

Ritual and Society: A Comparative Study of Miao Weddings in Southeast Guizhou and Northeast Guizhou

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Abstract. This article aims to compare the ritual processes and social significance of Miao weddings in the Southeast and Northeast regions of Guizhou. The article deeply explores the differences in youth social interaction and spouse selection methods, the symbolic logic and kinship rules in the engagement process, the view of the marital process reflected by the "not settling in the husband's home" custom, and the symbolic function of wedding costumes and silver ornaments. Based on public government documents, authoritative media reports, and related anthropological and ethnological research findings, this study, through comparative analysis, attempts to reveal the cultural diversity formed due to geographical region within the same ethnic group and its deep social logic.

Keywords: Miao ethnic group; wedding; Southeast Guizhou; Northeast Guizhou; gift exchange.

1. Introduction

As the primary area of population settlement for the Miao people in China, the internal culture of the Guizhou Miao exhibits rich and complex regional differences. Wedding customs, as a concentrated embodiment of social structure and cultural concepts, are an excellent window for observing this diversity. However, existing research either focuses on case descriptions of a single region or conducts macroscopic cultural overviews, lacking systematic discussion that performs fine-grained comparisons between specific regions. This article selects the geographically adjacent but culturally distinct regions of Southeast Guizhou and Northeast Guizhou, aiming to answer a core question through the comparison of their wedding customs: How are similar cultural elements (such as using "chicken" as a medium, valuing kinship relations, wearing elaborate costumes, etc.) organized into vastly different ritual processes and social practices in different regional societies?

To develop the discussion, what is referred to in this article as Southeast Guizhou mainly indicates areas like Leishan and Taijiang in the Qiandongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture, where the cultural symbols of the Miao are particularly prominent; Northeast Guizhou mainly refers to the administrative area of Tongren City (such as Songtao Miao Autonomous County), where wedding customs show different emphases. In terms of research methodology, this article adopts a comparative research path primarily based on publicly accessible authoritative sources—systematically reading provincial/county-level government portals, national-level intangible cultural heritage platforms, mainstream media reports, and materials from museums/university institutions, from which key nodes for comparison are extracted. This article will follow the logical main line of "youth social interaction—engagement rules—wedding process—ritual symbolism," striving to support every assertion with "facts from clearly indicated sources," to ultimately reveal the internal logic and socio-cultural implications of the wedding custom models in the two regions.

In Southeast Guizhou, the connection between Miao weddings and youth social interaction is very close, locally known as "youfang" (antiphonal singing, gathering scenes), which is similar in substance to the "zuomei" in Rongshui, Guangxi, and the "gan bianbian chang / hui guniang" in Xiangxi. The Hunan Provincial People's Government Portal, when introducing the Miao wedding customs of Fenghuang, clearly points out: in Xiangxi it is called "gan bianbian chang / hui guniang," in Southeast Guizhou it is called "youfang"; it also mentions the existence and duration (can be as long as one to four or five years) of wedding elements like "chicken divination," "maternal uncle money," and the "not settling in the husband's home (zuojia)" custom in Southeast Guizhou [1]. These

keywords provide us with an authoritative reference point for understanding the structure of the Southeast Guizhou wedding structure "monastery - family negotiation - multi-step process". In contrast, Northeast Guizhou (for example Songtao), in the procedures such as "presentation of Jing wine" etc., is more obvious social nature of "race recognition after the ceremony is completed", and retained its local intangible cultural heritage list, the "marriage of the ceremonial speeches (Songtao)" item, the relevant marriage discourse, also shows the uniqueness of the status of the marriage language rituals [2].

2. Youth Social Interaction and Spouse Selection: Different Preludes of Individual Autonomy and Family Alliance

The "Youfang Ping" in Southeast Guizhou (the "Youfang site") is an important area where many young people meet each other, localized with festivals (the "Daughters' Festival", etc.), and is a semi-ritualized, public, social relationship. For people account for "to select a husband by antiphonal song", "do not value but deploy intelligence morals head states." That allows the youth to draw enough affective soil ahead of building up their relations, before marriage under the parents' auspices is formally undertaken. As some of the ethnographic studies had shown, this apparently free working up of social intercourse is to be understood as a socially recognized structured area [3]. All the greater is the possibility of affective exchange between the youth, but another extremely important side is that it is a far larger means of building up village cross relations and accumulating in a personal way of prestige (this by means of singing gifts and elocution) themselves being a prelude to marriage and means of accumulation of social capital.

In comparison, although Northeast Guizhou belongs to the same Miao region, certain counties (like Songtao) place a stronger emphasis on matchmaking and ritual kinship recognition. The "presenting gifts" stage is often understood as the key node for the two families to formally confirm their relationship. In media field reports on Songtao weddings, the "presenting gifts" of "sending chicken wine" is described as the core etiquette, where the man's family brings chicken and wine to the woman's family, and the woman's family gives back tokens symbolizing fertility, such as "red-wrapped eggs," with the bride being welcomed the next day. This has a clear meaning of "gift exchange—social recognition" [4]. Here, the prelude to marriage is more often initiated by the ritualistic interaction between families, rather than the free social interaction between young individuals. This model is closer to a practice of alliance theory, where marriage is first and foremost seen as an important means for two families to establish or consolidate a relationship, and the role of the individual is more embedded in the overall strategy of the family. Therefore, this difference is not a simple binary opposition but reflects the different weights of "individual emotional consent" and "familial ritual recognition" in the process of establishing a marriage.

3. Engagement and Determination Mechanisms: The Social Contract of Oracular Logic and Gift Exchange

At the institutional level, many places in Southeast Guizhou supplement matchmaking and engagement with "chicken divination" (divining the feasibility of a marriage through specific parts of a chicken or its omens), which is clearly recorded in the folk custom entries of government portals. At the same time, obligations to matrilineal relatives, such as "maternal uncle money" (presenting property to the woman's maternal uncle's family), are common in pre-marital agreements. Northeast Guizhou (Songtao) is more often summarized by the media with the expression "presenting gifts" through "sending chicken wine" to signify the completion of the engagement/kinship recognition. Both use "chicken" as an important medium, but the former emphasizes divination and oracular judgment, while the latter emphasizes the completion of the rite and recognition of kinship.

These two mechanisms, one appealing to a vertical logic of oracular judgment and the other to a horizontal logic of social exchange, clearly demonstrate the different cultural paths the two regions

take in constructing the legitimacy of marriage. "Chicken divination" submits the final decision of the marriage to the verdict of supernatural forces, bestowing a sacred and unquestionable legitimacy upon a purely social arrangement, serving as a cultural coping mechanism in the face of uncertainty in major decisions. The act of "sending chicken wine," on the other hand, perfectly corroborates the classic discourse on "gift exchange" by anthropologist Marcel Mauss [5]. Here, the chicken and wine are not ordinary items, but social tokens carrying promises and obligations. The "giving" by the man's side and the "reciprocating" by the woman's side together weave a new network of social relations, firmly linking the two families together [1, 4, 6].

4. Wedding Process and "Zuojia": A Processual Marriage and a Slow Transition of Identity

In some areas of Southeast Guizhou, there exists the custom of "not settling in the husband's home (zuojia)": after the bride returns to her parents' home from her visit to the groom's, she lives there for a long period, only being "recalled" for short stays by the husband's family during festivals or busy farming seasons, and she does not permanently settle in the husband's home until after becoming pregnant, a period which can last from one or two years to four or five years. This is a crucial concept for understanding the marital structure of Southeast Guizhou—marriage is not "completed" with the wedding ceremony but is a kinship practice that is gradually "substantiated" over time. Government portal descriptions identify this custom as typical of Southeast Guizhou [1]. Some scholars interpret this residential pattern as a unique buffer space reserved for women within a patriarchal social framework [7].

By deepening the woman's identity as a "member of her natal family," it lessens the tension to which she might be exposed to the husband's family, and it preserves ever after the important position of her family of maternal kindred in the new family. The termination of marriage in this sense is a process of development and of movement, something dynamic, not a pre-determined contractual point. On the other hand, in the material of Northeast Guizhou and in the reports, there is very much less stress laid on 'zuojia,' and the process of marriage is more a continuous flow in which the gifts on presentation are followed up with the phrase 'West welcome the wife,' the 'marriage banquet.' After the completion of the offering of gifts, the social recognition of marriage is consecutive, and continuous, and the process spectacularly quicker, and the thing is more of a 'Patrilocal' type of 'instantaneous.' That is to say that after the marriage is consummated, the identity of the wife rapidly passes from the aspect of a member of her natal family to that of a member of her husband's family. These two different types of family existence are profoundly indicative of the different aspects of the understanding of the relation of family, of the relation of husband and wife, and the transformation of female identity in these two regions respectively.

5. Costumes and Silver Ornaments: "Visible Identity" as Symbolic Capital

The wedding is the peak moment for wearing meaning. Southeast Guizhou (Taijiang–Shidong, Xijiang) is renowned for its silver ornaments: a full set including silver horns, silver clothes, neck rings, chest locks, etc., can weigh over ten kilograms. It is both an embodiment of aesthetics and craftsmanship and a comprehensive symbol of the family's economic capacity and good wishes. The national-level intangible cultural heritage platform clearly lists "Miao silver ornament forging technique" as a representative project and points out that Taijiang is an important representative area [8]. At the wedding scene, the "visible" identity comes from both the meaning of the costume patterns and the "value density" brought by the accumulation of silver ornaments.

This entire elaborate attire, especially the brilliant silver ornaments, transcends a purely aesthetic function and constitutes what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu [9] called "symbolic capital." It is a prestige that can be "seen." As some studies [10] describe, the quantity, weight, and craftsmanship of the silver ornaments all visually proclaim a family's economic strength and social status. Northeast Guizhou

also values elaborate attire, but in public reports, the wedding narrative is more often developed through etiquette—wine rituals—welcoming the bride, and the "institutionalized display" of costume symbolism is not as focused as on Southeast Guizhou. This indicates that the elaborate wedding attire of Southeast Guizhou, especially the silver ornaments, is not just mere decoration but has become a highly symbolized cultural capital that can be used to measure family prestige and wealth, and its display function in the wedding ceremony has been intensified to the extreme.

6. Comparative Summary

To present the differences between the two regions more intuitively, the core comparative points are summarized in table 1 below.

Table 1. Comparison of Core Differences in Miao Weddings between Southeast and Northeast Guizhou.

Dimension of Comparison	Southeast Guizhou (taking Leishan, Taijiang as examples)	Northeast Guizhou (taking Songtao as an example)
Youth Social Interaction and Spouse Selection	Centered on "youfang," with active festival social interactions, strong youth autonomy, and an emotional basis preceding the marriage proposal.	Greater emphasis on the matchmaker's words and family arrangements; "presenting gifts/sending chicken wine" is the key node for establishing the relationship.
Engagement Determination Mechanism	"Chicken divination" is common to divine the auspiciousness of the marriage, appealing to the verdict of supernatural forces; "maternal uncle money" highlights the authority of the maternal uncle.	"Sending chicken wine" is the core etiquette, marking the achievement of a social contract and emphasizing public recognition between the families.
Wedding and Residence	The long-term custom of "not settling in the husband's home (zuojia)" exists; marriage is seen as a dynamic process that is gradually completed.	The wedding process is compact; cohabitation begins immediately after welcoming the bride; marriage tends toward an "instant completion" model.
Ritual Symbolism	Characterized by complete, systematized sets of silver ornaments, which are a concentrated visual display of family wealth and status.	The wedding narrative focuses more on exchanged gifts like wine and chicken, as well as language rituals such as "wedding ceremonial speeches."

7. Conclusion

Through the comparison of Miao weddings in Southeast and Northeast Guizhou, this article finds that under a similar cultural framework, the two exhibit distinctly different social logics. The wedding in Southeast Guizhou is more like a "slow variable" process, from youfang to festivals, from chicken divination to zuojia: the timeline for establishing the marital relationship is extended, ritual expression is intense and unrestrained, the individual agency of the youth and supernatural beliefs play important roles, and symbolic capital represented by silver ornaments is highly emphasized.

In contrast, the wedding in Northeast Guizhou, the compact arrangement of "presenting gifts/sending chicken wine—welcoming the bride" brings the relationship between the two families into a quick "landing" process through social etiquette, as a social and widely recognized contract.

The significance of this study is in that it shows us the remarkable differences in the cultural community of the "Miao" and reminds us to avoid a homogenized imagination of any ethnic group culture. At the same time, it also shows that the seemingly traditional wedding customs in them, in fact, include various different strategies adopted by the different regions of society in the matter of family relations, the establishment of social contracts and the expression of culture identity.

Of course, this study is mainly based on public documentary materials and has not been able to carry on actual observations by deep field work, and this constitutes its only great limitation. Here future studies may grow, by means of considerable interviews and participatory observation, and further consult the historical reasons for differences in these wedding customs, social changes, new developments in present customs.

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