

Dragonheads and Needlework: Textile Work and Cultural Heritage in a Guizhou County

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Abstract

This paper explores two different systems through which value is assigned to embroidered handicraft textiles produced by Miao women in Guizhou's Taijiang County. The first system is the incipient marketization of the rural economy in Guizhou. The second involves the construction of Miao ethnicity and identity in Guizhou. The paper thus offers an analysis of embroidery within two different regimes of value. On the one hand, it examines an emerging class differentiation within a rural "peasant" society that has resulted from the commercialization of embroidery production. From this perspective, embroidery is valuable as an agent of commercial development, but its value is assigned exclusively by those few who are in a position to garner benefits by organizing its production as a petty-commodity. For its producers, embroidery is chronically *undervalued* in relation to its labor demands. Value thus becomes an agent of exploitation. On the other hand, the paper examines the elite narratives of Miao culture and identity in relation to state development and modernization strategies. From this perspective, value is assigned not in terms of production relations but in terms of cultural heritage. The value of embroidery, here, comes from what it *represents* in broader narratives of modernity and ethnicity.

In this paper I do not argue that one of these regimes of value is more "real" than another. The value of a commodity is always arbitrary, whether it is assigned through production relations or through cultural representations. While the paper *does* serve to "unmask" the exploitative labor relations hidden behind a state rhetoric of embroidery as "heritage" and "tradition," its theoretical agenda lies in revealing how China's market reforms and commercial development at the local level are generating new conditions for the "politics of value." Embroidery as a commodity embodies the political contests that have emerged over development, inequality, and identity in Taijiang. This essay thus seeks a partial examination of "social life" of Shidong embroidery in hopes of illustrating the emerging political economy of reform at the local level in Guizhou.