

Exploring Cultural Diversity: A comparative study of shell belt craftsmanship in the Hani/Akha Group

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Abstract

This article explores the traditional shell belts of the Hani people, focusing on the styles of Loi Mi Akha and U Lo Akha in Southeast Asia and Bi Yue in China. It examines their history, techniques, design, materials, and cultural significance, identifying similarities and differences. The study finds that while the belts share materials and artistic value, they differ significantly in other aspects. These insights underscore the rich diversity of Hani handicrafts and their adaptation to different environments, contributing to the sustainability of ethnic minority crafts.

Keywords: Hani ethnic group; Akha; Shell belts; Culture diversity

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1.0 Introduction

Culture exists in various forms, and the cultures of different countries, nationalities, and times have unique forms, connotations, and characteristics. The Hani or Akha people discussed in this paper represent a diverse existence. Akha and Hani are two very closely related groups. According to incomplete statistics, more than 2 million people are distributed in Yunnan Province of China, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Thailand (Chen, 2014). Their distribution areas are adjacent, and their cultural customs are similar.

In China, the Hani ethnic group has a population of more than 1 million, most of whom are distributed in the area between the Yuan River and the lower reaches of the Lancang River in Yunnan Province, with the most concentrated distribution in Yuanjiang, Mojiang, Honghe, and Yuanyang counties. Many of these Hani branches are distributed in this area but are generally referred to as the Hani. From Xishuangbanna along the border area to several Southeast Asian countries, many of these groups are regarded by Chinese scholars as Hani or groups closely related to the Hani, also known as Akha people.

Judging from the close relationship between the Akha people and the Hani people, they were differentiated from the Hani people and gradually migrated to these areas where their descendants are distributed today (He, 2012). After environmental changes and the interaction of different societies, it is more appropriate to call them homologous ethnic groups. The Loi Mi Akha, U Lo Akha, and Bi Yue

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Hani discussed in this paper are all branches of this homologous ethnic group. Loi Mi and U Lo are two branches in the Southeast Asian region, found in Thailand and Myanmar. Scholars have many research materials on the Akha people in Thailand; this paper only focuses on this group in Thailand. Most of the Bi Yue live in China, and this paper focuses on the Bi Yue group living within Mojiang Hani Autonomous County, Yunnan Province, China. According to Yang (2011), one of the three migration paths of the Hani/Akha people involved passing through Mojiang Hani Autonomous County to Xishuangbanna, then moving from the border area of Xishuangbanna into Myanmar and subsequently to Laos, Thailand, and other places. Although Thailand was the last place of migration, the history of the Akha people in Thailand has already exceeded 100 years. Despite their complex migrations, they share a common origin and early history as homologous peoples. This is reflected in their culture and living habits. For example, in the use of decorations, they all use a type of seashell called cowrie to adorn their bodies. Yang (1993) pointed out that many ethnic groups worldwide use seashells as a medium for commodity exchange, especially in many countries in Africa and Asia, where shell currency is more common. According to historical records, the Hani people used seashells as currency during the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. After maintaining their primary livelihood, the Hani people would save and bury the rest underground as a legacy for future generations. Therefore, the Hani people regard shells as treasures and imbue them with the meaning of symbolising wealth and good wishes. The current discovery of the shell belts used by these three branches is not without basis. The Hani/Akha live in different geographical environments and historical backgrounds, leading to diverse developments in their decorative clothing arts. Although they all use shell belts, they exhibit different styles. The study aims to identify similarities and differences in the styles, materials, techniques, and cultural meanings of shell belts used by the Loi Mi Akha, U Lo Akha (Thailand and Myanmar), and Bi Yue Hani (China). The study also aims to understand the role of these belts in preserving the cultural heritage and promoting the sustainability of ethnic minority crafts. This study will further explore the cultural commonalities and diversity of the Hani/Akha.

2.0 Literature Review

Seashells are a significant component of Hani/Akha ornaments because these shellfish were historically used as currency. Although they no longer hold monetary value, shells remain a part of clothing decoration and symbolise wealth, as Bai (2009) detailed. Despite their significance, existing literature often merely mentions shell belts of the Hani/Akha as traditional accessories, with limited focus on their design or craftsmanship (Feng, 2014; Wang, 2011). To bridge this gap, future research should delve into these shell belts' production process, materials, technical details, and skill inheritance. A thorough understanding of these aspects will enhance our comprehension of the cultural traits and technical prowess of the Hani and Akha, assessing the viability and evolution of these crafts in contemporary society. While comparative studies between the Hani and Akha have explored linguistics and anthropology, noting differences in language evolution, cultural exchange, and social structures (Yu, 2009; Sprenger, 2015), the specific analysis of their costumes has been sparse. Most research tends to address broader cultural representations, neglecting detailed exploration of distinct cultural practices like shell belts. It is essential to conduct focused comparative studies on specific subpopulations, such as the Bi Yue subgroup in China and the Loi Mi and U Lo subgroups in Southeast Asia. Such detailed comparisons will more accurately capture these groups' unique cultural expressions and craftsmanship in clothing, thereby contributing to the broader understanding and preservation of diverse traditional cultures. This approach not only enriches ethnic studies but also significantly aids in promoting cultural heritage protection and sustainable development.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a comparative case study approach to examine the shell belt craftsmanship of three subgroups of the Hani/Akha people: the Loi Mi Akha and U Lo Akha in Thailand and Myanmar, and the Bi Yue Hani in China. These subgroups were selected due to their shared ethnic roots but varied geographical, historical, and cultural environments. The primary focus of this comparative analysis is on the craftsmanship, materials, and cultural significance of the shell belts. The data for this research was collected through a combination of literature review, fieldwork, and interviews with local artisans and community members. A comparative analysis was conducted to identify both similarities and differences in the shell belt styles of the three subgroups. The comparison focused on several key aspects: Materials, Techniques, and Cultural Significance. The analysis involved categorizing these elements for each subgroup and then systematically comparing them. The results were analyzed qualitatively to identify patterns and variations in the craftsmanship and their cultural implications. This approach highlights how environmental factors, and cross-cultural interactions have shaped the shell belt traditions of the Hani/Akha people.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

3.2.1 Thailand: Loi Mi Akha & U Lo Akha

Loi Mi and U Lo are two subgroups of the Akha who live in northern Thailand and Myanmar, and they are originally from Yunnan Province, China. Every nation has a migration history, which tends to be more frequent in earlier periods. The Akha's journey began in the Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture of Yunnan Province, China, moving through the border areas into Myanmar and Laos. From the late 19th century to the early 20th century, some Akha from Myanmar migrated into northern Thailand's mountains and Laos's border areas (Yang, 2011). The Akha first settled in Thailand before the 19th century and continued migrating until the early 1980s. The

first Akha village in Thailand was established in the Phayaphai region near the Burmese border, and by the end of World War II, the Akha population in Thailand was no more than 2,500. Their population tripled over the next four decades (Lewis & Lewis, 1984). Today, approximately 80,000 Akha live in Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai, Thailand (Forbes & Henley, 2012). The Akha have thrived and diversified into different Southeast Asian subgroups, maintaining consistency in most cultural customs but displaying notable differences, especially in costumes. U Lo Akha, who have settled in Thailand for many years, are identified by their pointed headwear, while Loi Mi, named after a mountain in Burma, typically wear flat headwear with a silver plate on the back (Lewis & Lewis, 1984). Their attire includes headdresses, corsets, jacket tops, belts, skirts, and gaiters. Their tops, straight in the front without buttons, often require belts for closure (Figure 2). However, they did not ignore the decorative belt because of its simple practicality; the shell belt is good evidence.



Fig. 1: U Lo & Loi Mi women



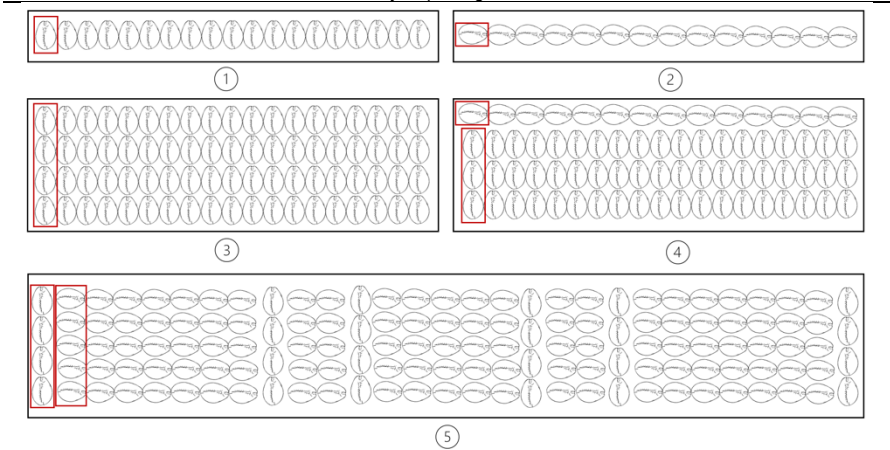
Fig. 2: Costumes of U Lo & Loi Mi
(Source: Peoples of the golden triangle: Six tribes in Thailand)



Fig. 3: Shell belts of U Lo & Loi Mi

Loi Mi and U Lo share similar techniques in crafting shell belts, typically sewing seashells onto fabric belts, often alongside Job's tears and silver pieces, with strings at both ends for easy tying. The belts vary in width and length, with unmarried young women typically featuring more shells, perhaps symbolizing or signalling a change in status as per Akha tradition. The seashell they used was cowrie (Yang, 2021), which was used as shell currency. Many materials have confirmed the use of shell currency in Hani nationality. Even with the emergence of new currency circulation, the seashell was regarded as a symbol of wealth, so they could not give it up. Through literature and video data, it is observed that the layout of seashells on the belt is modular in the form of paving, with single or multiple seashells as the basic unit. This modular design allows the same seashells to be repeated on the entire shell belt, creating an orderly and rhythmical visual effect. It can be arranged in various ways, either vertically or horizontally, and this variation allows the design to be flexible and adaptable to different widths and lengths of belts. The longitudinal arrangement emphasizes the fluency and depth of the belt. In contrast, the lateral arrangement highlights its width and stability, and the two-way combination enhances the movement, making the belt look more lively and visually attractive. While the basic units may be the same, a rich visual variation can be created by adjusting the arrangement of the angles or number combinations between seashells. This design is beautiful and reflects the craftsman's delicate control of detail. The natural form and texture of the seashell itself add a unique aesthetic to the belt. The light reflected by the shell's natural curves and gloss adds layers and depth to the decoration, making the entire belt look more artistic and dynamic (Figure 4). As can be seen from Figure 2, there are rich decorative forms of seashells on the belt, which can be summarised into five paving forms: single-paving longitudinal, single-paving horizontal, multi-paving in the same direction, multi-paving bidirectional ribbon, and multi-paving bidirectional block (Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of paving forms on shell belts



- | | | |
|---|----------------------------|---|
| 1 | single-paving longitudinal | Moving to the right with a single seashell longitudinally |
| 2 | single-paving horizontal | Moving to the right with a single seashell horizontally |

3	multi-paving in the same direction	Take all the longitudinal seashells in the first column and shift to the right.
4	multi-paving bidirectional ribbon	Taking the horizontal and longitudinal seashell of the first column as the unit to move to the right
5	multi-paving bidirectional block	Taking the longitudinal and horizontal seashells as the units and moving to the right according to the law

(Source: Table created by author)

3.2.2 China: Bi Yue Hani

The Hani people live in Yunnan Province, and Bi yue is a branch of the Hani people in China. It is mainly distributed in Mojiang, Zhenshen, and Jiangcheng areas, and a few are distributed in Luchun (Bai, 2005). The shell belt found in the Bi Yue branch in this paper is from Mojiang Hani Autonomous County, Yunnan Province, founded on November 28, 1979; it is the only Hani autonomous county in China and the most concentrated Hani population area. Mojiang is known as the "home of the Hani people" because the county has nine different branches of the Hani people, including Ka Duo, Bi Yue, Ka Bie, Bai Hong, Mi La, Xi Moluo, Hao Ni, A Mu, and Qie Di (Li, 2016). The nine branches are distributed in different villages in Mojiang County and often mix, with distinct differences in language and customs, much like the Loi Mi Akha and U Lo Akha in Thailand. According to the distribution area and the migration history of the Hani people, the researchers found that this migration route was the route that migrated south to Xishuangbanna and then to Southeast Asia, which seems to be related to the shell belt of the Loi Mi and U Lo subgroups. Bi Yue's costumes have a big difference in shape and form from the two subgroups mentioned above: the long dress type (Figure 4), including headwear, blouse, belt, waist, and long dress. Researchers have been to Mojiang County for several field investigations, during which they accidentally found in the Bi Yue community, in the Bi Yue branch, the use of cotton thread by string, braid, and winding of the shell woven into an adjustable and detachable belt (Liu, 2024). However, shell belts are no longer standard, partly because of the complexity of their manufacture and the decreasing number of people who know how to make them, and partly because the seashells used to make shell belts are not easy to obtain, and like Loi Mi and U Lo in Southeast Asia, they are made of shell currency with a cut top. Although many plastic shells have appeared on the market, Bi Yue people think plastic shells are "fake". Through an interview with Li Baitai, a Biyue native, I learned that "real" shells have "medicinal value" in the local area. Take a shell off the belt and soak it in vinegar until the shell is dissolved. Then, take it to treat kidney calculi. Researchers have not studied whether it is effective, but Biyue people are convinced of it, giving the shell belt more local cultural significance. Wise weavers skillfully weave the scattered shell currency they find into a belt, tie them around their waist, and dress themselves up with their unique aesthetic craftsmanship.

Compared to Loi Mi and U Lo's paved shell belts, Bi Yue's is a braided shell belt (Figure 5). Usually, they will use about 60-80 seashells to make a belt. First, use a long cotton thread 'a' to thread all the seashells and fold them in half from the middle to ensure that the number of seashells on both sides is the same, and the pointed ends are opposite. Fix the long cotton thread folded in half on a stick made of a tree trunk to form tension. Then, fix one end of the long cotton thread 'b' on the stick and all the seashells together by winding. After fixing all the seashells, braid the long cotton threads 'a' and 'b' together. Use long cotton thread 'c' to fix the edge of the waistband on the other side of the seashell according to the method of overlocking in embroidery. This braiding method makes the shell belt practical and detachable, and the number of seashells can be increased or decreased according to the needs (Figure 6).



Fig. 4: Bi Yue women



Fig. 5: Shell Belt from Bi Yue

(Source: Figure created by author)

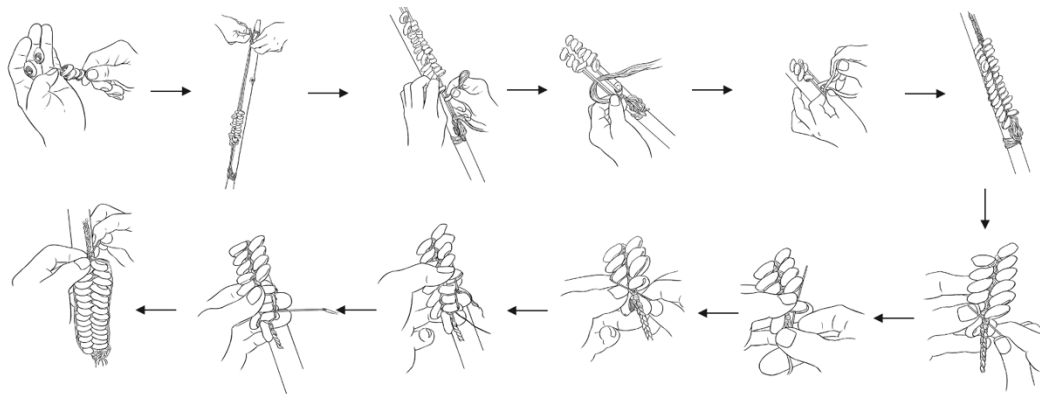


Fig. 6: Bi Yue Shell Belt Hand-drawn process
(Source: Figure created by author)

Biyue's shell belt is made of stringing shells one by one with a cotton thread and reinforcing them with braiding technology. This belt has high structural strength. This production method not only ensures the stability of the shell but also gives the belt itself a richer texture and layering. The production of this belt requires exquisite handicraft skills, including precise shell selection, threading, and a complex braiding process. This reflects the craftsman's high control ability over material processing and detail creation. The braided cotton thread combines with the natural shells to create a unique visual and tactile experience. The shell's natural sheen contrasts with the cotton thread's soft texture, adding to the aesthetic and tactile layers of the whole piece.

3.3 Limitation

The limitations of this study include the focus on only three Hani/Akha subgroups, excluding others; limited historical data on shell belts, with some traditional techniques potentially lost over time; restricted access to artisans, limiting the understanding of regional differences; and the inherent subjectivity in the comparative analysis, which may involve cultural bias. Additionally, the influence of modern technology and materials on traditional craftsmanship was not deeply explored.

4.0 Discussion

4.1 History and Culture

Similarities: Bi Yue in Mojiang County, China, and Loi Mi and U Lo in northern Thailand, despite being spread across different geographical areas, can be traced back to the same roots. This common heritage is reflected in shared origins, early historical narratives, and enduring cultural and customary practices that transcend geographical isolation. Initially, these groups belonged to the broader Hani ethnic group, and over the centuries, they continued to migrate to various regions in China's Yunnan Province and Southeast Asia. Migration, often driven by the need for arable land and political stability, led to different subgroups settling in different regions, from Yunnan Province in China to the mountainous areas of northern Thailand. Despite being physically separated, these groups retain a core set of cultural beliefs and customs, highlighting their common origins. In particular, the textile arts, especially natural dyes and traditional weaving techniques, are critical cultural products of Bi Yue, Loi Mi, and U Lo. These textiles are often decorated with culturally significant motifs and symbols for everyday wear and ceremonial clothing, representing their identity and heritage. Their ability to maintain and adapt their cultural practices despite the separation of national borders underscores their strong cultural identity. These cultural similarities highlight the deep connections that bind these communities across time and space, providing them with a shared sense of identity and belonging.

Differences: Despite the Akha people having more than 100 years of history in Thailand, they show traces of Thai culture in all aspects of life, creating unique characteristics of Thai-Akha culture. These differences are distinct from the local Chinese Hani culture, which is deeply influenced by Chinese Han culture. Specifically, differences are evident in living habits, ideology, and language use (Eduo, 2011). Another notable difference observed during this study is their views on twins. Mojiang County in China is the most concentrated area of Hani people and has the highest birth rate of twins globally. This cultural phenomenon is a source of pride for the local Hani people, and even the name of the knot made by finger knitting technology on the Biyue headdress is called the "twin knot." However, in Thai Akha culture, the existence of twins is considered ominous. People around them often criticise women who give birth to twins. This represents a significant cultural difference between the two groups.

4.2 Materials and Technology

Similarities: In terms of materials, the shells used by these groups were seashells that had previously been used as money. These shells, often chosen for their durability, natural beauty, and cultural significance, serve as the main decorative element of the belts, symbolising fertility or wealth.

Differences: The differences in shell belts used by Bi Yue in Mojiang County, China, and Loi Mi and U Lo in northern Thailand are mainly reflected in style, decoration technology, and craftsmanship. In terms of decorative techniques, the shell belts of Loi Mi and U Lo may incorporate other decorative elements, such as coix seed or silver flakes, influenced by the broader Southeast Asian decorative

arts. In contrast, Bi Yue may favour a more direct and rustic style that emphasises the natural beauty of the shells without additional decoration. In terms of process technology, the distinct technological processes have created two completely different shell belt styles. The paved shell belt by Loi Mi and U Lo highlights modular paving forms, flexible arrangements, natural aesthetics, and dynamic beauty. Bi Yue's braided shell belt emphasises stable structural strength, a detachable design, hand-braided elements, and the layered beauty of material texture.

4.3 Cultural Inheritance and Modern Application

The shell belts of all branches are cultural heritage worthy of protection, recording clues of their shared origins and embodying their wisdom and aesthetics. Despite differences in style, they all have significant modern application value. The paved shell belt can leverage its flexibility in decorative form. Combined with the pattern design on Hani/Akha clothing, the arrangement and composition of different shell units can be adjusted, improving the traditional linear composition and enhancing decorative potential. This decoration can be used not only on belts but also on any item that can be decorated. With its more stable structure, the braided shell belt can highlight its practical function and break down functional barriers, allowing it to be used in waist designs, neck ornaments, wrist ornaments, and more. Expanding the finger-braided process in the original shell belt technique can realise more design possibilities and applications in various aspects of life.

5.0 Conclusion

A comparison of shell belts from Loi Mi, U Lo in Thailand, and Bi Yue in China reveals a fascinating intersection of shared heritage and unique cultural evolution within these branches of homologous ethnic groups. This shared heritage establishes a baseline of cultural and historical elements that persist in their craft traditions. They consistently use shells and belts to symbolise cultural identity and decoration, emphasising the shared cultural value of preserving traditional forms and materials. The belts' craftsmanship characteristics and aesthetic expressions are the most significant differences. A comparative analysis of Loi Mi, U Lo, and Bi Yue's shell belts highlights the richness of cultural diversity among Hani descendants and demonstrates the dynamic nature of traditional craftsmanship. These belts are not static artefacts but vivid representations of their people's historical, environmental, and artistic evolution. This study underscores the importance of preserving culture in an increasingly globalised world and the role of traditional handicrafts in maintaining and disseminating cultural identity. This not only enriches existing ethnic research but is also significant for promoting the protection and inheritance of cultural heritage.

In conclusion, this study provides a valuable contribution by offering a comparative analysis of shell belt craftsmanship among different Hani/Akha subgroups, shedding light on their cultural diversity and craftsmanship evolution. In retrospective, the comparative methodology used in this research proves to be effective for exploring cultural and craftsmanship differences across ethnic groups, and similar methodologies should be applied in future studies of other traditional handicrafts. However, future research could improve by expanding the geographical scope to include more subgroups, and by incorporating modern influences on traditional crafts. Additionally, further studies could focus on the preservation of endangered techniques and explore the integration of contemporary materials and methods in the evolution of ethnic minority handicrafts.

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