Miao Batik Art in Danzhai, Guizhou
Cultural Preservation with Poverty Alleviation
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Background
Danzhai County is located in southeast Guizhou Province, China. It is home to many people from the Miao minority group, one of the most ancient minority groups in China. The Miao batik art is a highly noted Intangible Cultural Heritage in Danzhang County. Batik is the art of dying fabric, where wax is used to create patterns by covering parts that are not intended to be dyed. We were fortunate to have visited several batik workshops there. The batik products included clothing, tapestry, and accessories with ancient and complicated patterns of animals and flowers, which were truly amazing to watch.

The Batik Association
The batik workshop founded by Ms. Li Yang was conceived from a simple and straightforward idea, which was to preserve the skills of the ancient batik art. As a young woman, Ms. Yang was recommended by the local Women’s Federation to take classes on market management in Beijing. She wore traditional Miao clothing handmade by her mother on the trip, which was loved and purchased by many foreign tourists. She became interested in the business of Miao handicraft, only to find that there were barely any Miao artists in the village who still practiced batik art. In an attempt to rescue the soon-to-be-lost batik art and revive traditional Miao practices, Ms. Yang founded the Batik Association in Yangwu Village of Danzhang County in 2004.

Preservation of the Batik Tradition
We paid a visit to Danzhai High School for Nationalities, in which a “specialty class” was set up for girls that are gifted in the batik art. Ms. Yang said that each batik artist usually learned the techniques from her mother and grandmother without “official” training. As early as age 11, they could already draw from heart, and some girls are currently working in the batik workshop during their free time, where they are able to make some pocket money. Upon graduation from high school, the girls are free to choose between continuing to higher education and staying to work in the batik workshop.

Poverty Alleviation
A major achievement of the Batik Association was that it significantly improved living standards of the local Miao women and their families. Before the establishment of the Association, women stayed at home and the entire family depended on the husband’s income. Now that women are making batik products, they earn as much as their husbands, sometimes with a more stable income. The women are now able to afford their children’s education fees and household expenditure.

Raw Materials for Batik Production
All the materials used in batik production are natural and organic. The blue dye used in batik comes from a plant called Banlangen, which the Batik Association cooperates with the local pharmaceutical factory to plant. They also use filtered beeswax for batik drawing.

Banlangen Roots Soaked in Water to Produce Blue Dye for Batik

The Significance of Some Batik Patterns
The pattern of the fish is similar to the butterfly in that it also praises reproduction and beauty. The Miao people think that the bird represents the male and the fish represents the female. A fish and a bird in one picture form a comparison to a loving couple. The fish has wings like a bird, and the bird could enjoy a swim, a type of “water bird”. Some scholars think that this reflects the origin for equality between two sexes on the responsibility of reproduction.

According to the Miao ideology, the dragon is a mascot which benefits mankind. The Miao tradition pays respect to the dragon but does not fear it. The Miao Dragon is not as aggressive and as threatening as the Han Dragon. Dragons in Miao Batik Art come in various forms. Some have the head of a bird and the body of a snake, some have the head of a buffalo and the body of a fish, and some take the form of centipedes. Experts believe that the dragon patterns in Miao Art embody some totem ideology of buffalos and birds.

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CONCLUSION
“Batik is an important component of the life of the Miao minority group. It is their record of their own lives. Painting the wax on the cloth is their life pattern. Batik is an expression of their lives. The batik records the Miao people’s memories and history, records the Miao people’s memories and history, recording the agricultural work they do every day, records the environment around them, the flowers, grasses, insects, fish and animals. When Miao women create batik, they are certainly expressing their hopes and fears for their future lives and recording memories of their own past sweet lives.”

--- Professor Ren Xiaodong, Director of the Community-based Conservation and Development Research Center, Guiyang, Guizhou Province, China

Professor Ren currently teaches at Guizhou Normal University. He and his assistant helped make our travel plans in Guizhou Province and hosted us in Guiyang. His efforts during this trip are much appreciated by our group.