Introduction by Peter Chin

Michael Howard's essay, in its discussion of ancient connections through local manifestations of motifs and pictograms that are shared among many cultures, triggers a memory I have. When I was on the vast island of Borneo in the late 1990's, and visiting indigenous peoples, I looked at many woven cloths, and met with the people who made them. One night, eyes already heavy with sleepiness, I went to bed, and immediately, when my eyes closed, all the magic motifs appeared before me with a force and presence that startled me.

Also in Michael's essay, the recurring question of self-perceptions of modernity and progress dominating a perceived backwardness in others, is interestingly touched upon in his discussion of woven men's loincloths. Triggered by this discussion, two things arise: what is our value system, which either supports and celebrates indigenous and traditional societies, or tries to denigrate and reform them? And secondly, the relatively rare regard of male clothing from woven cloth gets a welcomed airing.

Finally, the urgent issue of the maintenance of weaving traditions in a changing world of globalization is acknowledged, for me, leading to a broader contemplation of what my priorities are in the way that I live in this world.

From *Hinggi* to *Muk* and Thoughts on the Fate of Loincloths

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Like many people, my attraction to Southeast Asian textiles began with a large textile from the Indonesian island of Sumba. In this case a *hinggi* with realistic human figures that I purchased in 1975. Over the years as my knowledge of Southeast Asian textiles grew in tandem with work and a variety of research projects throughout the region I became increasingly interested in more subtle aspects of the area's textile heritage. This is perhaps best represented by my interest in supplementary warp weaving and the sometimes easily overlooked motifs produced by this technique, such as the small geometric *muk* patterns that are found in narrow warp directional bands on skirt-cloth woven by Tai in many parts of Mainland Southeast Asia. My interest in *muk* and its relationship to the early history of weaving in Southeast Asia was the genesis of my 2008 book A World Between the Warps: Southeast Asia's Supplementary Warp Textiles.

The motifs found on Southeast Asian textiles can tell us a great deal about the cultures of the people producing them and their history. These include both many of the realistic figures depicted on textiles as well as geometric and other less representational figures. Concerned with promoting Southeast Asian traditional textiles, back in 2005 I collaborated with Himpunan Wastraprema (the Indonesian

Textile Society) to form the ASEAN Traditional Textile Arts Community (ASEANTTAC). The organization has held several large regional gatherings since then (the most recent one was held in Chiang Mai in January of this year). After ASEANTTAC's founding, the executive committee decided that it needed a logo derived from the motifs found on textiles from around the region that symbolized the common cultural heritage of the various local traditions. I set to work on this task with Thai artist Wattana Wattanapun and we came up with a variation of the hook and rhomb motif that is essentially universal to Southeast Asian textile traditions. This is easily one of the oldest motifs encountered in the region, dating back over 2,000 years ago to the Bronze Age Dong Son culture of northern Vietnam. Different cultures assign different meanings to the pattern, though often it is said to represent some sort of flower or fruit, but the shape serves to symbolize the common threads that weave together the region. In its most common form there are eight hooks around the central rhomb, but it can have more or fewer hooks and in the ASEANTTAC version there are ten, representing the ten ASEAN member countries (and with the idea that the number can be expanded if other countries, such as Timor Leste, join in the future).

The Dong Son culture had an important influence throughout Southeast Asia and many design elements associated with it are still to be found on traditional textiles, not just the hook and rhomb. Another figure is an elongated triangular shape with vertical lines protruding from the body (often with hooks). The motif is sometimes referred to as *tumpal* in Indonesia. I became aware of its link to Dong Son culture in researching the funeral traditions of the Tai people in northern Vietnam and the motifs formerly used on funerary skirts. These skirts are worn at the funeral and later when preying to ancestors. Such skirts commonly had figures representing dragons or grey herons that were associated with beliefs in the afterlife as well as these triangular motifs (called *thieng heo* in Tai Dam). The latter represent artificial trees that are erected during funerals and other ceremonies.

Recently my attention had come to focus increasingly on issues surrounding the survival of Southeast Asia's textile traditions. This is an important theme for ASEANTTAC, which hosts markets for weavers as well as fashion shows that feature contemporary clothing using hand-woven textiles as well as cloth with traditional motifs. One of the traditions that has been in decline for some time and that now is probably in its terminal phase is the wearing of male loincloths. Textiles used for loincloths tend to be overshadowed by those intended for use as women's skirts since they tend not be as elaborate and because they are rarely encountered. The Chinese fashion of wearing trousers triumphed over wearing loincloths throughout much of northern Southeast Asia quite some time age. Trousers were associated with civilization, loincloths with backwardness. There was an element of shame as well. By the mid-20th century men were still wearing loincloths only in more remote areas, such as the highlands of southern Laos and central Vietnam. There has been something of a revival of wearing

loincloths for cultural events in recent years, but not for everyday wear. In the past the type of loincloth worn by a man often indicated his social status. In the Central Highlands of Vietnam men of common standing usually wore narrower and plainer loincloths than men of higher status. Among those of higher status sometimes there were further distinctions. Among the Katu and Ta-oi only men of the highest status wore loincloths decorated with small lead beads, while men of somewhat lower status wore ones decorated with small white beads.

While wearing a loincloth decorated with lead beads is pretty much a dead tradition, there are traditions that have more potential for survival. This is especially true in terms of the use of natural dyes and bast fibers as well as in the use of traditional motifs on cloth used in contemporary fashion. Fortunately there is still widespread interest in Southeast Asia in preserving at least some aspects of the region's rich and important textile tradition.

Michael C. Howard is a Professor in the School for International Studies at Simon Fraser University. He is editor of the Studies in the Material Cultures of Southeast Asia series of books that is published by White Lotus Press in Thailand and author of numerous articles and books on the textiles of Southeast Asia.