CHINESE BABY CARRIERS: A HONG KONG TRADITION NOW GONE

VALERY GARRETT

Nine o’clock on a sunny morning in April 1989, and I was standing on the pier that juts out like a finger into Starling Inlet, a stretch of sea separating Hong Kong from China. About fifty fisherwomen were yelling at the top of their voices and pushing scraps of clothing in my face. My goal, apart from the immediate one of not falling into the murky waters below, was to acquire traditional clothing from the people of Sha Tau Kok, the fishing village that straddles the border with China.

I was taking part in a research project for the Hong Kong Museum of History to collect and document material culture, through purchases and donations, from the farming and fishing communities in the New Territories, before urbanization changed the area forever. It was a timely mission, for today the paddy fields have gone, and market towns have been absorbed by high-rise apartment blocks housing the refugees who arrived from China in the 1970s and 80s.

I became aware in the late 1970s, that change would soon affect the rural areas, and had paid numerous visits to the New Territories in search of traditional dress. Then, together with an interpreter to help with unfamiliar dialects, I made forays into the countryside each week, visiting remote villages where life had changed little for the past hundred years. Although I was viewed at first as a crazy gwaiipo, before long the villagers were yielding to my requests for old clothing they no longer needed. The loose black pyjamas, shady straw hats, colourful children’s dress and brightly decorated wedding outfits were collected, photographed and carefully researched.

Both periods of collecting produced large numbers of children’s clothing, kept for sentimental reasons, as well as good fortune, until the child was grown. Cloth baby carriers were some of the most common items collected. Carrying a baby on the back was long regarded in southern China as a safe and convenient place for a mother or servant to keep a child out of harm’s way. Many women had to work and care for children at the same time, either in the fields growing rice or vegetables, or helping w
numerous meandering rivers

There were two main groups of land dwellers in the New Territories, the largest being the Cantonese or Punti local people whose dialect is spoken and understood by the majority of the population. The other group were the Hakka 'guest people' or 'strangers' who are said to have originated from northern China, and settled in Guangdong and Hong Kong in the 18th and 19th centuries. Then there were the fishing people, the Hoklos originating from Fujian province, and the Tankas or sui seung yan, who, in the past, had lived their whole lives afloat the small sampans and junks moored along the coast of Guangdong and Hong Kong. All these groups used baby carriers, but the styles differed particularly between the land and boat dwellers.

Traditionally the carrier was made from a decorated square of cloth, with long strips of fabric extending from the corners of the square to form straps. The child was placed against the woman's back as she leaned over, with the feet encircling her waist, and the carrier laid on top. Two straps were brought over her shoulders and two more went under the child's legs and under the woman's arms, to tie in a knot at her chest. As the family grew, it became the turn of older girls to carry the younger siblings (Fig 1).

It had been the custom for the grandmother to make a carrier to greet the new offspring. This carrier, and subsequent ones were lovingly made by hand in spare moments when the woman was not tending to the farming, or cooking the evening meal while sailing off to distant fishing grounds. If the woman did not have sewing skills she would order the carriers from a neighbourhood seamstress. Despite the little education most women had received, the designs and colours were lively and varied, and each carrier was unique.

Different Styles of Carriers

Baby carriers used in the 19th and early 20th century were quite large, measuring as much as 60cm overall. The centre panel approximately 35cm square, was embroidered or left plain. Two wide straps made of calendared cotton or hemp, dyed black or indigo blue, extended about 110cm at each edge along top and bottom of the carrier.
At the end of one or both lower straps, the corners were folded over to the centre to form a pocket in which to carry a few coins. Gradually the overall size of the carriers became smaller during the 20th century.

The style favoured by Cantonese and Hakka women followed the old shape with a decorated centre, on average about 25cm square, with straps which were a continuation of the top and bottom edges (Plate 1). Modern versions were usually made with a red cotton embroidered centre square and brightly patterned cotton surround, with the extensions of the straps in plain red cotton. Those made for presentation on special occasions had a red satin embroidered centre, brocade surrounds and red cotton extension straps.

The style preferred by the Hoklo and Tanka fishing people was slightly smaller overall, with the ornate centre having a patterned cotton or decorated surround. Longer straps were fixed diagonally to the four corners of the square, sometimes with white stitching to decorate and strengthen. Head supports were often attached to these baby carriers. These were made of folded strips of cotton, about 1cm wide, stitched at intervals to form a lattice square and attached to the top edge of the carrier to support the baby’s head (Plate 2). Some were made from a plain piece of cloth to shield it from the sun.

The third style, once used by both land and sea dwellers, was the simplest, being a plain, undecorated strip of red cotton or hemp, approximately 2.7m long by 30cm wide. In the past it was a tradition for the bridegroom to wear a strip of red cloth draped across one shoulder of his long gown and tied on the opposite hip. After the wedding day it was put aside for later use as a baby carrier, by winding the strip of cloth twice round the child, then tying in a knot in front of the wearer (Plate 3).

**Carrier Covers**

When the weather was cold a cover was placed over the baby in its carrier. Chinese Lunar New Year is traditionally the time when new clothes are bought and worn to signify new beginnings. Carriers and covers made for this festival were most spectacular in colour and design, and continued to be used on special occasions such as clan festivals and weddings. Covers were made of two layers of brightly patterned
cotton, approximately 60cm to 75cm square and gathered slightly at the top edge. Red silk ones, padded for warmth, were embroidered in satin stitch with designs of birds, flowers, or the qilin, a mythical animal, which symbolizes great wisdom. A wide band at the neck formed a comfortable shield against cold winds, while others had fur lining and hoods. Covers made by the Hoklo women were extremely decorative, and embellished with embroidery, appliqué, braid, rickrack, wool tassels, fringing, sequins, strings of tiny beads and bells, matching the carriers they covered (Plate 4). True works of art, they took many months to complete.

**Designs of Carrier Centres**

The centre of the carrier was decorated in many different ways. The early style had a square of red silk or sometimes wool embroidered with satin stitch. Bats, symbolizing happiness, and the Eight Buddhist emblems surrounded auspicious designs of flowers, or often the qilin. At the centre top of the square, was a small folded triangular piece of cloth, from three to five layers thick. It was considered to be a lucky charm and originally represented the five blessings: health, wealth, happiness, long life, and the right to a natural death. In recent times only one or two layers were used. As well as being a lucky charm, it had the advantage of indicating which way up the carrier was usually worn, thus conforming to the shape of the child.

The Cantonese and Hakka women favoured red, considered an auspicious colour, or vibrant shades of flaming orange or bright pink. The ground cloth was usually of cotton or rayon satin for special occasions. Various good luck symbols were brightly embroidered in fuchsia, orange, lemon and vivid green satin stitch in floss or twisted silk on the centres. A pair of mandarin ducks symbolized marital fidelity and conjugal happiness, while the lotus flower represented purity and, with its seedpod, a wish for fruitfulness (Plate 5). Likewise, pomegranates with their many seeds stood for abundance in all things, especially sons.

Many of the designs had a charming period feel: the influence exerted by books of embroidery designs popular in Shanghai in the 1920s and ’30s was still strong (Plate 6). Chinese characters were used frequently for long life and good fortune; those for ‘double happiness’
indicated the carrier was presented to the couple on marriage. The characters for lucky, fortunate, virtuous and energetic were also common.

The centres on the Tanka carriers seldom featured embroidery; if they did, it was on a square purchased from an embroiderer. White open weave cotton squares embroidered with red cross stitch were made in bulk in China and brought to the fishing ports of Hong Kong to be sold. The cross-stitch gave a graphic effect with designs of birds, flowers and Chinese characters for ‘double happiness’, long life, and a safe and peaceful childhood.

Tanka women preferred appliqué or patchwork, which meant they could reuse parts of old clothing. The small pieces and patches were easy to handle and the carriers could be worked on whenever they had some free time on the boat, between cooking a meal and helping the family to fish. Many coloured strips and triangles of cotton were appliquéd onto the centre square and continued up the top straps. When worn, the decoration was visible as far as the knot tied at the front. Patchwork strips of different colours were built up around the border of the square and formed attractive patterns. A form of ‘cathedral window’ appliqué was popular, proving that craft techniques spread far and wide (Plate 7).

Those carriers made by the Hoklo fisherwomen were even more elaborate, especially for their festivals and celebrations. The carrier was a complex design in a combination of strong colours, often black with yellow, green, blue, white and red. Patchwork was frequently used in the centre of the square, made up of four folded triangles forming squares and decorated with tassels, fringing, sequins, strings of beads, buttons, shiny metal disks and bells to frighten the bad spirits away. Piping and rickrack braid were applied to great effect to outline the appliqué designs in the ‘false cloud’ pattern, which is particular to the Hoklo people and which resembles a Neolithic design. The Hoklo women cannot explain its origin, but its importance for them is shown by its appearance on most decorated articles of clothing and household use.

Like many customs which were once very common, the use of these handmade baby carriers has almost completely disappeared. In
the 1970s it was usual to see most young children transported in the cloth carriers. Now imported mass-produced ones have replaced them and mothers tend to carry their children in front following Western fashion. But fortunately, this large collection of Chinese baby carriers has been saved at the Museum, and will continue to give pleasure to future generations from both east and west.

**FURTHER READING**


Fig. 1. A fisherman's daughter carrying her brother in a baby carrier, Hong Kong, c 1910. Public Records Office, Hong Kong.
Plate 7. Centre panel and straps in cathedral window patchwork in design of coins, to be made up into Tanka baby carrier, 1990. Valery Garrett.