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Reinterpreting Tai Lue Textile Motifs for Contemporary Fabric Pattern Design

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Abstract.

Traditional textile motifs of the Tai Lue ethnic group represent a significant form of intangible cultural heritage, reflecting cultural identity, beliefs, and local wisdom transmitted through generations. However, many traditional motifs face challenges in adapting to contemporary design contexts and modern consumer preferences. This study aims to reinterpret Tai Lue textile motifs and transform them into contemporary fabric pattern designs while preserving their cultural identity and symbolic meanings. This research employs a design-based research methodology, integrating qualitative cultural analysis with practical design development. The study begins with an in-depth investigation of Tai Lue textile traditions, focusing on motif characteristics, symbolic meanings, and visual elements through document analysis and visual observation. Key motifs are systematically extracted and analyzed based on form, rhythm, composition, and symbolic significance. These elements are then reinterpreted through a structured design process, including motif abstraction, pattern reconstruction, and contemporary visual adaptation. The design development phase results in a series of contemporary fabric patterns that reflect Tai Lue cultural identity while aligning with modern aesthetic principles and functional applications. The outcomes demonstrate that traditional ethnic motifs can be successfully transformed into contemporary textile patterns without losing their cultural essence. The reinterpretation process allows for greater design flexibility, enabling application in fashion and related creative industries. The findings highlight the potential of contemporary textile pattern design as a medium for cultural sustainability, bridging traditional heritage and modern design innovation. This research contributes to design knowledge by presenting a systematic approach for reinterpreting ethnic textile motifs, offering practical insights for designers, researchers, and cultural practitioners engaged in heritage-based contemporary design.

Keywords: Tai Lue Ethnic Culture, Textile Motif, Fabric Pattern Design, Cultural Identity, Contemporary Design, Design-Based Research

1. Introduction

Textile design has long functioned as a visual medium through which cultural identity, social values, and collective memory are communicated. Traditional textile motifs are not merely decorative elements but serve as symbolic representations of belief systems, environmental relationships, and inherited cultural knowledge (Pye, 1968; Dormer, 1997). Within the field of design studies, textiles are widely recognized as carriers of intangible

cultural heritage, embedding meaning through form, pattern, and material practice (UNESCO, 2003).

The Tai Lue ethnic group possesses a distinctive textile tradition characterized by geometric motifs, rhythmic repetition, and symbolic references to nature and cosmology. These motifs reflect both aesthetic principles and socio-cultural narratives developed through generations of lived experience. According to Hall (1997), cultural identity is not fixed but continuously constructed through representation and reinterpretation, particularly within visual culture. From this perspective, Tai Lue textile motifs may be understood as dynamic cultural texts rather than static historical artifacts.

However, traditional ethnic textiles increasingly face challenges in contemporary society due to globalization, industrial production, and shifting consumer preferences. Many heritage motifs risk marginalization when confined solely to traditional contexts, limiting their relevance within modern design practice (Heskett, 2002). Gwilt (2020) argues that contemporary design must negotiate between heritage preservation and innovation, emphasizing adaptive strategies rather than replication.

Recent design research highlights **reinterpretation** as a critical strategy for sustaining cultural heritage in contemporary contexts. Reinterpretation involves the extraction of essential visual and symbolic elements from traditional sources and their transformation through contemporary design principles, materials, and technologies (Dorner, 1997; Pye, 1968). This process enables cultural continuity while allowing flexibility, innovation, and expanded application within creative industries.

Despite growing academic interest in ethnic textiles, existing studies often emphasize historical documentation or craftsmanship, with limited focus on systematic design methodologies that translate traditional motifs into contemporary fabric patterns. As Cross (2006) suggests, design research should bridge theory and practice through structured processes that generate new knowledge via making and reflection.

In this context, Tai Lue textile motifs present strong potential for contemporary fabric pattern design. Their clear visual structures, symbolic coherence, and repetitive systems lend themselves to abstraction and pattern reconstruction. By applying a design-based research approach, this study seeks to reinterpret Tai Lue textile motifs into contemporary fabric patterns that maintain cultural identity while responding to modern aesthetic and functional requirements.

1.1 Research Objective

1.1.1 To analyze the visual characteristics and cultural meanings of traditional Tai Lue textile motifs as a foundation for contemporary fabric pattern design.

1.1.2 To reinterpret and transform Tai Lue textile motifs into contemporary fabric patterns through a systematic design-based research process.

1.1.3 To demonstrate the potential of contemporary fabric pattern design as a tool for cultural sustainability, enabling the preservation and adaptation of Tai Lue cultural identity within modern design contexts.

2. Literature review

2.1 Traditional Textile Motifs and Cultural Identity

Traditional textile motifs function as visual representations of cultural identity, social values, and collective memory embedded within material culture. Scholars in craft and design studies emphasize that textile patterns are not merely decorative surfaces but carriers of symbolic meaning shaped by cultural beliefs and environmental contexts (Pye, 1968; Dormer, 1997). In the context of intangible cultural heritage, textiles serve as a medium through which cultural knowledge is transmitted across generations (UNESCO, 2003).

Cultural identity, as proposed by Hall (1997), is not fixed or static but continuously constructed through processes of representation and reinterpretation. From this perspective, traditional textile motifs should be understood as dynamic cultural texts that can be recontextualized within contemporary visual culture. This theoretical framework provides a foundation for exploring how ethnic textile motifs may evolve while maintaining their cultural significance.

2.2 Reinterpretation of Ethnic Motifs in Contemporary Design

Reinterpretation has become a key strategy in heritage-based contemporary design. Unlike direct replication, reinterpretation involves the extraction of essential visual elements—such as form, rhythm, structure, and symbolism—and their transformation through contemporary design principles (Dormer, 1997). This approach allows designers to preserve cultural essence while adapting traditional motifs to modern aesthetics and functional requirements.

Heskett (2002) argues that design plays a critical role in mediating between tradition and innovation, particularly within contexts shaped by globalization and changing consumer behavior. Similarly, Cross (2006) emphasizes that design research generates knowledge through structured processes that integrate analysis, making, and reflection. These perspectives support the use of design-based research as a methodological framework for transforming traditional motifs into contemporary fabric patterns.

2.3 Contemporary Textile Pattern Design and Cultural Sustainability

Contemporary textile pattern design offers significant potential as a tool for cultural sustainability. Gwilt (2020) suggests that sustainable design extends beyond material considerations to include cultural continuity and responsible innovation. By integrating traditional motifs into contemporary design applications, designers can enhance the relevance and visibility of cultural heritage within modern lifestyles.

Several studies highlight that contemporary reinterpretation of ethnic textiles contributes to broader creative industries by expanding design applications and audience engagement

(Heskett, 2002; Gwilt, 2020). However, existing research often focuses on product outcomes rather than systematic design methodologies. This gap underscores the need for research that clearly articulates the design process linking traditional cultural sources to contemporary fabric pattern development.

2.4 Research Gap

Although previous studies have extensively documented ethnic textiles and their cultural meanings, limited attention has been given to structured design-based frameworks that reinterpret traditional motifs into contemporary fabric patterns. In particular, research addressing Tai Lue textile motifs has largely focused on historical, anthropological, or craft-based perspectives, with fewer studies exploring their transformation through contemporary design methodologies.

Therefore, this study addresses this gap by proposing a systematic design-based research approach that reinterprets Tai Lue textile motifs into contemporary fabric pattern design, bridging cultural heritage and modern design practice.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a design-based research (DBR) methodology, which integrates qualitative analysis and practical design development to generate new knowledge through the process of design. Design-based research is widely recognized in design studies as an approach that bridges theory and practice by combining analysis, experimentation, and reflection within a structured research framework (Cross, 2006). This methodology is particularly suitable for research that involves the reinterpretation of cultural heritage into contemporary design outcomes.

3.1 Research Design

The research is structured into three main phases:

- (1) cultural and visual analysis of Tai Lue textile motifs,
- (2) reinterpretation and pattern development, and
- (3) design synthesis and evaluation.

In the first phase, traditional Tai Lue textile motifs are examined to identify their visual characteristics, symbolic meanings, and compositional structures. The second phase focuses on transforming these traditional motifs into contemporary fabric patterns through systematic design processes. The final phase synthesizes the design outcomes and evaluates their effectiveness in communicating cultural identity within a contemporary context.

3.2 Data Collection and Motif Analysis

Data collection is conducted through qualitative methods, including document analysis, visual analysis, and photographic documentation of traditional Tai Lue textiles. Primary

sources include academic publications, museum collections, and existing textile samples, while secondary sources consist of scholarly literature related to ethnic textiles and cultural heritage.

The selected motifs are analyzed based on key visual elements such as geometric structure, rhythm, repetition, symmetry, and symbolic representation. This analytical process enables the identification of essential design elements that reflect Tai Lue cultural identity and can be adapted for contemporary fabric pattern design.

3.3 Design Development Process

The design development process involves three systematic steps:

1. **Motif Extraction:** Core visual elements are extracted from traditional Tai Lue textile motifs, focusing on form, line, and structural composition.
2. **Motif Reinterpretation:** The extracted elements are abstracted and transformed through contemporary design principles, including simplification, scaling, and recomposition.
3. **Pattern Reconstruction:** The reinterpreted motifs are organized into repeat patterns suitable for contemporary fabric applications, considering balance, proportion, and visual harmony.

This process emphasizes reinterpretation rather than replication, allowing traditional motifs to be repositioned within a modern design language.

3.4 Design Outcomes and Evaluation

The design outcomes consist of a series of contemporary fabric patterns inspired by Tai Lue textile motifs. These patterns are evaluated qualitatively based on their ability to convey cultural identity, visual coherence, and adaptability to contemporary textile applications. Reflective analysis is employed to assess how effectively the design process integrates cultural heritage with contemporary aesthetic values.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

This research respects cultural heritage and acknowledges the Tai Lue community as the source of traditional knowledge. The study aims to promote cultural sustainability by ensuring that reinterpretation processes maintain respect for cultural meanings and symbolic values embedded within traditional motifs.

4. Results

Motif Transformation and Contemporary Pattern Development

The results of this study indicate that traditional Tai Lue textile motifs can be effectively reinterpreted into contemporary fabric pattern designs through a structured design-based research process. The design outcomes are derived from an in-depth analysis of traditional Tai Lue textiles, focusing on geometric patterns, symbolic representations of nature, and rhythmic weaving structures commonly found in indigenous weaving practices.

As illustrated in **Figure 1**, original Tai Lue textile motifs—particularly those produced through tapestry weaving (Koh Luang), geometric patterns, and symbolic natural forms—serve as the primary sources for motif extraction. Key visual elements such as geometric outlines, rhythmic repetition, and symbolic forms were identified and isolated from traditional woven textiles. This stage emphasizes the retention of essential cultural characteristics while minimizing excessive ornamental details that may limit adaptability in contemporary design contexts.

Figure 1. Traditional Tai Lue textile motifs derived from tapestry weaving (Koh Luang), geometric patterns, and symbolic natural forms used as sources for motif extraction

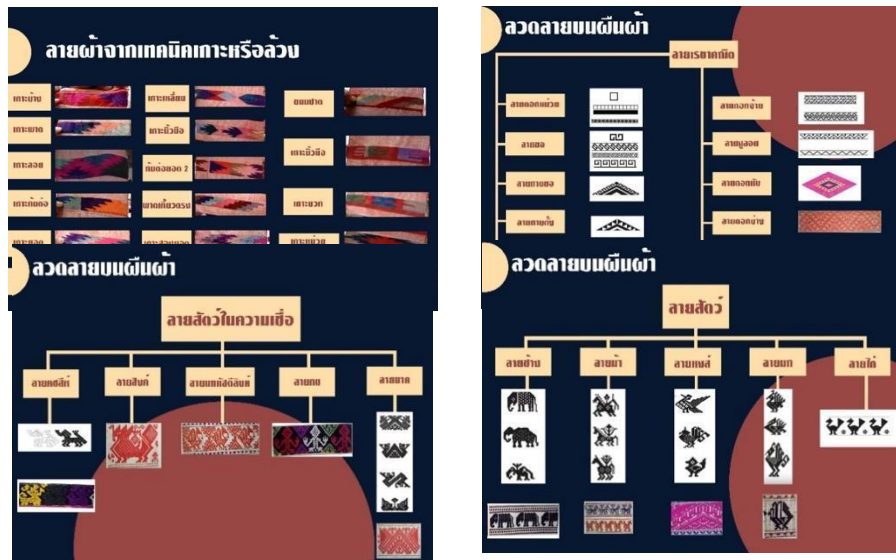


Figure 2 demonstrates the motif reinterpretation process, in which extracted elements were abstracted and transformed through simplification, material experimentation, and recomposition. Traditional weaving techniques, including Koh Luang and Tan weaving, were reinterpreted through modified color schemes and innovative material applications, resulting in modular visual units that maintain cultural identity while adopting a contemporary visual language.

Figure 2. Motif extraction and reinterpretation process showing abstraction, modification of weaving techniques, and material experimentation based on traditional Tai Lue textile practices.



The pattern reconstruction stage is presented in **Figure 3**, where reinterpreted motifs were organized into contemporary fabric pattern systems. Traditional horizontal stripe compositions, characteristic of the *Sin Ta* textile, were reconstructed into modern pattern arrangements using repetition and proportional variation to enhance visual flexibility and functional adaptability.

Figure 3. Reconstruction of reinterpreted Tai Lue motifs into contemporary pattern systems, adapting traditional horizontal stripe compositions into modern fabric patterns.



The final design outcomes, shown in **Figure 4**, consist of contemporary fashion and fabric designs developed from reinterpreted Tai Lue textile motifs. These outcomes demonstrate the successful integration of traditional cultural identity with modern design principles, highlighting the potential for application in contemporary fashion and related creative industries.

Figure 4. Final contemporary fashion designs developed from reinterpreted Tai Lue textile motifs, demonstrating the application of traditional weaving identity within modern design contexts



5. Discussion

The reinterpretation of Tai Lue textile motifs presented in this study extends beyond aesthetic transformation and should be understood as a process of cultural negotiation within contemporary design practice. As evidenced in **Figure 1**, traditional motifs operate as visual signifiers of cultural identity, reinforcing Stuart Hall's proposition that cultural meaning is continuously produced through representation rather than fixed historical reference (Hall, 1997). By repositioning Tai Lue motifs within contemporary fabric patterns, the research demonstrates how cultural identity can be rearticulated in response to changing design contexts.

The abstraction and recomposition processes illustrated in **Figure 2** reveal a critical shift from traditional craftsmanship to experimental design practice. This transition aligns with David Pye's distinction between the *workmanship of certainty* and the *workmanship of risk*, where reinterpretation introduces uncertainty as a productive condition for innovation (Pye, 1968). The deliberate modification of motifs, materials, and weaving techniques reflects an active design intervention that preserves cultural essence while enabling creative evolution, consistent with perspectives on craft transformation and contemporary making (Dormer, 1997).

Furthermore, the pattern reconstruction phase shown in **Figure 3** exemplifies Nigel Cross's concept of design as a knowledge-generating activity. The iterative process of transforming traditional structural systems into contemporary repeat patterns functions as both a design outcome and a research method, producing insights into the adaptability of ethnic motifs within modern textile systems (Cross, 2006). In this sense, pattern reconstruction operates not merely as visual development but as a form of design inquiry.

The final outcomes presented in **Figure 4** underscore the role of contemporary textile design as a platform for cultural sustainability. Rather than positioning heritage as a static reference, the designs demonstrate how traditional motifs can be embedded within contemporary visual culture, ensuring continued relevance and engagement. This supports arguments that sustainable design extends beyond material concerns to include cultural continuity and responsible innovation (Gwilt, 2020; UNESCO, 2003).

Collectively, the findings position contemporary fabric pattern design as a critical interface between cultural heritage and modern design practice (Phriwanrat, K., Suwannat, P., & Nakha, B.: 2023). The study contributes to scholarly discourse by evidencing how design-based research can translate intangible cultural heritage into contemporary forms while generating new theoretical and practical knowledge within textile and design studies (Cross, 2006; Hall, 1997).

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that traditional Tai Lue textile motifs can be effectively reinterpreted into contemporary fabric pattern designs through a structured design-based research approach. By systematically analyzing, extracting, and transforming essential visual and symbolic elements, the research confirms that cultural identity can be preserved while adapting to contemporary aesthetic and functional requirements.

The design outcomes illustrate that reinterpretation—rather than direct replication—enables traditional motifs to function as flexible design resources within modern textile applications. The transformation process from original motifs to contemporary patterns highlights the role of design as a form of cultural mediation, bridging heritage and innovation.

This research contributes to design knowledge by presenting a methodological framework for motif transformation that integrates cultural theory and design practice. The findings suggest that contemporary fabric pattern design can serve as an effective medium for cultural sustainability, allowing ethnic textile heritage to remain relevant within evolving social and

creative contexts. Future research may further expand this framework through digital pattern development or application across diverse cultural textile traditions.

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