

Know the Weaver # 13

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Tien Chiu

Artist and TC2 owner

Tien Chiu is a nationally recognized, award-winning weaver with a deep interest in the creative process. Her work has been featured on the cover of Handwoven magazine, and her handwoven, couture-sewn wedding dress is part of the permanent collection at the American Textile History Museum. When not catering to the whims of her cats, Tigress and Fritz, or her husband Mike, Tien blogs, coaches, and teaches at www.creatingcraft.com. She weaves on a TC-2 jacquard loom.

1. After having spent twenty years working as a high-tech project manager in the software industry, you prefer to introduce yourself as a weaver (and a writer). What brought about the change of heart and what is it about weaving that keeps you at it?

I'm not in love with technology, and never have been. I was working on a technologically fascinating project - building the ground systems for a revolutionary satellite imaging system - at Google, which a very prestigious employer that pays very well and offers its employees all kinds of perks. I woke up one morning and realised that I just wasn't interested

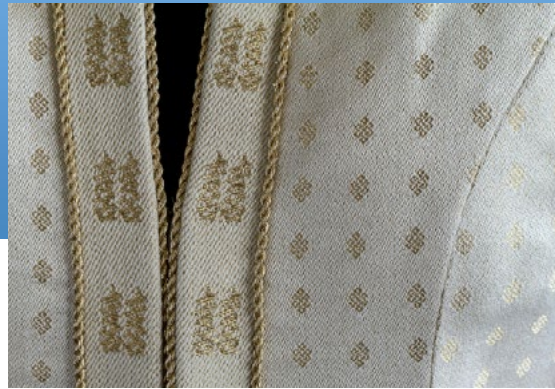
in my job, and moreover, that I couldn't bring myself to care about it. What I really loved, and was enthusiastic about, was my writing and my weaving. I was spending every spare moment either writing or weaving. It was like working two full-time jobs, one that I loved and one that I hated.

And what I realized was that, if I was unhappy working a high-tech project manager's "dream job" at one of the most sought-after employers in high-tech, I was never going to be happy as a high-tech project manager. I had achieved the summit of desirability, career-wise, and it was still awful.

WEBSITE:
www.tienchiu.com



Eternal Love - Wedding Ensemble coat



Eternal Love - Wedding Ensemble coat detail



Eternal Love - Wedding Ensemble dress

So at that point, I had a choice between being unhappy for the next twenty years, or doing something else. And the weaving and writing were so compelling, I couldn't imagine being happy in a different job. So I'm starting a business teaching people how to become master artisans - how to design and create craft masterpieces, how to grow their artistic skills, and how to develop a career in craft. I'm also planning to develop my own artistic resume further, by creating, exhibiting, and selling more of my woven work. The TC-2 is critical to that process, so I'm glad I got it.

I have no idea whether this new venture will work and whether I can make a living from it, but I'm going to try. (You can check out my new website on this [link](#))

2. Could you share the details of some of your works that are closest to you? Also, any projects in the pipeline?

My two favorite pieces so far are the "Eternal Love Wedding Ensemble" and my "Bipolar I: Inside the Prison of My Mind" wall hanging.

The wedding ensemble is probably the most important to me. Partly because it was the dress I wore to my wedding, but it also had a huge impact, career-wise. It made me realize that I could be a serious textile artist. I spent over 1,000 hours designing, weaving, and sewing the dress. At the end, when I looked at it, I realized I had created a masterpiece - and that I wanted to make more. The dress won all kinds of awards,

was published in weaving magazines, and is now part of the American Textile History Museum's permanent collection. It made me understand that I could succeed as a textile artist, and that I wanted to! (And, of course, I got a ton of compliments on it at my wedding!

My "Bipolar I: Inside the Prison of My Mind" wall hanging is the piece I most recently completed. I have bipolar disorder, and it almost killed me twice before being correctly diagnosed and treated. One of my struggles early on was not wanting to tell anyone that I had bipolar disorder, because of the stigma against people with mental health issues. Eventually, I decided to be "out" about it, and to speak up about it - because the stigma will never go away as long as people are silent about it. I want to help put a human face on mental illness. "Bipolar I: Inside the Prison of My Mind" does that. It's the first in a series; I have three or four more pieces planned on the same warp.

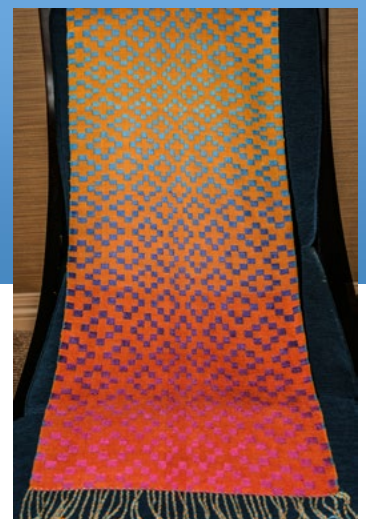
On a technical plane, "Bipolar I" is also significant. It's the second major piece I've completed on the TC2, and it's enabled me to achieve another of my artistic goals. I wanted to weave something that exploited the unique properties of cloth. Many jacquard weavings are simply woven photos. And while there's nothing really wrong about weaving photos, I feel they don't even scratch the surface of textiles' potential. So my goal with "Bipolar I" was to weave a piece that could only be made through hand-weaving.



Double Weave Delight -
Front



Bipolar Disorder - Inside the Prison of
My Mind



Double Weave Delight -
Back

I wove "Bipolar I" as a triple-weave piece. Two of the layers were woven with painted warps. Each painted warp was coiled up and painted in a completely random pattern. To add further variegation and texture, I used three different yarns in each painted warp: a silk yarn, a mercerized cotton yarn, and an unmercerized cotton yarn. Each fiber took up the dye differently, giving visual texture, and the yarns were all different diameters, giving physical texture. For the prison bars and the face, I wove with a single warp layer on top, and padded the bars and the face between the layers. This made them three-dimensional.

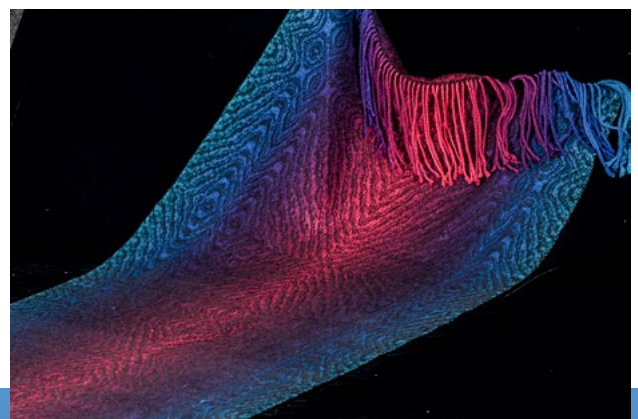
These are all things that could only be done by a hand-weaver, so I felt it achieved my technical as well as my artistic goals.

The next piece to go onto the loom will be a tribute to a friend who passed away recently, and quite unexpectedly. It has four pictures of her in the corners; the center is a Buddhist eternity knot with images of meaningful things in her life in each empty space of the knot. I'm planning to weave it with a weft yarn made with real gold. I've written a little about the process [here](#):

3. Being an artist is one thing and being an artist who fulfills his/her creative quest and is also commercially successful quite another and it seems like your latest book - *Master Your Craft: Strategies for Designing, Making, and Selling Artisan Work* - deals with some of these issues. What is your piece of advice to all the artists/weavers out there?

Creating original work is not a linear process. Instead, it follows what I call the Creative Cycle: design, create, evaluate what you've created, identify what you'd like to change, and then go back to the design phase to integrate your changes into the design. In the initial stages, the Creative Cycle is about creating and refining your design; later, it's about evaluating the work as you construct it. By making lots of small changes and evolving your work continuously while you're making it, you create much stronger work than if you'd tried to plan everything up front and then execute.

Master Your Craft: Strategies for Designing, Making, and Selling Artisan Work offers advice for each stage of the Creative Cycle, and also offers principles for functional, visual, and practical design. It offers advice for artistic growth - both growing your design and construction skills and (if you wish) developing a career in craft. Finally, it contains advice from the 22 master artisans whom I interviewed for the book. They represent a broad range of craft media - metal, wood, ceramics, glass, and textiles - including weaving, of course!



Black Jewel Shawl



Under the Sea scarf

Master Your Craft took me four years from concept to publication. Feedback on it so far has been very positive - I've gotten positive reviews from several major players in craft, including Chris Amundsen, the Executive Director of the American Craft Council, and Paul J. Smith, Director Emeritus of the Museum of Arts and Design.

4. You enlist travelling as one of your other interests and we understand that as a part of your travels, you've also explored various indigenous weaving techniques. Could you share some of your experiences? Also, if and how they've influenced you as a person and a weaver?

One of my favorite memories from a six-month sojourn through Southeast Asia came in northern Thailand, where I spent three days studying spinning and weaving with a wise woman in an Akha hill tribe village. She taught me to spin cotton on a mid-whorl drop spindle, and to weave on the Akha loom, a very simple, very portable



Autumn splendour

2-shaft counterbalance loom. I stayed with them in a simple but very elegantly designed thatched bamboo house.

Now, this particular village was the last traditional Akha village in northern Thailand, which meant they were on all the tourist routes. Eight or nine times a day, a bus would pull up, disgorge twenty or thirty tourists, who would then wander through the village, taking pictures of villagers as they did their laundry, brushed their teeth, and went about their usual business. So there were a lot of tourists.

Well, on the third day, we decided it would be a great joke to put me out front, weaving for the tourists. They dressed me up in traditional Akha garb, and I started weaving at the loom (which was set up in front of the house). Busloads of tourists came through the village, taking photos of the "traditional Akha maiden," while my Akha family sat on the porch, pointing and laughing at the tourists taking photos of tourists.

The climax of the day came when a young couple from San Francisco (my hometown!) came to visit with their ten-year-old daughter. The daughter was fascinated by the weaving, so I showed her how the loom worked (without words, since I couldn't open my mouth without giving the game away). The mother took some pictures, and they left. Shortly after that, I heard them coming back. The mom was just a little bit ahead of the dad, and I could hear him saying, "No! Don't do it! You'll just encourage her to beg!" And she came back and handed me a 20-baht note (worth about 50 cents). I somehow managed to keep a



Reborn in Fire



Phoenix Rising scarf



Phoenix Rising scarf - detail

straight face as I bowed to thank her, but the Akha were literally rolling on the floor of the porch, howling and laughing at the sight of a tourist tipping another tourist!

More seriously, there are three major things I've learned from my travels. The first is that the creative spirit is universal. Wherever I traveled, there were artists making gorgeous work - in textiles, wood, metal, or another medium. The second is that you don't need the perfect setup or expensive tools to make beautiful work. The Lao hilltribe weavers weave on rough-hewn wooden looms, kept under the house with the pigs, and the Akha simply tie the entire warp to a stick in the ground (instead of beaming on), and comb the inevitable tangles back as they go. The shuttles are crudely carved and the bobbins held in place with a sliver of bamboo. Their equipment looks nothing like the sanded, finished, and precisely designed wooden looms we use in the West. But they produce amazing textiles.

The third thing I realized is that stash is not necessary to create beautiful things. I spent six months traveling Southeast Asia with just four ounces of blue silk top, a low-whorl spindle, and a pair of circular knitting needles. At the end of it, I had a beautiful ring shawl - a shawl fine enough to be drawn through a wedding ring. On my return, I spent almost a year working my way through another four ounces of merino-silk roving, spinning and knitting another ring shawl, "The Spiral of Life". It contained symbols for earth, air, water, fire, light, dark, compassion, and "right action" - the four elements in balance, plus all the parts of a good life - some darkness, some light,

compassion, and doing the right thing. I made that shawl with just a simple spindle, a pair of knitting needles, and a tiny bit of fiber. (You can see the Spiral of Life on my website: [Link here](#))

5. You'd done quite a thorough job researching about the Jacquard looms available in the market before you narrowed down on our loom - why does the TC2 work for you? Is there a possibility of you authoring a book on "Weaving on the TC2"?

Ha! After spending four years writing *Master Your Craft*, I'm not taking on any book projects for a good long time. But seriously, I did a lot of research and wove on both the TC-2 and the AVL Jacq3G before settling on the TC-2. The TC-2 is simply a better-designed and more robust jacquard loom. Digital Weaving Norway also has a much better reputation for supporting users of the TC-2 than AVL does for the Jacq3G, which clinched it for me. You can read more about my research [here](#).

6. And lastly, a rapid fire round -

You draw your inspirations from...

Abstract ideas - themes like rebirth and mental illness, and design elements such as color gradations.

A colour you can't get enough of...

Orange, especially when paired with blue. They remind me of fire and water.

A fibre you love...

Silk! My favorite fiber, hands down.



Goodbye Ma



Goodbye Ma - detail



Kodachrome Jacket

Most intriguing weave structure...

Lately it's been double and triple weave, but before that, I did a lot of work with complex tied weaves.

Geometric or organic shapes...

Definitely organic. Usually representational art, e.g. images of things you'd recognize immediately.

An artist you admire...

Itchiku Kubota, a Japanese shibori artist who made the most amazing kimono in the tsujigahana tradition.

You'd love to exhibit your works at...

The Museum of Modern Art, or the Smithsonian.

An aspect of weaving you could do without...

Threading the loom! It took me weeks to thread 2,640 threads on the TC-2.

Is it about the look or the feel (of fabric)...

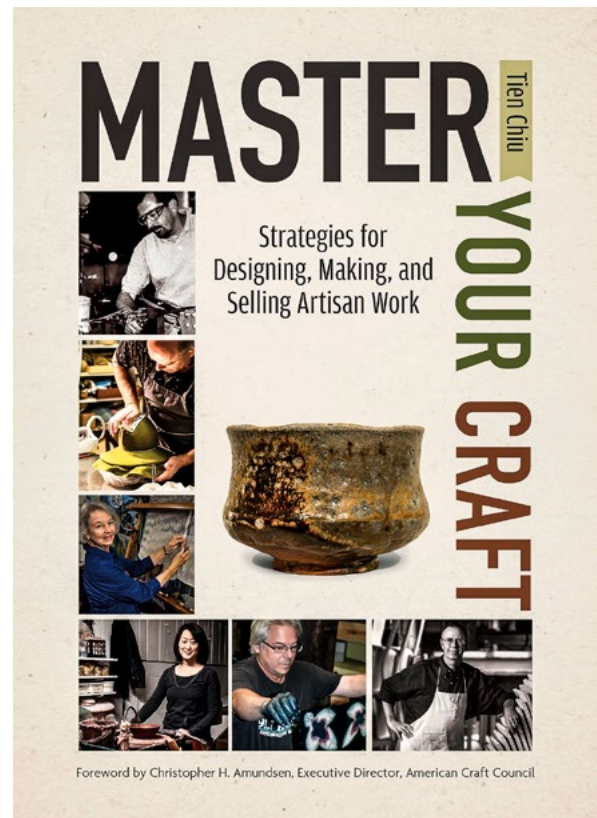
Look, definitely.

A dream you wish comes true...

A one-woman show at a major museum. (Hey, a girl can dream!)

Tien's book *Master Your Craft: Strategies for Designing, Making, and Selling Artisan Work* distills her experience and that of 22 other master artisans to help intermediate artisans make the leap to mastery.

You can read more about *Master Your Craft* on this [link](#)



Foreword by Christopher H. Amundsen, Executive Director, American Craft Council