

Marriage Customs in Gulin County, Sichuan Province

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Abstract

Miao Nationality in Sichuan Province commonly known as the “Southern Sichuan Miao”, mainly is found in Sichuan south which is adjacent to Guizhou Province. Based on fieldworks of three visiting, the marriage customs in Gulin County is found to be the most unique among Southern Sichuan Miao. They include the forms of pledging love, Caishan Festival; Miao Fair, halfway feast,; passing umbrella, summoning the spirits, pulling chicken tongue, taking old names, bumping against the door, singing loudly ceremony songs, and so on. These customs are valuable assets which are primitive, elegant and rich, on inheriting on Miao history and culture.

Key words: Miao Nationality; Marriage customs; Sichuan Province; Gulin county

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INTRODUCTION

Australian ethnologist W. R. Geddes wrote in his book *Migrants of the Mountains* that the Miao people living in China and the Jews spreading around the world were the two most suffering yet tenacious nationalities in the world. Indeed, the history of Miao Nationality was full of

endless wars, deep distress and misery of homeless people drifting from one place to other places. It has experienced great migrations which were large-scale, from north to south, from east to west and from the domestic to overseas. In the historical process of thousands of years, Miao Nationality hasn't fallen apart but maintained a strong sense of national identity and distinctive ethnic characteristics: they are dressed in a cardigan coat and pleated skirt, wear exquisite silver, blow Lusheng, sing Miao songs and inherit the customs of “Gusheji” by slaughtering cattle to worship the ancestors, or paying homage to “Chiyou Emperor Temple” or worshipping Chiyou, the “Maple God”, which shows that the Miao around the world has the same root.



Figure 1¹
Miao Girls Skilled at Singing and Dancing

Miao Nationality ranks fourth in China's minority population. There are more than 160,000 Miao people in Sichuan Province², mainly inhabiting in the border between Yunnan and Guizhou, including Counties of

¹Cao, W. B. (2014). Retrieved from <http://news.lzep.cn/2012/0124/218637.html>

²Data is from the data source of the sixth national census by Sichuan Provincial Bureau of Statistics.

Xingwen, Hung, Junlian nearby Yibin City and Counties of Gulin, Xuyong nearby Luzhou City. It is often called “Southern Sichuan Miao”. Although they are scattered in different places and have various cultures in each region and each branch, some symbolic cultures like marriage customs are quite similar.

The Miao in Gulin County is a good example to show marriage customs of the Miao in Sichuan.

Miao people believe that marriage is the greatest thing in life, not only involving the parties and families of both, but also the relatives in the entire clan. Thus, relevant activities naturally become the major event in the clan. In southern Sichuan Miao, the marriage customs of Gulin has distinctive features, including forms of pledging love; Caishan Festival, Miao Fair, halfway feast; passing umbrella, summoning spirits, pulling chicken tongue, taking old names, bumping against the door, and singing loudly ceremony songs, and so on.

1. PRE-ENGAGEMENT

In the first lunar month each year, the joyful activities to celebrate New Year will be held in Miao village in some places like County Gulin and Xuyong: Caihuashan (also called Caishan Festival). As early as Jiajing years of Ming Dynasty, Yang Shen, No.1 Scholar and famous poet in Sichuan, described this customs in *Yongning Chant*: “Climb laboriously onto cloud-capped mountain, overlooking women singing to the moon at brightly lit night, with dark hair raised high like Huaiyin”.

Gulin County inherits the main Miao traditional practices in the regions adjacent to provinces of Yunnan, Guizhou and Sichuan. From 13th to 15th day of the first Lunar month every year, tens of thousands of Miao compatriots from Gulin and other townships and adjacent areas come together by vehicle or on foot to PoWa Mountain at the junction of Gulin and Xuyong from all directions to participate in annual Miao event. They dressed in national costumes, radiant with joy in Caishan Festival. Gulin Miao compatriots aged over sixty years recall in excitement the unprecedented Caishan Festival on Po Wa Mountain in 1970s: it was composed of more than a dozen programs, what attended by thousands of people, even people across the townships. The bonfire was lit at night and several hundreds of people sang love songs in antiphonal style. The game of contending for umbrellas was held among the young men and women on Caishan Festival. If the woman wanted to develop a relationship with a man, she would give the umbrella to the man or exchange belts as a token of love to promise to be the lifelong companion. So far, people in Miao villages still sing love songs of contending for umbrellas.

Gechang Town carries on the activities of Caishan Festival Caishan Festival has two special ceremonies: Erect Flower Pole and Fall Flower Pole ceremonies. Erect Flower Pole ceremony is presided over by the respected

elder of the Miao nationality. The local people say that the flower pole is a symbol of good luck. No flower pole, no flower mountain. Paper money and cypress branches are tied to the top of the pole. The pole is divided into three sections. The cypress branches represent “Harmonious Miao” and the three sections mean that Caishan Festival lasts three days. Among yo-heave-ho, gongs and drums, firecrackers and melodious Lusheng music (a reed-pipe wind instrument), the pole is erected which symbolizes the annual Caishan Festival start. Subsequently, the offspring of Miao nationality and guests participating in the festival will drink a big bowl of Miao homemade rice wine—“Presence Wine” (also known as the “Unity Wine”) which signifies unity and smoothness. After drinking the wine, people hold hands around the pole to dance to Lusheng music, which symbolizes that the Miao offspring will forge ahead in unity and live happily in the new year. Some Lusheng players are blowing while dancing; some blow and dance with each other, or blow while squat jumping with one foot stretching to spin and alternating the right foot and left. The most difficult is the one who plays the Lusheng, with the head touching down the ground and the feet toward the sky. Most of the men of Miao nationality can play the Lusheng, but few can squat to blow or play it while heading down. After the dance is over, the elder will drink while making daily conversations, talking about farm work. The young men and women who fall in love with each other tend to make antiphonal singing to praise each other’s appearance and moral character and get each other’s mind so as to know whether it is necessary for further relationship. At night, bonfires are lit on the mountains. People sit around the campfire, drinking, chatting all night long. Caishan Festival will not come to an end until Fall Flower Pole ceremony is held.



Figure 2³
A Sea of People Attending Caishan Festival in Miao Mountain Village

Gan Miaochang(Miao Fair) as a traditional festival of Miao nationality is a gathering of Miao people to exhibit

³Xie, H. (2014). Retrieved from <http://photo.blog.sina.com.cn/photo/1288911737/4cd33b79x741ed820eccc>

the folk customs. Miao Fair is popular in Xuyong and Gulin County. It is held in spring and autumn, respectively in 2nd and 7th lunar month each year. There is Miao Fair for Gulin County on 2nd of 2nd lunar month each year. Long time ago, someone wrote a poem depicting its spectacular event: “Expecting the fairy on 2nd of 2nd lunar month, a sea of Miao people gather in the streets, dancing happily, indulgent in Lusheng melody that blows away night wind.”



Figure 3⁴
Erect Flower Pole Ceremony



Figure 4⁵
Fantastic Lusheng Performances

Miao Fair is similar to Caishan Festival. They differ in the locations. The former is in the street. The latter is on the mountain. According to legend, Miao Fair came into being after the failure of the first intifada. The official did not allow Miao people to gather together. Then Miao People pretended to blow Lusheng for entertainment but contacted in secrecy, and later it evolved into a regular festival. In addition to celebrating their own festival on Miao Fair, Miao people will purchase production materials and daily necessities. They will not go back home until the sun goes down. It is worth mentioning that

⁴Xie, H. (2014). Retrieved from <http://photo.blog.sina.com.cn/photo/1288911737/4cd33b79x741ed8200ecc>

⁵Xie, H. (2014) Retrieved from <http://photo.blog.sina.com.cn/photo/1288911737/4cd33b79x741ec91dbacf>

besides celebrating the festival, Miao Fair provides a very appropriate opportunity for the young men and women to be acquainted with each other, to have a date and develop romantic relationship. As is documented, lunar February, May and October are the months for gathering in Lin (Gulin) county. Only the second day of lunar February each year can be called Miao Fair when the young men and women at the age of marriage appear on the gathering to seek their lovers. If both are attracted to each other, they exchange their color ribbons (Lang, 1997).



Figure 5⁶
Miao Songs

Caishan Festival and Miao Fair not only provide the young people with the opportunity to choose their own lover and develop relationship but also play a positive role in facilitating cultural prosperity and economic development by enabling people of all nationalities to communicate and exchange in cultural, economic and other aspects. Gulin Miao song & dance, Gulin Caishan, etc are also enlisted in the Directory of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Sichuan Province and Non-material Cultural Heritage Expansion Projects; CCTV “Local” group also went to Gulin mountain village to film “Flash Marriage” that reflects the process of the Miao young people’s love and marriage.

2. ESCORTING BRIDE TO WEDDING

On Caishan Festival and Miao Fair, the young set up their relationship. The man let the matchmaker to go to the woman’s home to propose. The proposing is complicated and must be carried out in even month. The woman’s uncle plays a very important role in proposing process. The next steps are to give betrothal gifts - determine an auspicious date - find helpers – the woman gives a banquet – the man escorts the bride to the wedding.

The number of escorting team is odd: introducer, “parents” (refers to the broom’s uncles), managers, a favored couple, people with a carrier on the back (the

⁶Retrieved February 2, 2014, from http://www.glxww.com/news/gly/glmj/201104/news_20110410060143.html

groom's brothers or nephews are responsible for carrying the marriage items.), best man (the groom's cousin), male singer, and the groom. When reaching the woman's cottage, the broom's male singer should skillfully make antiphonal singing with the bride's male singer. Only after answering the questions in "Block Song" can the team be allowed to enter the cottage. Subsequently, the bride team holds a jubilant red umbrella for the bride, walks towards the man's home, and meets with the man's team.



Figure 6⁷
On the Way of Escorting the Bride to Wedding

On the way to the groom's home or the bride's home, the group should stop to eat feast halfway, also called halfway carriage back. The feast is presided over by one of the broom's team, who takes out the prepared wine, chicken, sticky rice, and spoons on the ground and pays homage to their ancestors by scattering some rice and singing, and utters some words to drive out demons and bless the bride and groom with security and happiness. Finally, everyone shares the delicious meal. It is worthy of special attention to the eaten parts: the woman of the favored couple eats the chicken head; that of the bride's team eat chicken tail; two bridesmaids eat chicken wings; the bride eats chicken legs.

When the teams come close to the groom's house before they can see it, the bride needs to dress up and put on one more new wedding dress. It shows that the woman's family is well off so that she will not be underestimated by the broom's home. (A set of Miao clothing that is hand-made takes one to two years to make. The cost is very high. It goes through process of planting linen, twisting, weaving, batik, embroidery, sewing, and beading. The women's whole cloth includes the head cap, shirt, neckpiece, cape, loincloth, belt, skirt and other accessories.) Thus, the living were precarious. The long history of war makes people to be vigilant in peace time. So Miao people do not show off their wealth even though they are rich. When approaching the groom's family and

ensuring the security, the bride will put on the expensive cloth. When the bride wears one more wedding dress, she will seem to have larger hips, which is a symbol of family fertility and nationality reproduction.

3. WEDDING PROCESS

Bustling with excitement, the group of people go to the groom's family from the east where the sun rises. If not starting from the east, they should make a detour from the east. It is said to be in memory of their ancestors who were from the east. When entering the broom's yard, the bride's umbrella is held by her brother or cousins as lowly as to cover the bride's face, and then the managers, favored couple of the groom's team, welcome those of the bride's team and take over their umbrella which is held by the bride. The bride holds the umbrella herself when putting one foot inside the gate, one foot outside. A woman grabs the upper part of the umbrella with the left hand, and unfolds the bride's hand with the right hand to take the umbrella from the bride. If the bride puts her foot on the threshold, it means that she is not willing to marry the man.



Figure 7⁸
Get Married Joyfully

At the time of taking over the bride's umbrella, a man and a woman are summoning the spirits. The man and the woman hold a cock and a hen respectively and a measuring tool (for calculating the grains. The total capacity is one liter) which contains rice, an egg and three sticks of incense, waiting at the gate and making a circle with the chicken around the bride's head and then around the house. The main purpose of summoning the spirits is exorcism so that the bride can peacefully stay at the husband's family which is slightly strange for her.

On the wedding night, there is a special ceremony—pulling the chicken tongue and taking the old name. Four people in the main room pull the chicken tongue at the same time: a leading singer, one singing after the leader,

⁷Retrieved February 2, 2014, from http://www.chinamzw.com/wlgz_ReadNews.asp?NewsID=2387

⁸Retrieved February 2, 2014, from http://www.scwmw.gov.cn/tswm/201304/t20140416_269532.htm

one accompany, one holding the plate. The chicken tongue is used as carrier and keepsake. The complete chicken tongue symbolizes sweet happiness of the newlywed. Soon afterwards, those who have highest seniority in the family and highest prestige take an old name for the groom (the former name is infant name), which means he officially gets married and starts his own career. It is similar to the growing-up ceremony of Han nationality. It is worthy of particular attention to naming. The first word must be the same with that of the grandfather's name so as to keep roots generation after generation. In Miao village of Jianzhu, the groom pulls the chicken tongue, sing songs of "pull chicken tongue" and name the groom and bride. The bride is named by adding "Bu" to the groom's old name ("Zhi" and "You" are equivalent to male and "Bu" means female). The groom is called "Zhizhang", the bride is "Bu Zhizhang"

When entering the nuptial chamber, there is an interesting custom: bumping against the door. The relatives of the broom hold on to the bride's hands and the relatives of the bride hold on to the broom's hands, trying to stop each other from entering the nuptial chamber. The one who first enter will have the absolute control over the other in the family. The one who enters later will obey. The competition is full of laughter.

On the entire Miao wedding, they often sing loudly wine songs. In the celebration of the marriage, Miao wine songs tend to be sung in a complete set. It takes eight to nine hours to finish a set of the wine songs for Miao marriage ritual, sometimes even the whole night. Each set of wine songs is divided into nine parts: first is to sing "Block Song" in escorting; second is called "Ten Rounds", i.e. the male singers sing ten songs reflecting the customs of the village. The third one is named as "Ancestral History" about the ancestral origins and migratory of both man and woman; fourth is "Marriage Road", singing about formation and forms of ancient marriage rituals; fifth is "Basic Info of Three Generations". The male singers of the newlyweds sing the basic information of their three generations of fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfather in order to deepen the mutual understanding of the two families; sixth is "Phoenix's Proposal". The male singers introduce the relationship development between the bride and the broom by singing, such as how they met. It is like reporting to everyone on behalf of the groom; seventh is "Wish", singing out the expectations and wishes of the elders of the newlyweds; eighth is

"Thanks to the Bride's Family". The male singer of the broom sings to thank the bride's relatives on behalf of broom; ninth is "Dragon Boat Song", which is the climax of the entire drinking songs. The male singers compete antiphonally while pulling the preserved duck. The winner in antiphonal singing competition gets preserved duck.

The evolution and procedures of Miao marriage system can be seen from "Gulin Miao Marriage Ritual Words" which presents relatively complete "Proposal Ritual Words", "Engagement Ritual Word", "Escorting Ritual Words" and "Exchange Ritual Words". Part of the ritual words refers to the migratory history of Miao nationality, the wishes of the elders to the youth, and skills of handling the family relationship that have certain guiding significance for the establishment of marriage and family. The ritual man as the inheritor of the marriage ritual words plays the most important role.

Time flies. Along with changing times and economy and rapid development of science and technology, some Miao young people think their marriage rituals are relatively cumbersome, and tend to love and marry in the way of Han Nationality, or even are attracted towards the western romantic and colorful marriage customs. But most of them still have something to hold fast to. On Caishan Festival and Miao Fair, the forms of playing Lusheng to express their feelings, singing love songs antiphonally, umbrella-holding game, exchanging belts and so on, promote mutual understanding. Miao People wear folk costume, hold folk wedding; and trace the histories of migration and tribulations of the nation and family in the festive. Lusheng songs and dances accompany "summoning the spirits" "pulling chicken tongue", "bumping against door", "singing loudly ritual songs". The best wishes for a better life are sent to the newlyweds; the solemn growing-up ceremony is completed by "take an old name".

Miao traditional marriage customs are of primitive simplicity, elegance and color. They carry on Miao history. There is no doubt that they are valuable national cultural wealth.

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