

Miao

Miáozú 苗族

As one of the fifty-five officially recognized ethnic minority groups in China, the Miao have a long and rich history. They have demonstrated the highest level of ethnic adherence and tenacity despite migration and adaptation to new environments. In recent decades, because of wars and economic necessity, the Miao have established themselves in communities around the world.

The Miao, an ethnic group that originated in China, is the fifth-largest ethnic group in the country, numbering 8.94 million in 2000 (according to the Fifth National Census). (The Hmong, a branch of the Miao, make up about a third of the Miao population—there is no name for them in Chinese, however—and many Hmong as well have migrated to Southeast Asia and abroad.) The Miao inhabit the southern provinces of Guizhou, Hunan, Yunnan, Sichuan, Guangdong, and Hubei, as well as the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region.

Miao Groups

During their long history, the Miao have acquired distinct visible ethnic traditions, such as the color of design of their women's costumes, to differentiate one subgroup of the Miao from another. Miao in western Hunan are called Red Miao; those in southeastern Guizhou, Black Miao; and those in northwestern Guizhou and northeastern

Yunnan, Big Flowery Miao. Other well-known group names include White Miao, Green Miao, Blue Miao, and Small Flowery Miao. As a result of the Ethnic Identification Project of the 1950s, all the subgroups living in different areas of China were given the unified name Miao and designated one of the fifty-five officially recognized ethnic groups in mainland China (fifty-six including the majority Han).

Through most of China's history, all ethnic minorities were regarded as barbarians by Chinese speakers. The term *Miao* was often used with *man*, a generic term for "southern barbarians." In some southern Chinese subdialects, *miao* was used as an adjective to describe a person as fierce or stubborn. The name Miao in itself is by no means derogatory in China. In Chinese the word means "young plant" or "offspring." It has long existed as the name of an ethnic group and as a surname among the Han, the dominant ethnic group of China.

Miao Language and Writing

The Miao language belongs to the Miao-Yao subfamily of the Sino-Tibetan language family. Because of a long history of migration and scattered settlements in isolated mountain regions, the language has developed into scores of dialects, many of them mutually unintelligible. Based on their linguistic characteristics, locations, and extent of intelligibility, these dialects have been identified in three dialect areas: the Western Hunan (or Eastern), Eastern Guizhou (or Central), and Sichuan–Guizhou–Yunnan (or Western).

The Miao language was once only a spoken language. Linguists, working with native speakers, created a writing system in 1956. Four of the Miao dialects now use a romanized alphabetic writing system.

Miao Culture

The Miao have an extremely rich oral tradition, complete with mythologies, legends, histories, poems, dramas,

operas, and songs. In Chinese historical literature, the recorded history of the Miao is as long as that of any other group in China. Chinese records contain information on Miao ethnic origin, migration, customs, social structure, economic activities, technical achievements, and relations with other ethnic groups and the state. Throughout their history, the Miao have demonstrated the highest level of ethnic adherence and tenacity.

The Miao follow a patrilineal descent system (descent through the father's line) and a patronymic linkage

A young girl dressed in traditional Miao (Hmong) clothing and jewelry. The Miao are famous for the craftsmanship of their silver ornaments. PHOTO BY WANG YING.



system (a practice in which part of the son's personal name comes from that of his father). Most young people are free to marry whom they please, but arranged marriage is also practiced in some areas. In western Hunan and Guizhou, cross-cousin marriage is practiced. This practice requires that one should marry one's cross-cousin—mother's brother's child or father's sister's child—if such a person is available. Levirate, the custom whereby a man marries the widow of his deceased brother, is also practiced in many areas. Sororate, the custom whereby, when a man's wife dies or is unable to bear children, her unmarried sister is given to him as a wife, is sometimes practiced among the Miao in Yunnan. Delayed-transfer marriage, the custom in which the bride does not live with her husband until two or three years after the wedding day, is a common practice among the Miao in Guizhou. Beyond the household grouping, relations are organized into lineages, subclans, and clans. One's position in the kinship network and role in the ritual system of ancestral worship are important ways of defining the social status of a Miao person.

In addition to ancestral worship, the Miao practice animism (endowing inanimate objects and natural forces with life) and a type of shamanism. Christianity has been practiced by some Miao in Guizhou, Yunnan, and Sichuan since the nineteenth century.

Agriculture has long been the traditional means of subsistence for the Miao, supplemented at times with fishing, hunting, and handcrafting; dyed batik cloth, a tourist favorite, has been produced by the Miao for over one thousand years. As in other regions of China and with other ethnic groups in recent decades, education has been developing rapidly in the Miao areas. Inside and outside of China, the Miao have their own teachers, lawyers, medical doctors, scientists, and engineers.

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Further Reading

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