal. Through these examples, the study illuminates how Liping Miao patterns synthesize technical mastery, cultural narratives, and spiritual symbolism.



(a) Solar Motifs



(b) Ruyi Motifs



(c) Spiral Motifs

Figures 6: Solar, Ruyi, and Spiral Motifs in Liping Miao Baby Carriers

4.1 Analysis of "Stacking Fabric" Patterns: Solar Motifs as an Example

When crafting solar motifs using the stacking fabric technique, artisans first cut fabrics of varying colors into shapes such as circles and triangles to mimic radiating sunlight. These pieces are then meticulously layered and stitched, resulting in motifs with striking three-dimensionality and vivid color contrasts. Beyond their visual resemblance to the sun, these motifs embody the Miao's solar worship, symbolizing light, warmth, and divine protection. Transformed into embroidered patterns over generations, solar motifs have become a distinctive visual language of Miao identity.

In Southwest China, sun veneration is widespread among ethnic groups, rooted in the belief that solar energy -though incompletely understood by ancient peoples -nurtures all life. On Liping Miao baby carriers, solar motifs at the center express elders' blessings for infants' well-being. For instance, carriers from Diping Township, Liping, often feature a circular "sun disk" at the heart of the design (Figure 3). Most motifs depict an eight-rayed sun (though six- or twelve-rayed variants exist), while others retain only the central core or an outer ring. Some artisans replace the central rays with floral patterns, reflecting both reverence for nature and innovative cultural adaptation. These variations exemplify the Miao's artistic ingenuity and serve as invaluable specimens for studying their cultural evolution.

4.2 Analysis of "Coiling Threads" Patterns: Ruyi Motifs as an Example

The Ruyi motif, crafted through the coiling threads technique, employs multicolored silk threads meticulously coiled along the contour of the auspicious ruyi (S-shaped scepter) symbol. Variations in thread density and tension create dynamic lines, while the silk's luster enhances the motif's opulence, embodying hopes for prosperity and good fortune. The Ruyi motif, a traditional Chinese auspicious pattern, is crafted in the shape of a ruyi scepter, metaphorically representing "fulfillment" and "good fortune". Ruyi motifs on Liping carriers appear in isolated, bi-directional repetition, or quad-directional repetition layouts. Structurally, Ruyi motifs fall into two categories: Perfect Symmetry: Mirrored along the carrier's central axis. Imperfect Symmetry: Retains the ruyi's core features but introduces asymmetry through adjustments to cloud-head proportions, line lengths, or curvature. Artisans demonstrate exceptional skill in coiling threads -maintaining uniform tension and density to achieve smooth, 'full-bodied' contours. Complex designs integrate flat stitches, chain stitches, and seed stitches to enhance dimensionality, showcasing the Miao's technical mastery.

4.3 Analysis of "Weaving Patterns" Patterns: Spiral Motifs as an Example

Spiral motifs formed through intricate weaving patterns, exhibit rhythmic dynamism through strategic color pairings, evoking the pulsation of life and reflecting the Miao's profound connection

to nature. These motifs hold multifaceted cultural meanings:

Associated with the Guzang Festival, a sacred Miao ancestral ritual. Linked to jijidou, a medicinal herb revered in Miao folklore. Symbolizes ancestral drum-dancing ceremonies, fostering ethnic unity. Represents whirlpools encountered during the Miao's westward migration, memorializing historical tribulations. Spirals, ubiquitous in nature -from galaxies to fingerprints -are also globally prevalent in ancient art. Scholars posit that "spiral structures arise from energy resistance and organic growth" [8]. For the Liping Miao, spirals symbolize cyclical renewal and perpetual vitality, transcending mere ornamentation to convey philosophical insights into existence. The region's biodiversity further inspires patterns, with motifs like the Butterfly Mother reflecting animistic beliefs. Environmental diversity fosters pattern variation, highlighting the Miao's adaptive creativity.

5. Conclusion

The baby carriers of the Liping Miao in Southeastern Guizhou are meticulously constructed through the distinctive techniques of stacking fabric, coiling threads, and weaving patterns, which collectively define their unique structural and aesthetic forms. The stacking fabric technique enhances the three-dimensionality of motifs through layered fabric combinations; the coiling threads method imbues patterns with dynamic rhythm via intricate thread winding and stitch variations; and the weaving patterns approach employs interlaced warps, wefts, and strategic color pairings to create visually compelling motion.

An analysis of the carriers' decorative elements reveals a rich tapestry of natural, geometric, anthropomorphic, and totemic motifs. These patterns, deeply rooted in mythological narratives, nature worship, and totemic beliefs, synergize with their crafting techniques to convey profound cultural significance. The interplay between ornamentation and artistry not only preserves the Miao's historical memory but also exemplifies the intrinsic connection between craftsmanship and cultural identity.

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