

Thai Song Dam Hand-Woven Fabric

Phetchaburi Province

Thai Song Dam or Lao Song is the name of Tai Dam ethnic group who originally settled alongside the Black and the Red rivers of Northern Vietnam in Sipsong Chu Thai area called Muang Thang or present-day Dien Bien Phu. Throughout the Thon Buri and early Rattanakosin periods, several groups of Lao Song had migrated via LAO PDR, from where the word “Lao” in “Lao Song” derived, to Thailand and lived here for more than 200 years. Thai Song Dam’s unique tradition includes wearing mostly black clothes and their expertise in hand-weaving exquisite “Suea” (a shirt or blouse) and “Pah Sinh” (a traditional wraparound skirt), the costume clearly reflecting this ethnic group’s identity. Most of Thai Song Dam people in Thailand live in Phetchaburi Province where their traditions, rites, and ceremonies are still maintained strictly.



Importance on Local Culture

Thai Song Dam or Lao Song’s people typically wear signature black clothes and is called “Thai Song Dam” (Thai wearing black) after their clothing. This ethnic group respects and values spirits and deities which are believed to reside in natural surroundings like rivers, canals, forests, and mountains. The most respectful is Phaya Thaen, the chief of the universe and of their parents and ancestors’ souls. Consequently, several daily rituals to worship these deities have been preserved and are still practiced until today.



The ritual shirt called “Suea Hee” is specially made and exquisitely embroidered with bright threads and small pieces of silk fabric (Suea Hee) on the black background. “Suea Hee” for the female can be worn on both sides. The outer side is decorated in beautiful minimal style and worn in joyous occasions such as the wedding and the Sen Ruen ceremonies. However, the inner side is gracefully embroidered with white, green, maroon, bright orange, and pink silk and may be decorated with small pieces of mirror. On the contrary, “Suea Hee” with the inside out is worn for unpleasant ceremony as the funeral or, in some communities, is used to cloth the dead body or cover the coffin.



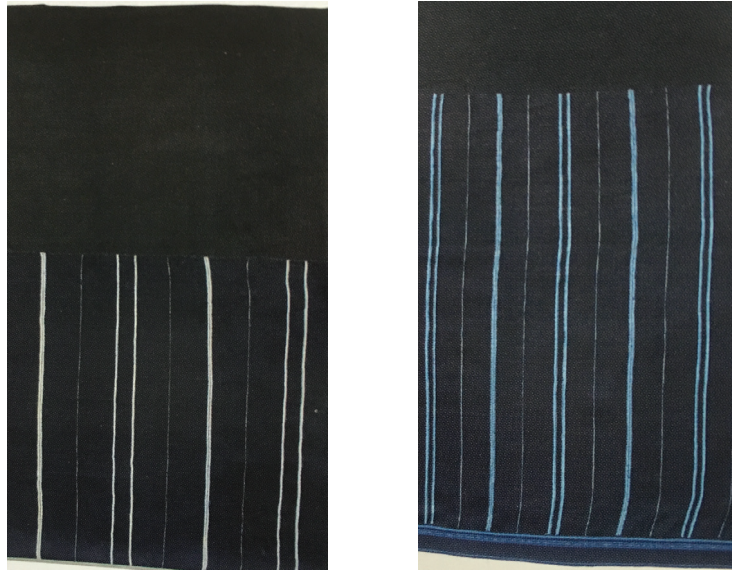
“Suea Hee”, consequently, plays a very important role in Thai Song Dam’s culture as their ritual costume and clothing for the deceased. They believe that the dead will be recognized by his departed family members because of “Suea Hee” that he wears and will not be remembered if not wearing it. Therefore, everyone in this ethnic group must possess one’s own “Suea Hee”.

Unique Characteristics of Thai Song Dam Hand-Woven Fabric

Thai Song Dam or Lao Song's clothing culture is unique. Both women and men wear black clothes in their daily life and other special events such as traditional ceremonies or rituals. From past to present, the female Lao Song have worn "Sinh Lai Taengmo" (Watermelon-Patterned Sinh) woven by themselves. This traditional wraparound skirt made from cotton is a dominant signature of this ethnic group which is worn by every woman in every occasions no matter formal or informal, at home or while traveling, and important ceremonies or working. "Watermelon-Patterned Sinh" consists of three parts; the first part is "Hua Sinh" which is in plain black or indigo, the second part is "Tua Sinh" which is decorated with white vertical stripes similar to pattern on watermelon skin or "Lai Taengmo", and the third part is the bottom or "Teen Sinh" made from a few stripes of white fabric sewn together. When the women's husband passes away, "Teen Sinh" will be totally removed from the skirt to mourn the husband's death.

Thai Song Dam's women in the past used cotton thread or red silk as the warp yarn and black thread as the weft yarn. There is a story behind this weaving process orally passed down from their ancestor. In the past the married female Thai Song Dam had to stay at home while her husband, the leader of the family, had gone for several days into the forest to find a proper area for farming. The wife while waiting hand-wove some clothes. She managed to dye the warp yarn in red colour referring to her loving thought for the far away husband while the weft yarn was dyed in black or dark indigo representing herself. Considering the finished piece of woven fabric, the red warp yarn which was smaller would be completely covered by the bigger weft yarn. However, when "Sinh Lai Taengmo" was worn and reflected by the sunlight, the glittering red colour would be apparently seen. The message conveyed here was that: Although the red warp yarn could be entirely hidden, the tiny particle of red pigment could not and would show up when touched by the sunshine. This was resemble to the yearning heart of Thai Song Dam's women who was, by nature, shy and had to conceal her loving thought for husband. However, she managed to create a signal to

communicate her feeling to him. Although the story might be only the legend, the weaving technique of “Sinh Lai Taengmo” is considered the truly local wisdom.



Thai Song Dam

The shirt is called “Suea Kom” with long and cylinder sleeves, stand-up collar, silver buttons closely lining vertically along the parted front of the fitted bodice.

Pha Peow is another symbol and personal attire of Thai Song Dam’s women. It is a hand-woven shawl made from cotton dyed in dark indigo or almost black colour and decorated with colourful threads curled in beautiful circular shape. There are eight decorative curls in total with two of them on each side. Pha Peow is still used nowadays by Lao Song or Thai Song Dam people for hanging over the neck, covering the chest, or wrapping around the head. The elderly people usually wrap this shawl around the chest diagonally when they go to the temple or attend important ceremonies. This nearly black Pha Peow is used for covering the deceased’s body based on the belief that Pha Peow



Pha Peow

needs to be worn when going to pick mangoes in Himavanta (a legendary forest), to see “Thaen” (angels), and meet the departed relatives in order that they can recognize the dead who dresses properly. Therefore, each of Lao Song or Thai Song Dam people possesses a personal Pha Peow.