
Historic Development and Cultural Landscapes of the Miao of Southwest China

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Abstract

Over nine million people are distributed among the four major sub-groups of the Miao people of China, all of whom speak mutually unintelligible languages (although they are officially referred to as dialects). After a review of their origins, a general picture is presented of the village-based, socio-economic and cultural landscapes of this minority which is geographically dispersed throughout southwestern China. The basic hypothesis of this work is that societies are reflected by the cultural landscapes that they produce. Finally, there is a growing awareness in various Miao communities that, despite their distinctive characteristics, they belong to a larger more inclusive Miao nationality. With this comes the advantage of being able to access additional financial and technical inputs into their socio-economic development.

Key words: Miao, Cultural landscapes, Hmong, Hmu, A-Hmao, Ghao-Xiong, Guizhou, Yunnan

***Brief bio of author**

PhD (McGill). Health status and risk factors research (1980 - 2006) in four geographic areas: Arctic Québec (Inuit), Mongolia (semi-nomadic herders), Yunnan (Hmong and A-Hmao) and the Qing-Zang (Tibetan) Plateau (Kham). Over 40 research trips to China, many in the southwest, over the past 25 years. Relief and development work in Haïti (1977-79). Professor of medical and cultural geography (undergraduate and graduate levels) and of a 'flagship' course on the Regional/Human Geography of China, for 20 years. Two relevant publications: 1) Foggin, P.M. & S. Carrier, 2010 *The Miao of China: An emerging nationality*. In *Regional minorities and development in Asia*. H. Cao and E. Morrell, eds., 138-155. London and New York: Routledge; 2) Foggin, P., N. Armijo-Hussein, C. Marigaux, C. Shu and Z. Liu, 2001 Child mortality and risk factors among the Miao of Yunnan, China. *Social Science and Medicine* 53 : 1683-1696. Fluency in French and mid-level Mandarin.

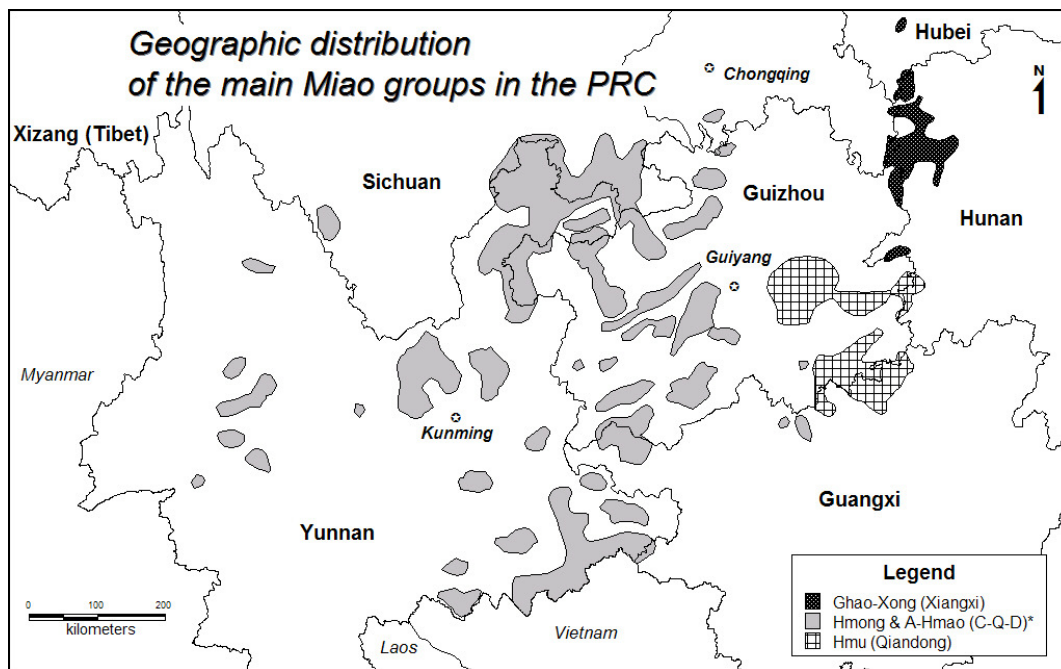
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In China there are 55 officially designated minorities which are said to be ‘nationalities’ (plus the dominant Han majority which is also referred to as a nationality). However, these are in many cases rather general ethnic categories composed of multiple ethno-linguistic groups or sub-groups, each with its own language and cultural history. This is the case of the Miao who are the fifth largest of these minority groups, outnumbered only by the Zhuang, the Manchu (of the northeast), the Mandarin-speaking Muslim Hui, and very close in number to the Uygur people of Xinjiang in the northwest. Studying the Miao is further complicated by the fact that this minority category is far from being either ethnically or socio-economically homogeneous. Nor do they live in areas separate from other ‘competing’ minorities. For example, even in certain counties or prefectures that are specifically designated as “Miao autonomous areas”, there frequently are other minorities that share these same territories.

The Miao designation as one of China’s 55 minorities (‘nationalities’²) includes four major ethnic groups. Nevertheless, and perhaps surprisingly, the very existence of this official category appears to engender a sense of identity that transcends to some extent the basic ethno-linguistic divisions existing within itself (Foggin and Carrier, 2010). At the last national census in 2010 the Miao category included just over 9,426,000 or .71 % of China’s total population at the time (NBS, 2012). They are concentrated for the most part in southwest China, particularly in Guizhou, Yunnan, Hunan and Sichuan provinces and in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region (Figure 1).

Figure 1 – The geographic distribution of the main Miao groups of China

(Source: Foggin and Carrier, 2010)



* (With Figure 1) C-Q-D (Chuan-Qian-Dian) – the broad linguistic category which officially includes both the Hmong and the A-Hmiao, although their languages are mutually unintelligible. A significant number of contemporary authors consider the A-Hmiao and the Hmong to be two distinct groups. The former are located in northwest Guizhou and in northeast and north-central Yunnan.

Any analysis of the historic development of the Miao nationality in China faces tremendous obstacles, in particular that of the absence prior to the 20th century of any writing system the various sub-groups could call their own. As a result, any historical work in this realm has had to resort to Chinese sources, virtually all of which are incomplete and imprecise (Michaud and Culas, 2004; Tapp and Cohn 2003). In pre-Qin times (over 2200 years ago) the word Miao was often used in the following three combinations: *Miaomin* (苗民), *Youmiao* (有苗), and *Sanmiao* (三苗), particularly the latter, for designating *any* or *all* non-Han groups in the south of China. This lack of precision has continued over the centuries so that Chinese sources have often used

the word Miao with different meanings in varying contexts (Mottin, 1980; Yang, 1989; Schein, 2000). It wasn't until the Song period (from the 10th century onward) that its use began to be limited to certain populations in the southwest of China (Ruey, 1960). However, the common color divisions (Red Miao, etc.) and the *sheng* vs. *shu* ('cooked' vs. 'raw') designations date back to the Ming Dynasty (1278-1644) (Tapp, 1989). Since 1957, in addition to referring to members of a specific national minority called the Miao, multiple meanings of the word still remain (Lemoine, 1998; Tapp, 2002).

In my view, there are two overriding general but opposing theories regarding the origins of the Miao, although Schein (2000) identified no less than five geographic categories of their origin (North, South, East, West and Centre). The first of these two perspectives, and probably the most contested view, implies the existence of a single original group that arrived from the north, either from south-central Siberia or from Mongolia. This would have been a group that also inhabited the valley of the Yellow River over 4000 years ago. According to this hypothesis, the present day cultural and linguistic differences of the Miao are superficial and should be explained in terms of a stormy, historical migratory pathway over the centuries marked by many conflicts (particularly with the Han) and by important geographical (i.e. spatial) diffusion in several directions. Strongly influenced by his religious ideology, Savina (1924) linked the Miao to the Touranians, a Caucasian people who apparently left, 7,000 years ago, the shores of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, going first to Siberia, and then on through Mongolia to eventually establish themselves on the shores of the Yellow River some 4000 years ago. Taken up and diffused throughout the 20th century by a wide range of intellectuals (De Beauclair, 1970; Lartéguy, 1979; Wang, 1988), as well as by official representatives, the hypothesis of a common

northern origin of all the Miao is now deeply ingrained in the popular beliefs of the Miao people both in China, Southeast Asia and elsewhere in the world where they have migrated. This particular historical interpretation is, in fact, at the heart of the Miao identity-building project of the present day (Schein, 2004; Foggin and Carrier, 2010).

The second major perspective concerning the origins of the Miao suggests, by way of contrast, that the various present-day Miao sub-groups have probably had varying lines of historic development. Taken up by several contemporary authors (Tapp, 2004; Michaud and Culas, 2004; Schein, 2000; Zhang, 1989; Enwall, 1995), this somewhat more realistic view of the history and geographic distribution of the Miao bases its argument on the fact that the vernaculars of four Miao sub-groups are sufficiently different to be considered distinct languages within the Miao-Yao language family (Wang, 1988) which is similar in its breadth to that of the ‘Romance’ languages of Europe.

It is geographically interesting to note that many Miao groups occupy broken pieces of territory, interspersed by the seemingly random appearance of many other minority groups (such as the Dong, Yao, Yi, Tujia, Buyi and Zhuang). This however is much less true of the Hmong Miao of southern Sichuan, western Guizhou and eastern Yunnan. Nevertheless, although ethnic boundaries *seem* relatively clear when depicted on maps, in fact this is very often not the case. For example, the presence of regional dialects or languages spoken by the populations of various ‘nationalities’ (among them, the Miao) in the same geographic area gives the impression in many cases that these diverse groups are more related to each other (for example, the Zhuang and the Hmong Miao of Wenshan Miao-Zhuang Autonomous Prefecture in southeastern Yunnan) than

are many of the different sub-groups of the Miao that live elsewhere in the country. However, this geographical proximity of differing ethnic groups is probably due more to the phenomenon of shifting cultivation than anything else, whereby historically the concept of the ownership of land and territory was not a criterion for the maintenance of a group's identity. Further, Chinese settlers have come to increasingly occupy the more fertile lowlands, so that the Miao peoples have often been forced to live and farm in the less productive highlands of the region. Still, in spite of our hypothesis that the Hmu, the Gho Xiong, the Hmong, and the A-Hmao (all officially referred to as Miao) come from *differing* geographic origins (Foggin and Carrier, 2010), historical arguments linking the Miao to the *Sanmiao* (of the Yellow River basin of antiquity) should not be excluded, as this could well be plausible *for at least some of these groups* that have been lumped together under the Miao designation. It should also be remembered that the unitary origin theory is generally part of the official (i.e., governmental) position on the question of the origin of the Miao. Certainly, as pointed out by Tapp in a recent personal communication, "Ruey (1960) [...] never seriously doubted that all the Miao he studied [the Gho Xiong, or Xiangxi Miao, of western Hunan and the Hmong Magpie Miao of Guizhou] were originally of one stock".

As of the fifteenth century, the majority of China's *southern* minority peoples were known as the 'Miao' (in its sweeping generalized sense), even though there were also references to other peoples in this region, such as the Man, the Yi and the Qiang. They have often been referred to as either being open to assimilation, the so-called *Shu Miao* (literally, the "cooked" Miao), and those who were not, the *Sheng* ("raw") *Miao*. Underlying this type of distinction was the idea that these groups were the ancestors of all the non-Han peoples of the South including,

of course, the people under today's more restricted (but still very broad) official designation of the Miao nationality (Diamond, 1995; Harrell, 2001).

A second type of categorization began in the eighteenth century by Chinese explorers and scholars who travelled extensively in the Southwest. Their thinking was no doubt conditioned by the growing colonization of the south and its absorption into the Empire that began as early as the 15th century (when Guizhou, for example, first began to be colonized by the Han). This later trend in the 1700s was motivated by the hope of illustrating the traditional and exotic nature of non-Han peoples (Tapp, 2012; Hostetler and Deal, 2007; Tapp, 2003). They proceeded to develop a classification of these populations on the basis of geographic, social and cultural criteria that would clearly distinguish them from the Han. For example, types of clothing, women's hair styles and head dress (even today, the elaborate silver ornamentation worn on the heads of young Miao women in eastern Guizhou is, in the public consciousness, what has become a national icon and a ubiquitous symbol of Miao identity), geographical environment and the use of traditional objects and practices were used to make such distinctions (Diamond, 1995; Ruey, 1960). At least thirteen groups of Miao were first identified in this way, the most important numerically being the so-called 'White' Miao, the 'Flowery' Miao, the 'Black' Miao, the 'Green' Miao, and the 'Red' Miao. These categories also corresponded to the images that were presented in various *Miao* albums, collections of 18th and 19th century paintings, usually in water color, of scenes and stereotypes of various minorities in the South as envisaged by mostly anonymous Han Chinese painters. These have been presented in a condensed fashion and analyzed in a fascinating little volume called *The Tribal Peoples of Southwest China: Chinese Views of the Other Within* by Nicholas Tapp and Don Cohn (2003). For example, the *A-Hmao* or

Da Hua (Big Flowery) Miao of northwest Guizhou and northeast Yunnan are shown in a special way in a painting (Photo 1, taken from Tapp and Cohn, 2003) of their “Moon Dance of seduction [...] with the playing of reed pipes [the *lusheng*] and shaking of bells. The two *lusheng* shown here are short ones, unlike the long ones in use in Southeast Guizhou, and more like those used by the Hmong” (Tapp and Cohn 2003, 106). There are 53 plates like this, including various branches of the Miao category, each reproduction being identified, described and explained in some detail. Another similar collection was published later by Hostetler and Deal (2007).

Much has been made of the ‘Miao’ rebellions of the 18th century. However, according to Jenks (1994) and McMahon (2002), the expression is deceptive since many other minorities in addition to the Miao took part in these uprisings. Other populations (including many poverty-stricken Han) also mobilized together to protest the oppressive policies of the Qing (especially the land take-overs and excessively high taxation). It is the connection with these rebellions that may explain in large part the persistent image of the Miao, even to this day, as that of a warrior and rebellious people (Schein, 2000). They were also involved in other uprisings, notably the Muslim Rebellions (1818; 1855-1873) and the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1872) (Michaud and Culas, 2004). Another dimension was that of the growing presence of foreign powers in China which greatly impacted the way of life of many of the minorities of the Southwest, particularly in relation to the production of opium (Newman, 1995). These were principally the Lolo (part of today’s Yi category), the Yao and the Miao (more specifically, the Hmong, the most numerous of the four main Miao subgroups (Geddes, 1976; Tapp, 1989; Lee, 2005).



Photo 1: Plate No. 12, Tapp and Cohn (2003, 106), with permission, of the “Big Flowery” Miao (A-Hmao)

In addition to regular confrontations with the Qing (1644-1911) and the oppression to which they were subjected, the Miao had to cope with successive famines (Li, 1982). This difficult situation, which lasted right through the 18th and 19th centuries, incited many Miao (but only of the Hmong) to migrate towards Southeast Asia (Thailand, Vietnam, Burma and Laos) in search of a better environment for their lives. Whereas the first documented waves of these

migrations took place in the 18th century, the biggest population movement took place in the second half of the 19th century. For example, many Hmong from Sichuan and Guizhou reached Southeast Asia via Yunnan, using the routes developed by Chinese Muslim itinerant traders (*Haw*) (Michaud and Culas, 2004). None the less, the majority of the Miao remained within Chinese territory, isolated for the most part in the mountains of the southwest provinces, a geographic area that the Miao have occupied right through to the present.

Although at first less frequent than under the Qing, contacts between the Han and the Miao became more numerous in the second half of the twentieth century with the founding of the People's Republic of China and the official creation of what was to become known as the Miao nationality. More than ever before, the history of the Miao, together with that of other minorities in the Southwest, became entwined with that of the Han. In fact, the official existence of these minorities would become an integral part of the new ethnic frontiers surrounding the Chinese (Han) nation. The declaration of the Republic of China in 1912 was fundamentally linked to the question of Chinese nationalism and to a definition of the Chinese identity. The Chinese nation was defined exclusively by the culture and civilization of the Han and did not include any of the non-Han peoples (Golfin, 1982; Dikötter, 1996). However, it was imperative for the new (Guo Min Tang, or Nationalist) Republic to reconcile the logic of its nationalism with the need to control the surrounding territories. To do this a "Republic of five nations" was decreed, namely composed of the Han, the Hui (Chinese Muslims), the Meng (Mongols), the Manchu (of the Northeast or Manchuria) and the Zang (Tibetans). As can be seen, the minority peoples of China's southwest (including, of course, the various Miao groups) were granted absolutely no special status in this early part of the 20th century. Rather, they were considered to be primitive

peoples at a lower stage of cultural development than that of the Han “race” (Eberhard, 1982; Harrell, 2001). As a result, unabashed assimilation of the minorities was the philosophy that marked the political landscape of the Republican era (Mackerras, 1995). However, in spite of this negative (and repressive) philosophy, the 1930s and 40s of the regional warlords were so tumultuous that the peoples of the Southwest, in practice, were scarcely affected by these integrationist trends. In point of fact, some of the more isolated multi-ethnic areas in Yunnan and Guizhou were virtually beyond the pale of central government policies.

In spite of sporadic migrations towards Southeast Asia which lasted until the 1960s, the vast majority of the Miao remained in the rural areas of the Southwest growing maize and rice (Lee, 2005). Contacts with the Han were largely those maintained by Chinese ethnologists whose research followed much the same logic as that developed during the 18th and 19th centuries. They still emphasized the description of customs and other cultural characteristics that were considered by the Han to be primitive and traditional (i.e. ceremonies, funeral rites, religious beliefs, handicrafts, dress and so on). Ethnological texts continued to use the same ethnonyms as before (Diamond, 1995). In fact, the Miao themselves began to refer to themselves by these same names (White Miao, Black Miao, etc.) in order to distinguish themselves from other populations of the region.

As of the 1950s, officially renouncing traditional and Confucian doctrines, the policies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in relation to the minorities were remarkably similar to those of its predecessors (Harrell, 1995). The coming to power of the CCP in 1949 at first brought a period of tolerance with regard to national minorities, officially decreeing the equality of all the peoples of China. Furthermore, regional autonomy - although usually involving a

symbolic rather than a real participation of minorities in local government (Mackerras, 1995) - was gradually implemented. Minority territories were created at different geographical scales: autonomous regions, prefectures and districts (counties). However, from the end of the 1950s into the 1970s there was a radicalization of government policy with regard to the minorities. This was the period of the grandiose and utopian ideas of cultural standardization as witnessed by the so-called “Great Leap Forward” (1958-1961) and the “Cultural Revolution” (1966-1976). As a reaction to the repression that was encountered, several minorities, including several Miao groups in Guizhou, were involved in sporadic uprisings. After the death of Mao Zedong (1976), the new constitution adopted in 1982 and the law concerning the autonomy of minority areas decreed in 1984 reaffirmed the cultural, linguistic, religious and social rights of minority peoples (Heberer, 1989; Mackerras, 1995). There were even policies legislated that were to the advantage of minorities: for example, the right to have more than one child without the usual sanctions, as well as greater access to educational opportunities (i.e. higher quotas through lower entry requirements, a type of affirmative action).

A formal classification of the minorities was undertaken in the late 1950s (Tapp, 2002). The official reason given for this exercise was to identify the historic and cultural reality of various ethnic groups with a view to leading them to a ‘common level of modernity’ (Harrell, 1995). A multitude of civil servants and ethnologists was unleashed to conduct what was to be a somewhat arbitrary categorization of ethnic groups, theoretically based on Stalin’s criteria of ethnicity: common language, common territory, common economic life and common psychological characteristics. In order to facilitate this work, the authorities first asked minorities to identify themselves as such; more than 400 ethnic groups did so, including 260 in the single province of Yunnan, all of whom were seeking official recognition (Tapp, 2002). However,

since the choice of which groups would be considered national minorities was the prerogative of Chinese authorities (and not the right of minorities themselves), this process led to the official recognition of 53 ethnic categories by the 1963 census, with one more added in 1965 and another in 1979. The end result was that many of the southern ethnic groups that had historically been referred to as *Miao* were designated a single national minority, in spite of their obvious cultural and linguistic differences. By insisting on the exotic and traditional aspects of the *Miao* and other national minorities in this categorization process, the government began a redefinition of the Han identity (which incarnated modernity and wealth) by neutralizing in this way the “other” (characterized by traditionalism and poverty). Both Gladney (1994) and Schein (2000) have noted this definitional trend, 1) within the tourism industry, 2) through the national media and 3) in school textbooks, whereby national minorities are stigmatized as connected to folkloric, impoverished and “uncivilized” populations.

It is clear then that the *Miao* national minority is an artificial social construction largely independent of the populations that have been lumped together in this way. However, since ethnicity is itself a dynamic social construct and subject to change over time (Juteau, 1999), the above affirmation is more valid for the situation at the time this category was created, namely in 1957. In fact, in some ways the various groups who were included have naturalized and internalized over time the official *Miao* designation because it allows them to experience a larger identity at the national scale (Jenkins, 2000). Such a statement, of course, is based on the idea that ethnic identities are not simple but multidimensional and unifying (Gallissot, 1987). It can be said then that, in spite of the tremendous cultural diversity of the socially constructed *Miao* category, their collective identity has become a reality both at a national (Diamond, 1995), and even at an international (Schein, 2004) scale. However, following a survey of 51 *Miao* villages in

Yunnan, we noted that this feeling of belonging to a broader ethnic category is fragile and varies considerably across geographic space (Foggin *et al*, 2001; Carrier, 2004). In fact, this larger unifying Miao identity, although real, does not replace at the present time the strong sense of place-specific and language-specific identity which is attached to each and all of the component groups of the Miao category (Foggin and Carrier, 2010).

As noted at the outset of this overview, on the basis of the 2010 census, we can safely say that there are well over nine million people who are part of the Miao nationality of China (Lemoine, 2005). To describe the major Miao ethno-linguistic subgroups, starting in the east, there are the *Ghao-X[i]ong* (also often referred to by two other names, the Xiangxi Miao or the Red Miao) in western Hunan province. Their language or dialect has two main vernaculars, the western dialect for over 90 per cent of the speakers and the eastern version comprising slightly less than 10 per cent. The *Hmu*, also known as Qiandongnan (“Southeast Qian”) or as the *Hei* (Black) Miao of southeast and east Guizhou, have three very distinct dialects: the northern with 65 percent of the speakers, the eastern with 15 percent and the southern with 20 percent” (Enwall, 1995).

The *A-Hmao* is the third major grouping of the Miao. As a language, it is also referred to by Chinese authors as a sub-dialect (*Diandongbei*) of the Chuan-Qian-Dian (C-Q-D)³, even though it is virtually unintelligible to those speaking other sub-dialects within the C-Q-D. In reality, the *A-Hmao* people are separate and different from the Hmong (the language of whom is officially called C-Q-D). Those speaking *A-Hmao* are spread over perhaps the largest contiguous territory of any of the Miao linguistic groups. The *A-Hmao* language is spoken in northwest

Guizhou and northeast and central Yunnan (see Figure 1). As mentioned above, they are also referred to as Big Flowery (*Da Hua*) Miao, and sometimes as the so-called Variegated Miao. There is a legend that the written language of the *A-Hmao*, carried by their leader around his neck, was washed away as they swam for their lives across the great river (the Chang Jiang or Yangtse) during the great migration from the north (Diamond, 1995; Enwall, 1995). So when certain foreigners appeared among them early in the 20th century and reduced their language to writing, it was easy for them to make the logical jump that their written language had at long last been ‘rediscovered’ (Culas, 2005). Indeed, this written form of the *A-Hmao* language is still in use. The present day version is an adaptation of the original syllabics and is called the ‘Reformed Pollard script’.

Last (but certainly not least!), **Hmong** language dialects are spoken by between a third and a half of those classified as Miao in China. In a telling commentary Lemoine says: “Back to the anthropological facts, ethnic (H)mong of China are but a part of the Miao political minority nationality and I see *no logical way that other Miao (like the Ke Xiong [Gho Xong], the A Hmao or the Hmu) could pretend to be considered as belonging to the same (H)mong ethnic group or change (H)mong from an ethnic name into a category name equivalent to Miao* (my italics). [Conversely], there is no way for the (H)mong outside China to enter the Chinese Miao ‘nationality’ unless by resettling into China and being granted the Miao minority nationality status. Because they correspond to different levels of the social sphere, we should remember that ethnicity and [Chinese] minority nationality are mutually not transferable” (2008, 9).

The Hmong are also distributed over a vast area, including central and west Guizhou, south Sichuan and many parts of Yunnan. In Chinese publications all their dialects are referred to collectively as the ‘Western dialect’ or by the title Chuan-Qian-Dian³. Major designations within this group are the White (*Hmong Daw*) Miao, the Blue/Green (*Njua*) Miao and the Small Flowery (*Atse*) Miao (Enwall, 1995; Tapp, 2002; Gordon, 2005). With regard to *hmongic* dialects, Enwall observed that there is an even greater variety of spoken forms in central Guizhou, but that since they were most closely “related” to Hmong, it was decided to consider them as sub-dialects of the expanded Chuan-Qian-Dian, along with *A-Hmao* (their supposed “dialect” being called *diandongbei*) and five other sub-dialects. None the less, even given this enormous proliferation of sub-groups *within* the Miao nationality, there is more and more a sense of collective identity due to the general belonging to this overall nationally-imposed category. There is also a growing number of more or less assimilated Miao sub-groups who speak the regional variant of the standard national language (Mandarin), and often they refer to themselves simply as **Han Miao**. This was found to be particularly true of some of the *hmongic* Miao living in the south of Sichuan province (within the southern counties of Yibin Municipality, south of the Yangtse River) and others that we have encountered in Wenshan (Zhuang-Miao Autonomous) prefecture in the southeast of Yunnan.

Cultural landscapes and socio-economic conditions of the Miao

One significant strand of cultural geography seeks to discover meanings within the lives of human beings by looking at the places and spaces where they live. This has given rise to a long tradition in geography that attempts to observe and describe the *geographic expression of*

cultures. In general, this is done through the observation and analysis of diverse cultural landscapes. Since there is a multiplicity of meanings attached to the word ‘culture’, it should be said right away that, for the purposes of this discussion, the term ‘culture’ is understood to be the dynamic mixing (through time and across geographic space) of learned (as opposed to innate) knowledge (this includes symbols, meanings, beliefs, values, languages and practices), techniques and institutions. Indeed, cultural landscapes exist because there are ‘cultural processes’ that exist whereby people continually elaborate and increase their understanding of the world around them. The building of this kind of understanding is arguably *fundamentally geographic* in that these culture-building processes inevitably leave their mark on the spaces and places in which people live and work. In fact, it has been argued that in the developing of new meanings and in decoding existing meanings, human beings construct at least five kinds of geographic entities (Anderson and Gale, 1992; 1999). They build: 1) *spaces* (e.g. an agricultural area on a delta); 2) *places* (e.g. religious buildings which are, typically, loaded with meaning); 3) *cultural landscapes* (e.g. a rural landscape such as the terraced rice paddies of east and southeast Asia); 4) *regions* (e.g. a specific urban or agricultural area having particular characteristics); and 5) *environments* (e.g. a healthy as opposed to an unhealthy environment). To summarize this approach then: human beings construct diverse geographies because they organize distinctive and functional spaces; they fashion cultural landscapes by the cumulative effect of their activities; they erect (or destroy) monuments (whether historical, political, religious or aesthetic); they build and evaluate their spaces and places (changing or adapting them as necessary); and they build environments and territories⁵.

Given the wide range of ethnic groups within the Miao category, it is difficult to generalize in terms of distinctive cultural landscapes and characteristics. We have seen how, historically, the dominant Han have tended to describe each Miao sub-group in terms of its superficial characteristics such as, for example, the colors and patterns of traditional clothing (Ramsey, 1989; Tapp, 2003). Our intent here is to describe briefly in a somewhat more substantive (and certainly a more visual) way at least some aspects of Miao cultures *through* the cultural landscapes that have been observed and photographed.

Agricultural practices and crops can be a useful starting point. From our observations, the staple foods that are grown by various groups of the Miao in southwest China are maize/corn, rice, potatoes, sweet potatoes and other root crops, buckwheat, oats, millet, barley, beans, soya beans, greens and cabbages. People generally reserve and prepare pork, beef or fowl for festivals and other special days such as weddings, funerals and house-warmings. Some food products, such as tea, flour and sometimes rice (i.e., where it is not grown), often have to be purchased, whereas the bulk of their diet is locally produced. Obviously, Miao populations in lower areas who are able to cultivate irrigated rice are in a much better position to regularly consume rice than those in isolated upland and mountainous areas. Clearly, agricultural and dietary practices are a major component of their cultural landscapes (Photo 2).



Photo 2: An agricultural landscape at Langde Hmu village in the Kaili region

There are many regional culinary variations. For example, in southeast Guizhou cooks make a sour mixture of glutinous rice and vegetables by packing them tightly into jars for up to two months. Regional culinary specialties such as this could be described for each of the many Miao sub-groups (Lee, 2005). These kinds of practices can be seen as a part of the cultural landscape on the occasion of frequent festivals where great numbers gather together in vast outdoor collective spaces. Within these spaces are created special kinds of *place* (e.g. food stalls, fields for bull fights, eating areas, and so on). This reminds us of the fleeting nature of some cultural landscapes, some of which exist only at certain times of the year (e.g. spring plantings, late summer harvests, musical and other specific practices depending on the nature of a given festival). The temporal dimension is an essential component in the observation and analysis of various cultural landscapes (Photos 3 and 4).



Photo 3: Huangping (Si-Yue-Ba, April 8, 2013) Lusheng (reed pipes) Festival



Photo 4: Huangping Lusheng Festival – notice the reed pipes called lusheng

In terms of housing, since timber is still relatively plentiful in certain mountainous regions (such as southeastern Guizhou), houses in such areas are most often built of wood, and roofed with fir bark, ceramic tiles, or thatch (Photos 5 and 6). However, in central and western Guizhou, houses are often roofed with stone slabs. Although metal roofing is no doubt used in more geographically accessible areas we have only occasionally observed this material in use in the villages visited over the last fifteen years. In central and southeastern Yunnan, houses tend to be made of reddish brick materials.



Photo 5 – Housing in Da Hong Zhai, a Hmu Miao village in the mountains of southeast Guizhou



Photo 6 – Mrs Zang, a Hmu Miao grandmother with Da Hong Zhai homes lying behind her

Scattered among these homes are the various structures that are required for their agricultural lifestyle: particularly, small barns and sheds in which to store crops, equipment and supplies as well as to provide shelter for animals. In the Zhaotong area in northeastern Yunnan many (*A-Hmao*) Miao live in thatched huts or “branch houses”, made of woven branches and twigs or bamboo strips plastered with mud. In steeper mountainous areas, dwellings are usually built on slopes and are very often partially raised on stilts. Animals are kept under the stilted floors or in small covered enclosures close to each house; piggeries of this type are very common. Often there are standard farming tools (e.g. steel-tipped wooden ploughs, threshing machines) as well as ingenious devices such as, for example, a long, levered hammer-like wooden tool for the crushing of potatoes into a kind of paste. One characteristic trait of many Miao villages, at least in Yunnan, is the large number of tobacco-curing kilns. Apparently, these

tall structures (up to 10 meters in height) have been subsidized by local and provincial governments in the recent past so that in some villages there seem to be as many tobacco-curing structures as there are houses. These buildings are often used for other purposes when tobacco production is not 'in season'. The cultivation of tobacco often replaces food production (particularly rice) as a profitable cash crop. Domestic and international tobacco firms provide strong incentives and are viewed as a potential source of prosperity.

Education (or the lack of it) drives another component of the cultural landscape. For example, concerned with educational needs and basing their calculations on census data, Attané and Courbage (2000) concluded that Miao rates of illiteracy were among the highest in China: relatively high among men (26 %) but over twice as high in the case of women (58 %). By way of contrast, in the same region only 12% of *Han* men were unable to understand written Chinese, but 31 % of Han women were still functionally illiterate. Similarly, we were able to observe in our own survey work in southeast and central Yunnan that in Wenshan county 64 % of the Miao 15 years of age or older had *not* finished primary school⁶, whereas 52 % of the same Miao age-group in Luquan county (to the north of Kunming) found themselves in the same situation. As can be seen from the above percentages, levels of functional illiteracy are still high among adults. Furthermore, the percentage of boys attending school is still much higher than it is for girls. Usually, there is a primary school attached to each administrative village (made up of several 'natural' villages). The local Miao language is used in the first years of primary school, at least where the school teachers are Miao themselves, which is very often not the case, together with standard Chinese (*putonghua*). Otherwise, pupils are obliged to try to understand standard Chinese from day one, which clearly puts them at a disadvantage (Photo 7).



Photo 7: Pupils in Da Hong Zhai on their way home for lunch. Their school is just down the hill.

The robustness of a population is also reflected through certain aspects of the cultural landscape. With regard to health, two studies (one in central Guizhou province and the other in southeastern Yunnan have observed that rates of infant and child mortality (classic and telling indicators of health status) are alarmingly high: well in excess of 100 deaths before the first birthday for every 1000 live births (Huang *et al* 1997, 1031; Foggin *et al* 2001, 1688). The majority of these deaths during the first year of life are due to respiratory illnesses suggesting the importance of the physical and social environments to the survival of infants and children (those under 5). Further, another roughly 25 % of infant deaths are related to birth asphyxia and neonatal tetanus, which would lead one to conclude that birthing practices, in addition to the environment, are also related to these high rates of infant mortality (Huang *et al* 1997, 1034).

With regard to adults, respiratory illnesses are also predominant. However, there are also periodic outbreaks of other contagious diseases (for example, typhoid fever). Health care facilities are virtually always lacking in Miao villages, and often when there is a serious, or even a life-threatening illness, lack of financial resources often prevents people from traveling to the regional hospital in each county centre. Anecdotally, one very young woman who had been in labour for two full days rode in a vehicle with one of our survey teams to the county centre hospital and the lives of the new-born infant and the mother were saved. When questioned later about why she hadn't gone before, her simple answer was, 'We didn't have the money'. Clearly, cases where hospital care is *not* (geographically and financially) accessible are very common. In addition to so-called 'western medicine', traditional remedies are used, but according to our survey, not nearly as much as one might expect. Another problematic area for the health of the Miao, as for all others in rural China, is that of the excessive use of antibiotics (available 'across the counter') and the intravenous administration of medications of all sorts. Indeed, the pervasive use of gravity-fed intravenous fluid intake for minor illnesses is a standard characteristic of the medical landscape in many parts of China (Foggin and Foggin, 2006).

Summarizing then, over 9 million people are distributed among the four major sub-groups of the Miao 'nationality' in China, all of whom speak mutually unintelligible languages (although they are officially referred to as dialects). These are the Ghao-Xiong (or Xiangxi Miao) of western Hunan, the Hmu (or Qiandongnan Miao) of eastern and southeastern Guizhou, the A-Hmao (or Big Flowery Miao) of northwest Guizhou and northeast and north-central Yunnan, and finally, the Hmong of central, south and southwestern Guizhou and southeastern Yunnan. Notwithstanding their fundamental linguistic differences, the A-Hmao are included with

the Hmong under the official Chuan-Qian-Dian language group. Despite its linguistic heterogeneity, the category referred to as the Miao nationality (which includes both Hmongic and non-Hmongic peoples) has resulted in the formation of a new more-inclusive cultural identity that seems to transcend the obvious differences between its various component groups, so that it is possible to be part of a larger cultural entity which apparently brings with it new meanings, aspirations and, presumably, various advantages. It is because of this great diversity that it is difficult to formulate a general description of the Miao minority. Finally, an attempt has been made to give a very general picture of the village-based, socio-economic and cultural landscapes of this overwhelmingly agricultural and geographically dispersed population spread through southwestern China. There is a growing awareness in various Miao communities that they officially belong to the larger more inclusive Miao nationality. This has the double advantage of enabling them to have additional financial and/or technical inputs into their socio-economic development resulting, in many cases, in the improvement of their standard of living. At the same time the sub-groups of the Miao also carry on into the twenty-first century with a strong sense of their own specific cultural identities.

Endnotes

¹ Some of the material in this article draws from a chapter published by the author and Sébastien Carrier in 2010 (The Miao of China: An emerging nationality. In H. Cao and E. Morrell (eds.) *Regional minorities and development in Asia*. London and New York : Routledge, 138-155).

² “Nationalities” is the Chinese term for the 55 officially recognized minority groupings (sometimes, as in the case of the Miao, including several quite distinct ethnic groups), plus the majority Han, the vastly dominant ‘nationality’, comprising over 91 % of the population of the Peoples Republic of China.

³ The Chuan-Qian-Dian (C-Q-D), which was named after the three traditional appellations of the three province, *Chuan* (Sichuan), *Qian* (Guizhou), and *Dian* (Yunnan), is one of the three officially designated ‘dialects’ or subdivisions of the ‘Miao language’ - the two others are the Qiandongnan (or Hmu) in eastern Guizhou and the Xiangxi (or Ghao Xiong) of western Hunan

province. Following those subdivisions, government-sponsored teams of linguists developed three new forms of Miao writing systems, which are based in part on the Romanized form of Chinese (*pinyin*). The written form of the Chuan-Qian-Dian is used in official publications, and is presumably understood *to some degree* among the hmongic dialectal groups: the Hmong Daw (White Miao), the Hmong Njua (Blue/Green Miao), the Southern Mashan, the Central Huishui, the Northeastern Dian (A-Hmao), Eastern Huishui, Southwestern Guiyang, Southwestern Huishui, Chong'anjiang, Luopohe, Mashan, Northern Huishui, Northern Mashan, Western Mashan, Southern Guiyang and the Northern Guiyang (Gordon, 2005). However, our observations indicate that few people are able to read, much less write, in this (C-Q-D) script.

⁴ The A-Hmao were *officially* included with those groups in the C-Q-D (Chuan-Qian-Dian) group even though, as shown above, in reality their language is unintelligible to Hmong speakers. In addition, the A-Hmao do not use the C-Q-D written form but rather the so-called 'reformed Pollard script' (the written form of the *Diandongbei* 'dialect').

⁵ Culture is thought of as an amalgam of processes involving the interaction of many social and cultural groups and forces. Symbolic expressions in the cultural landscape usually result from some kind of interaction between human beings and the environment. Some authors suggest that these types of interaction produce cultural landscapes that can be thought of as 'texts', 'spectacles', or even 'theatre' (Rowntree, 1996; Head, 2000; Cosgrove, 1997). The production of cultural landscapes can also involve the production of certain types of environment favored by existing power structures. Finally, a cultural landscape can have various, and contested, meanings depending on what sector of society is interpreting it.

⁶ The term 'primary' school in China refers to the first six years of schooling, although in some cases it is five.

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