

Pah Thai Magazine

VOL. XI, ISSUE NO. 2 - AUTUMN 2023



สมาคมผ้าไทย

THAI TEXTILE SOCIETY



A Bounty of Bags in the Mountains

Functional and Festive, Devotional and Defensive

Text and Photos by Victoria Vorreiter

Throughout millennia an astonishing multiplicity of mankind has dwelled in the large vertical swathe of terrain that makes up the Himalayan foothills. Once an untamed frontier without borders, this corner of the world where Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, and China now converge has played out historically and culturally in dramatic ways as the diaspora of more than 130 different ethnic groups and subgroups have crisscrossed the land as they migrated and settled in remote mountain aeries.

Such diversity of humanity reveals itself through fundamental and distinctive characteristics that make each group unique. Many of these attributes—ancestry, speech, sagas, songs, stories, and spirits—are intangible. Other hallmarks are material, revealed in the artisanal handwork of men and women who have absorbed their knowledge and skills from their forebears imparted over hundreds of years through an unbroken chain of oral tradition. One of the most striking features that, in an instant, gives a group its undeniable identity appears in the garments they fabricate by hand and wear in all seasons, to all events, from birth to death. Here is a visible manifestation—in all its glorious colors, styles, motifs, and adornments—of who, what, where, and when a people haes. Such a ‘uniform’ offers a community an abiding sense of belonging, while differentiating it from all others. This can be clearly seen in individual items of clothing—headwear and headdresses; bandeaux, blouses, and tunics; skirts and trousers; sashes, aprons, and leggings; and the shimmering silver jewelry that embellishes the entire ensemble.

Yet not to be forgotten is an article that is so functional, so ubiquitous, that it may be overlooked as unworthy of attention. The humble, utilitarian bag, worn by every man, woman, and child, is not only a carrier of one’s personal possessions, tools, and goods, it is also a beacon of one’s clan affiliation. In truth, as remote mountain groups assimilate into the mainstream national culture, indeed, into an ever-homogenous world, and as they adapt their clothing to local norms, the single last vestige of one’s ancestral heritage may just well be the decorative bags people sling over their shoulder.



Kim Mun Lantien Sha young woman visiting a neighboring village, Laos

Every person, young and old, owns numerous bags of different sizes and styles to serve a variety of purposes. Whether suspended over one shoulder, diagonally across the chest, around the neck, from the waist sash, from the shoulders like a backpack, or around the forehead like a tumpline, whether worn as one or in multiples, people rarely leave the village without their bag.



Khun Song Ai Ee, Eng shaman with flintlock and large work bag, Myanmar



Dzeu Leh and Wo Lee, Sha Sha Lisu shamans, Ne Pha, China



Ta'ang (Palé Palaung) young women, Myanmar



Lo Wu Lisu matriarch and grandchild, China



Lahu She Leh matriarch, Thailand

Work Bags

In their everyday lives, the highlanders of the Golden Triangle use large, sturdy work bags. As a villager travels to field, forest, market, or distant destinations, such oversized bags carry tools for cultivating crops, foraging in the jungle, cutting firewood, and hunting game; transport harvest from field to village to market to sell, trade, or purchase; as well as transfer personal belongings when visiting another village. By bearing heavy loads in bags and baskets as they climb winding paths through jungle

or field, a villager's hands are then free for other activities, as seen, for example, when Akha women wind threads on a small wooden spindle, blow tunes on a folded leaf, or swish a tree branch to herd their cattle home. To accommodate loads that are heavy or bulky, workaday bags are necessarily woven with strong, durable hemp thread into two pieces: a large rectangular panel, folded in half, serves as the body of the bag; and a long wide band, sewn along both sides of the central piece, provides the bag with its shoulder strap. These are fabricated and designed plainly, displaying only the signature colors and patterns of the ethnic group.



Mula Akha woman shepherding her cattle, Myanmar



Nadgyi Akha woman shouldering firewood with bag atop, Myanmar



Pa O woman, Thaung Tho Market, Myanmar.



Kim Mun Lantien Sha woman shouldering firewood, Laos



Pa O woman, Thaung Tho market, Myanmar



Tai Dam matriarch, Keng Tung market, Myanmar



Loimi Akha woman, Keng Tung market, Myanmar

Work Bags of Note

A sight common in the highlands of the Golden Triangle, and a surprising one for the uninitiated, occurs when encountering Karen, Akha, Lahu, and Lisu villagers, among others, with vivid scarlet lips, for they enjoy the age-old practice of chewing betel as a source of heady energy. So engrained is the practice of consuming betel nut in Southeast Asia that its preparation is something of an art as a consumer may blend together the primary ingredients—lime leaves and paste, shredded tobacco, *areca catechu* nuts, and piper betel leaves—with additional substances for flavor—bark, snuff, peppermint, cinnamon, coconut, saffron, cloves, aniseed, cardamom, dates, sugar, or menthol. Each element in this cornucopia is stored in distinctive lacquered and silver containers. So, to keep these various receptacles, nuts, and cutters together, every user possesses a cloth bag specially designated for betel paraphernalia. Such a small bag can then be stashed in a larger carrier sack while traveling on the beaten path.



Eng villagers, Keng Tung market, Myanmar



Pwo Karen betel bag with contents, Thailand

Besides fashioning bags from cloth panels woven on a loom, a number of highland groups fabricate loosely looped hemp bags using a single crochet hook. The result is a light string bag that not only is easy to carry, but also has the added feature of being able to expand or contract according to the contents. In Akha tradition, women crochet their bags, *kaya*, with natural or deep indigo hemp fibers in two distinct sizes. For transporting harvest from the field or goods from the market, they use a small carrier. However, once a young Akha woman becomes betrothed, she crochets a large, capacious *kaya*, for she will load all her worldly possessions in this sack when she leaves behind her family and village to begin a new life with her fiancé in his village.



Khmu woman crocheting open weave bag as she walks, Laos

During forays in the jungle huntsmen require specific bags to carry their hunting kit when they track quarry. Whether to store their slingshots and projectiles, crossbow arrows, small knives, gunpowder horns, or pieces of flint to ignite their flintlock rifles, hunting bags may either be plainly constructed or fashioned with ornate embellishments, such as appliquéd designs and signature adornments based on the tradition of their ethnic group. It even comes to pass that, to highlight a hunter's prowess, the hunted animal itself becomes a feature of the hunting bag. The large bag of Iu Mien marksmen is specially woven in black and white cotton threads, embroidered with Yao motifs, and trimmed with vivid red pompoms. But the signature mark that distinguishes an accomplished Iu Mien hunter appears when the skull or tusks of his prey, a barking deer or wild boar, are attached to the front panel. When the wild game is larger, such as bear or *muntjak* deer, master huntsmen, notably the Lisu and Lahu, may skin and tan the animal's hide to fabricate their hunting bag, quiver, or tanning apron. Here for all to see is tangible proof of a brave sharpshooter.



Khun Song Ai Ee, Eng shaman with flintlock and large work bag, Myanmar



Lo Wu Lisu hunter carrying his impressive black bear bag, China



Iu Mien hunter's bag with deer's skull and pompons, Northeastern Thailand



White Hmong young women, New Year Ball Toss, Pov Pob, Laos

Decorative Bags

Along with durable, serviceable work bags, men, women, and children of all ethnic groups of the mountains possess small decorative bags, ‘coin purses,’ which they don when bedecked in their finest attire for the many festivals and rites held throughout the year. Prominent among them are the sumptuously adorned ‘courting bags’ that complete the resplendent attire of young men and women as they woo a mate. For adolescents of the Golden Triangle, courtship begins in earnest after the New Year Festival and stretches to the season of planting rice. This is the special occasion when bands of young men of marriageable age, dressed to the hilt, travel to other villages in search of a girlfriend and future wife. Throughout the night, over days and weeks, boys and girls exchange amatory songs call-and-response and play instruments with a dulcet timbre that ‘speak,’ conveying sentiments of love through tones. Such a time-honored courting rite reflects a momentous life passage allowing couples to introduce themselves and their lineage, explore their compatibility, express their dreams and hopes, build intimacy, and finally commit their true love one to the other.

A handsome bag, brilliantly, skillfully embellished, adds to the first impression of a potential partner, revealing his or her attractiveness, wealth, and personal qualities. For young women who spend weeks sewing their own courting bags, this is a sure mark of their artistic and technical aptitude, something to be considered when choosing a life partner. That said, courtship bags are also extremely practical. For these carry the small, easily misplaced musical instruments—mouth harp, flutes, free reeds, and small lutes—young couples play to ‘court and spark.’



Blue Hmong musician playing courting songs on a Raj Lev Les, Thailand

Fabricating Decorative Bags

For festive occasions, women and adolescent girls spend an inordinate amount of time and lavish infinite care to create attire not only for themselves but also for their husbands, sons, and small children so the entire family can attend a celebration in full glory. It is only when one considers the scope of their labor—from planting, cultivating, and harvesting the crop, to weaving, dyeing, tailoring, and embroidering every garment—that women’s prodigious efforts can be truly appreciated.



Akha weaver weaving hemp on a foot loom, Laos



Ta'ang (Palé Palaung) weaver weaving cotton on a back-strap loom, Myanmar

Yet when considering all the garments that women fabricate, perhaps it is the diminutive coin purse that best displays a woman’s expertise, for, due to its petite size, her technical and artistic skills are put to the test. Indeed, the wonder is that women are able to sew such exquisite decorative bags with the finest, tiniest of stitches on the smallest squares of cloth, just as 14th century medieval illuminators painted jewel-like miniatures on the smallest pieces of palm, wood, vellum, copper, ivory, or paper. For the highland groups of the Golden Triangle, courting bags are truly the showstopper of every ensemble. Like other garments, coin purses are emblazoned with the age-old motifs, colors, and stylistic

characteristics that connect the wearer to his or her ancestors, community, and diaspora at large. It follows that, just as there is extraordinary diversity in the ethnic groups inhabiting this corner of the world, so too there is glorious variety in their signature dress style, thereby making each tradition of ornamental purses refreshingly unique. Let us count some of the ways.

Karen women, renowned master weavers of the back-strap loom, fashion striking courting bags in bright red hemp threads that are enhanced with vivid multi-colored pinstripes—a style that can also be found in their blankets and ‘singing shawls,’ notably adorned with long tassels of beads, bells, and shimmering beetle wings. Karen bags transform from simple everyday bags to radiant festival bags when women further adorn them with brilliantly colored pompoms, long fringe, and tufted panels, a special technique that gives textiles a luxurious look and a soft, chenille-like touch, one which is rarely practiced in the region.

What makes Lisu *lae sha mya* courting bags so alluring is the layers of lavish trim that covers their white panels woven with red and black bands: intricate latticework of multi-colored glass beads as delicate as lace; red and blue ribbons brightly, boldly embroidered, which hang from the bag’s strap; and a kaleidoscope of long brilliantly colored silk tassels. To demonstrate beauty and wealth, to attract good fortune, and, most ostensibly, to add sparkle, silver orbbed studs and clinking club-shaped pendants adorn the top edge of the Lisu courting bag. All elements of Lisu dress are on magnificent display when musicians and villagers kick up their heels as they dance around the New Year tree. Their festival bag is the ‘jewel in the crown.’



Muang Jiem, Iu Mien girl sewing her first festival bag, Thailand



Iu Mien women wearing exquisitely embroidered attire, Thailand



Iu Mien woman's decorative festival bag, Thailand



Lahu Nyi courting bag, Thailand



Lahu She Leh courting bag, Thailand



Pwo Karen man's festival bag, mid-20th century, Northwest Thailand



Lo Shi Lisu courting bag, *Lae Sha Mya*, circa 1980, Mae Hong Son, Thailand



A Karen courting bag

The Hmong wear decorative coin purses in pairs, slung over each shoulder and crossing the chest. To these, many women and girls add a third square or triangular purse that hangs from the neck like a beautiful cloth necklace. While Hmong women are considered consummate artisans with needle and thread, White Hmong (*Hmoob Dawb*) women are particularly celebrated for practicing *paj ntaub*, “flower cloth,” a technique combining intricate embroidery with reverse appliqué. By layering two vividly colored cloths, women cut a design on the upper fabric to expose the cloth below, sewing the pieces together with minute stitches in a third color. Of the numerous *paj ntaub* motifs the most common is based on a swirl design, *qwj*, which in various configurations forms distinct symbols—a snail, rooster combs, flowers, and, most frequently, an elephant’s foot. To this masterpiece, every edge of a bag is then lined with overlapping coins that jingle and jangle on beaded threads.



White Hmong child's coin purse worn around the neck, Northeast Thailand or Laos



Blue Hmong woman wearing three coin purses, New Year festival, Thailand



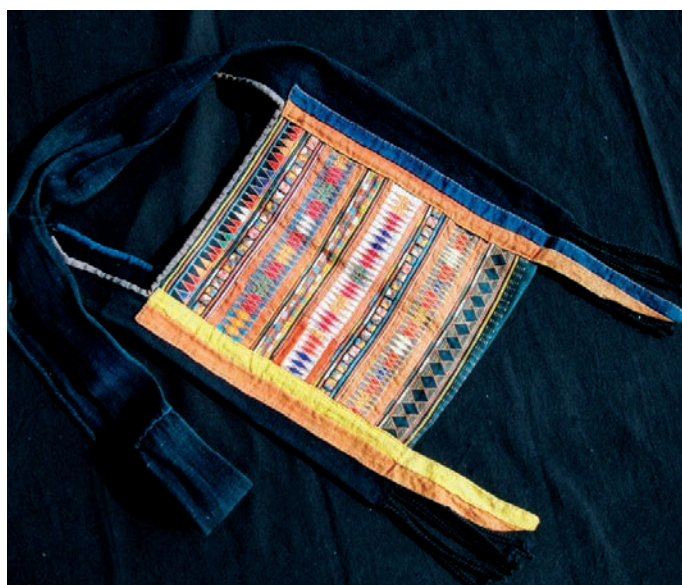
White Hmong girl wearing two coin purses, New Year festival, Laos

In contrast to all other ethnic groups, the magnificent shoulder bags that the Akha carry are not reserved for festivals, ceremonies, or special occasions alone. Indeed, except for tending flock or field, whenever Akha, men, women, and children leave their village—whether shopping at the lowland market, trekking through the jungle, or visiting family and friends in neighboring communities—they are beautifully ‘turned out.’ Just so their bags, which precisely mirror the patterns and techniques found on the back of their jackets, and which clearly identify the wearer as a member of one of the thirty Akha subgroups. Made of homespun cotton, dyed deep indigo, Akha women appliqué multi-colored geometric motifs—diamonds, triangles, and squares—with tiny contrasting colored stitches, forming multiple parallel rows on the bag’s front panel. They festoon their elegant handiwork alternately with bright pompoms; silver piasters, Indian rupees, and square Burmese pyas; silver orbbed studs; white glass buttons; gibbon fur; and long white beaded tassels.

While the styles of decorative bags carried by the various groups of the Golden Triangle are spectacularly distinctive, they all have one trait in common. All coin purses, courting bags, and festival bags have dynamic elements that move. Whether it is long colorful silk, cotton, or beaded tassels, or whether it is overlapping coins, shimmering silver pendants, or bobbing pompoms, these bags reveal a liveliness that creates a vibrant visual allure and a silvery sonic tinkling with every move the wearer makes. During festival dancing and intimate courtship rites, decorative bags have the ability to beguile.



Loimi Akha man's bag, circa 1940, Northern Thailand



Loimi Akha man's bag, early 20th century, Northern Thailand



Lahu Nyi musician bedecked in his festival attire, Thailand



Mula Akha man, Myanmar



Mula Akha woman, Myanmar

Decorative Bags of Note

There are key transitions in life that call for the initiated to don distinctive attire—this includes their bags. Fine examples of these can be found in the traditions of various Yao subgroups, the Iu Mien and Kim Mun Lantien Sha. Instilled with the beliefs of their ancestors, the Yao perform lengthy, complex ceremonies that are visually dynamic and spiritually profound to usher every person through the pivotal passages in the wheel of life—safe birth, childhood, courtship, wedding, ancestor memorials, healing, and funerals. Included in this number are religious rites specifically designed to lead youth into adulthood—inducting adolescent girls and boys into Yao society and guaranteeing their place, at death, in the ancestor world.

Of the various Yao subgroups, the Kim Mun Lantien Sha specially practice initiation rites for girls when they reach sexual maturity, formally leading them into womanhood. They have prepared for this momentous event by plucking their eyebrows and by fabricating their own garments: weaving, dyeing, and tailoring their indigo tunic and trousers; weaving a white hemp stole on which they have embroidered ritual precepts in archaic Chinese characters; and weaving a wide ceremonial bag in white and mauve hemp pinstripes, which they embellish with miniature colored pompoms along the bottom edge. This is also the significant moment when a girl receives and assembles the components of her glimmering ‘Celestial Crown’—a silver disc with a ten-point star, scores of small hairpins that form a larger circlet; and supplemental braids of black hair. Adding her silver ‘halo’ to her initiation attire indicates a young Kim Mun Lantien Sha woman is now available to court and marry.

Notable ritual bags also appear during Yao wedding ceremonies. After an Iu Mien bride arrives at the family home of her fiancé, a high priest, *ching sui*, oversees nuptial rites at the Big Door, *top keng*, the main portal for divine beings and benevolent spirits to reach the family altar. While intoning verses he weighs the dowry bag, a simple, spacious bag woven in the preferred Yao colors of red and green, which holds silver bars and coins for the bride’s family. When the contents have been confirmed, the high priest continues his chanting to summon spirits, ancestors, and souls to the celebration while shaking his ritual rattle and tossing rice of abundance and protection on the bridal bag. In Iu Mien tradition the bride celebrates this momentous ceremony in the sumptuous attire she has sewn for her trousseau, notably trousers, sash, and headdress sewn with



Kim Mun Lantien Sha bride, Laos



Iu Mien, High Priest, *Ching Sui* weighing and blessing the bride's dowry bag, three-day wedding ceremony, Thailand

colorful silk threads in bold, geometrical designs, for which Iu Mien women are acclaimed; a long indigo robe, edged with a majestic red wool ruff; a white stole with embroidered Yao motifs; and a shawl (which later transforms into a baby carrier) embroidered and appliquéd in colorful designs and edged in burgundy silk cord with silver-wound coils. And from her sash hangs the smallest of garments, a petite coin purse, exquisitely embroidered in delicate stitches.

While the numerous Yao subgroups share fundamental spiritual tenets and cultural practices, slight contrasts have evolved based on their historical experiences and environment. This can especially be seen in the motifs and color palette of their textiles. Indeed, one can determine which group produced a specific textile based on a familiarity with these differences. Thus, in

comparing an Iu Mien woman's nuptial purse with that of a Kim Mun Lantien Sha bride, it is easy to spot similarities in their small size, U-shaped body, and adornments of red cord strap and long tassels, while details of the embroidered ornamentation show the contrast between Iu Mien abstract designs and the Lantien Chinese calligraphy. One more distinctive bag makes an appearance during Iu Mien weddings when the new bride, accompanied by her two attendants, makes the rounds to welcome her guests with tea and cigarettes. As one attendant pours the tea into small ceramic cups, the bride extends the tray to friends and family. Set on the tray beside the cups rests a bowl where guests place gifts of money for the newlyweds as they start their life together. The duty of the second attendant is to remove the bills when they fill the bowl and place them in the impressive, oversized bag, flamboyantly decorated with a constellation of pompoms (See Cover Page Photo).



Iu Mien woman's wedding purse, mid-20th century, Chang Kham, Thailand



Kim Mun Lantien Sha wedding purse, early 20th century, Northern Laos

Bags for Ritual Paraphernalia

Cloth bags also find their way in a spiritual setting as a means to keep safe ritual articles and precious artifacts. In Hmong tradition, for example, every shaman, *txiv neeb*, maintains a sacred altar in the home, where he or she regularly conducts prescribed annual ceremonies to honor ancestors and household spirits, as well as healing rites to cure family and community members. Symbolically, the altar represents the home of a shaman's helper spirits. Numerous sacred objects and ritual tools, each serving a special purpose, are set on the altar top, considered the ground floor of the spirit house, while other paraphernalia are hung on the altar posts. Among these items is a large cloth bag in which a shaman stores such articles as paper spirit money notes and streamers, the currency of the spirit world.

Yao spiritual canon is unique in the Golden Triangle as it intermingles the 13th century Taoist practices, which the Yao adopted from the Han Chinese during close association in the course of their migrations, with their first beliefs in animism. This means that along with trancing shamans, Yao Taoism includes a hierarchy of priests who oversee all Taoist ceremonies. In order to perform properly, every Kim Mun Lantien Sha high priest, *iman*, possesses a collection of ritual tools, one among them a slender wooden 'tablet,' carved with a delicate arch, that serves as the 'path' that benevolent deities and spirits follow to attend rites in the home. Encircled with woven ribbons, intricately embroidered with archaic Chinese maxims, and colorful 'pendants' with tassels, this sacred tool is so precious and powerful, when not in use it is protected in a special cloth bag, intricately embroidered to match its importance.



Kim Mun Lantien Sha priest's cepter, ritual pendants, and cloth bag, Laos

Bags for Healing

Because the isolated highland peoples have necessarily depended on their own resiliency and problem-solving skills to survive centuries of challenging conditions, they have developed extensive knowledge of the healing power of plants to care for their small communities. Thousands of species of plants—their roots, bark, leaves, seeds, fruits, and flowers—have gone through a tried-and-true process so that in times of illness, specialists who have been trained in herbal medicine are able to gather domestic plants cultivated in the garden and wild herbs growing in the forest to prepare special tonics, infusions, poultices, tinctures, and amulets to alleviate a variety of conditions. Instilled with such a time-worn tradition, villagers who descend the mountain to buy, barter, and trade at the local lowland market, invariably find vendors selling ingredients for medicinal elixirs, from animal parts, insects, honeycombs, to an assortment of herbs, which are stored in cloth bags that can easily be tied to preserve them until the next market day.



White Hmong wife and husband shamans and medicinal healers standing at their altars, Thailand



Medicinal and culinary herbs in cloth bags, Lo Wu Lisu market day, China

The Hmong regularly wear small cloth pouches filled with medicinal herbs, *hnab tshuaj*, as personal talismans against evil. Whether worn around the neck, tucked into a pocket, or sewn onto their clothing, such as a skirt waistband or jacket collar, such a concoction of domestic and wild leaves, seeds, and flowers remains with them wherever they go. As children are particularly vulnerable to harm, Hmong newborns and young girls wear protective herbs in the “beak” of their New Year rooster caps. Similarly, Iu Mien girls and boys sport colorfully embroidered caps encircled with bright red pompoms, which are topped by numerous long tassels hanging from the crown that often includes a lucky coin, cowrie shell, or small bag of curative herbs.

For personal protection in daily life and during outbreaks of disease, many Akha rely on the magical healing properties of the relics of ancestors who once triumphed over adversity. According to age-old wisdom, the Akha hang from their neck a small pouch, *ja gha paetang*, which holds a piece of clothing, locks of hair, or teeth of a venerated ancestor, *cho sho*, who once suffered grave illness but who survived thanks to inner strength and spiritual favor. These relics are believed to have such supernatural powers that wearing them provides an impenetrable energy shield that safeguards the wearer from serious misfortune, injury, or illness.



Blue Hmong girl with rooster cap with herbs, Thailand



White Hmong girl with rooster cap with herbs, Laos



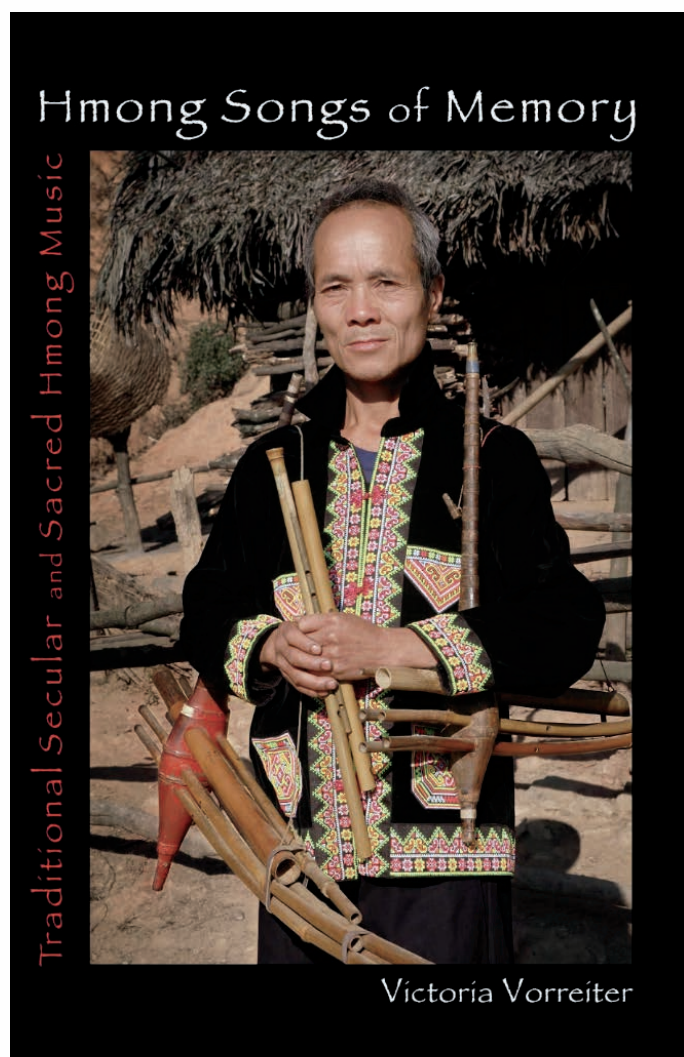
White Hmong boy with pouch of protective herbs, Laos

Pack your Bag

The many, diverse highland communities of Southeast Asia teem with a profusion of bags that serve a spectrum of purposes—to carry heavy loads from fields and markets; to serve as a beacon of beauty, wealth, and artistry at festival gatherings; to complement special attire worn during rites marking pivotal life passages; to safeguard magical ritual tools of spirit intermediaries; to carry elixirs close to the heart as a protective force field; and simply to keep small courting instruments at hand should the occasion of a love match arise. In all their magnificent forms, bags also act as a cultural marker that unmistakably reveals a people's identity, customs, and tenets—even when seen from afar, high on a mountain or deep in a jungle.



Young Eng men returning home from the market, Keng Tung, Myanmar



To learn more, visit: www.TribalMusicAsia.com - Facebook: Victoria Vorreiter - Instagram: vvorreiter

