

CHICKEN AND FAMILY PROSPERITY: MARITAL RITUAL AMONG THE MIAO IN SOUTHWEST CHINA

Xianghong Feng

Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, Michigan

For a week in April 2002, I was on a journalistic reporting trip in Xingyi City, the capital of Qianxinan Miao¹ and Buyi Ethnic Groups Autonomous Prefecture in Guizhou Province, China. I had not had a chance to glimpse the people and the city until a rainy afternoon when I decided to put the interview routine aside and went to explore instead. Too little time and too much to see, and too wet to enjoy the outdoors, I spent my free afternoon in the local Guizhou Minorities' Marriage Custom Museum.

I was the only visitor that afternoon, and I enjoyed my visit with the luxury of a private tour by the curator Mr. Mingyong Zhao. The exhibition mainly focused on the local Miao marriage customs in Guizhou. Chickens (rooster or hen) appeared throughout various rituals during the different stages from courtship to the actual weddings. Mr. Zhao's explanation was straightforward, "it is the custom!" I couldn't help but wonder: Why these rituals? Why chicken? What were the roles of chicken in these various marital rituals? How does the chicken ritual relate to Miao culture? This visit sparked my interest in the marital chicken ritual

¹ Miao is the official designation of a highly varied group of people in China. In this article, I use the Chinese designation Miao to refer to the various groups of people in Southwest China who call themselves Hmong, Mong, Hmu, or Xioob. Their languages are closely related, but their dialects, customs, myths and legend are very diverse from place to place. The related people in Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand are usually designated Hmong or Meo. For a more detailed discussion of the Miao, see Diamond 1995. The purpose of this article is to inquire into and demonstrate some of the common features in the chicken ritual between these otherwise quite unlike societies, so I have used the term Miao, which is the most inclusive.

among the Miao in southwest China. Multiple visits later to the Miao communities as an anthropologist conducting research on tourism development and sustainability (Feng 2008, 2007a, 2007b) gave me the opportunity to better understand Miao culture, and to find answers to my earlier questions on the chicken ritual. While local customs vary greatly, this article looks for general trends in chicken use in marriage rituals among the Miao in southwest China. To explore the relationship between explicit cultural forms and underlying cultural idioms, the object of this paper is to place the Miao chicken ritual in proper perspectives. The problem may be phrased in the form of two questions: what circumstances evoke performance of the chicken ritual? What cultural beliefs and dispositions underlie it?

The Miao ethnic group (Miaozu, often known as Hmong, especially in Southeast Asia and Diaspora communities) is the fifth largest minority among all fifty-five officially recognized “minority nationalities” in China, and is mainly distributed in the southwest, notably Guizhou, Hunan, Yunnan, Hubei, Sichuan, and Guangxi, with six Miao autonomous prefectures established in the first four provinces (Bender 2006; Schein 2000, 1999). The chicken ritual discussed here is performed mainly by the Miao in different regions of Guizhou Province (Figure 1). Dispersed over a wide area, the Miao populations are composed of diverse subgroups of related peoples that go by different names, and who “show considerable differences as well as similarities.” (Fei 1980: 62-63, cited in Diamond 1995), which creates issues of identification and inclusion (Bender 2006). As Diamond (1995: 114) points out, “at the level of common discourse, as opposed to official writings, there is some disagreement about whether the Miao are a single unified nationality”. This article is concerned however with the Miao populations’ similarities rather than with differences.

Through the discussion of chicken swearing, divining, and exorcizing rituals, the present paper highlights the importance of marital chicken rituals for restoring family order to the Miao and common features between these otherwise quite unlike societies. It helps us understand the dynamics of culture among the Miao people and similar folk cultures.

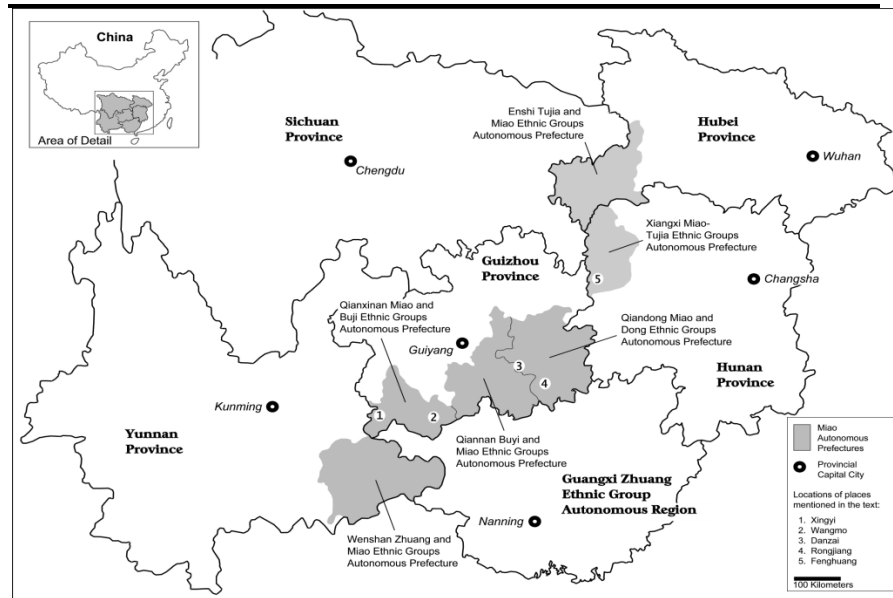


Figure 1: Four provinces (Guizhou, Hunan, Hubei, and Yunnan) with major Miao autonomous prefectures. In addition, there is a relatively large Miao population in Sichuan Province and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. The locations of places (Xingyi, Wangmo, Danzai, and Rongjiang, Fenghuang) mentioned in the text are also shown here.

Various Miao Marital Chicken Rituals²

Simoons (1991: 298) asserted, “it is widely agreed that [chicken] domestication was carried out not for culinary purposes, but for obtaining a ready supply of birds for divination and cock fighting, and that only later were their flesh and eggs of primary importance.” Whether chicken domestication was for ritual supply or not, chicken

² The data on various chicken-rituals, if not cited with a specific source, were mainly collected during my trip in April 2002 in the Miao and Buyi Autonomous Prefecture of Southwest of Guizhou Province. Most were obtained from the archive available in the Museum of Minorities’ Marriage Custom in Guizhou, and from personal communication with Mr. Mingyong Zhao, the curator of this museum.

had long played an important role in people's ritual life around the world. There is archeological evidence to show the early use of chicken in rituals on West Hill, Uley, in England (Brothwell 1997). Ethnographic evidence shows that among the Azande in Africa, chickens are kept mainly with the object of subjecting them to oracular tests, and are only killed for food when hosting important guests (Evans-Pritchard 1937).

Chicken serves not only as suitable food for guests and a gift to bring when visiting, but also has rich cultural meaning as it plays an important role in Chinese folkloric beliefs (Wu 1986; Wu 1998). Chicken had been frequently consumed since ancient China. "Chicken was mentioned frequently in Shang oracle bone writings, and its bones are common finds at An-yang" (Shi 1953, cited in Chang 1977: 29-30). The Miao keep roosters and hens in every family, whose utility goes beyond their value as food. Chickens and eggs are used ritually in divination, to cure disease, to retrieve the lost soul of a sick child, to seal a marriage ceremony, and to guide the newly deceased family member's soul to find the ancestral land (Ling and Rui 1947; Mo 1986; Peters-Golden 2005; Tang 1998; Tapp 1989; Zhou 1998).

The two most important cycles of ritual in a Miao individual's life are those surrounding the events of marriage and of death, and chicken is used in both. Tapp did an elaborate ethnography in northern Thailand on Miao (Hmong) religion including the more sacred ritual surrounding death (1989; 2003), as well as his thorough accounts of a Chinese Miao wedding (2003) without further exploring the frequent appearance of chicken in the more secular marital ritual. To better understand the underlying cultural meaning of the Miao marital chicken ritual, this article interprets its function and explores its relevance to Miao subsistence, kinship, myth and legend. In the process of Miao marriage, chicken is a symbol throughout every stage, from courting, proposal, betrothal, and wedding, to having children.

Betrothal hen and chicken as a solemn pledge of love

In Danzai County, Guizhou, if a Miao boy wants to marry a girl, he asks a matchmaker to go to the girl's home, saying that his family

lacks hens, and therefore begging for a hen to reproduce chickens. If the girl's parents agree, they will give a pair of little chickens to the boy's family, who will raise them carefully. If they die before the wedding, it means this match is not a good match, and the marriage will turn out bad; if they grow up well and reproduce, it means this marriage is blessed. In the suburb of Guiyang city (the capital of Guizhou), after the proposal is approved, the parents of the boy bring a big hen to visit the girl's home, together with the matchmaker, who is treated warmly by the girl's family. The big hen is killed and cooked to treat the boy's parents and the matchmaker, indicating the match has been settled. Such a hen is called "betrothal hen". There is a saying, "after eating the betrothal hen, the girl belongs to the boy's family." (Liu and Zhao 2002)

Among ethnic minorities (largely the Miao and Buyi) in the southeast of Guizhou, if the parents refuse a marriage, sometimes the two lovers will express their determination to be together by "tearing chicken". They would meet somewhere, stand face to face, hold each wing of a live chicken, and pull in the opposite direction until it falls into two parts. Then the one who gets the larger part will decide whether they should commit suicide or elope in order to be together forever (Liu and Zhao 2002).

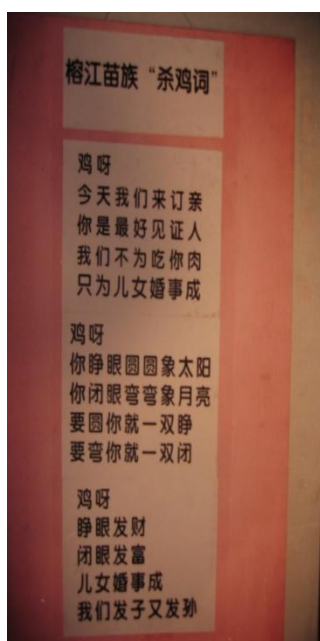
Chicken fortune telling to predict the future of the marriage

Fortune telling is popular among the Miao in Wangmo County in the southwest of Guizhou. Rooster's wing bone, thighbone³, tongue-bone, and eyes (see Figure 2 for the "Chicken-Killing Chant" of the Miao in Rongjiang) can all be used for fortune-telling. Tapp (2003: 281) mentions that in a Miao village in Sichuan the boy's go-betweens bring two chickens to the girl's home to be sacrificed to examine the tongue-bones for omens of the marriage before wedding. Simoons mentions the use of chicken thighbones (1991: 298) and chicken eggs (1991: 362) in divination in South China and Southeast Asia.

Tapp (1989: 70) talks about the Miao ritual in northern Thailand

³ Chicken thighbone has fine perforations. Bamboo splinters are inserted into the perforations. The angle at which they project is the basis for prophecy.

whereby the color and positions of a sacrificed chicken's claw, eyes, thigh-bones, skull and bones of the tongue are all examined for signs of good or bad fortune, as well as examining dissected eggs as a form of divination. The Miao epic "Song of Gold and Silver" collected in southeast Guizhou mentions that neither snake, grouse, and egret's eggs "could be used to divine the road taken by Gold and Silver;" only a chicken egg "correctly told" the path (Bender 2006: 35). Chicken divination is widely applied not only in the marriage rituals, but also in ancestral worship, funerals, and other important activities (Li 2001; Tapp 1989). According to Tapp's (2003: 272, 300) description of a Miao wedding in Sichuan, there is a special supper in the evening of the wedding day, during which "the bride's side offer a cock. The bridegroom's side present a hen. After they are cooked, divination by chicken tongue (*sua qas nphlaib*) will take place. If the tongues are not damaged in any way, the signs will be very lucky." They also read chicken bones for auspicious omens with two tables blocking the door of the groom's house upon the bride's arrival during the wedding day.



Rongjiang Miao "Chicken-Killing Chant"

(Translated by Xianghong Feng)

Chicken

Today we are going to decide a marriage

You are the best witness

We are here not for eating you

Just for settling down our children's marriage

Chicken

You open your eyes round like the sun

You close your eyes curved like the moon

If you want round, open both of your eyes

If you want curved, close both of your eyes

Chicken

To open both of your eyes means getting us rich

*To close both of your eyes means bringing us
good luck*

And our children's marriage will be successful

We will have many grandchildren

Figure 2: Rongjiang Miao “Chicken-Killing Chant”. Photo taken by Xianghong Feng in the Museum of Minorities’ Marriage Custom in Guizhou.

Rooster in the wedding ceremony

In some regions in Guizhou, the groom sends his friends to get the bride on the wedding day, one of whom will hang a rooster around his waist on their way to the bride’s home. (See the man on the right in Figure 3). At the time that the bride crosses the threshold of the groom’s house, the groom’s family will kill a rooster and spray a few drops of its blood on the floor. The rooster may be swung in a circle around the bride’s head before being killed. In Tapp’s (2003: 285) lengthy description of the process of Miao betrothal and wedding in Sichuan, China, “some lineages have the boy’s mother wave a rooster three times around the new bride’s head before she enters the groom’s house to dispel her evil influences”, or they “have the groom’s father’s sister wave a rooster three times round the new bride’s head to call her soul” (2003: 304). Other rituals such as chanting and throwing unhusked rice away from the front door of the groom’s house may be performed for the same purpose to “beat away the wild spirits which may have accompanied the bride from her own patrilineage.” (Tapp 2003: 300)



Figure 3: “Best Man’s Unique Label — Messenger Chicken Hung by the Waist”. Photo taken by Xianghong Feng in the Museum of Minorities’ Marriage Custom in Guizhou.

Chicken rituals and child bearing

During the wedding ceremony, the Miao constantly express their longing for children from this new marriage in the singing of lyrics such as “sons and daughters fill the house and endure for a hundred years”, “the descendants will multiply and live long lives”, and “this couple in marriage may trade and prosper, thrive and be well...and their grandsons and granddaughters multiply and increase, that they may eat and drink without ever ending.” (Tapp 2003: 289, 291, 314). After marriage, the new couple will pray for children. If children arrive quickly, they may use chicken to feast the gods, a hen for a daughter and a rooster for a son. On the day the wife gives birth, the husband is expected to tell his parents-in-law the good news with a chicken, also a hen for a daughter and a rooster for a son. This shows a “symbolic differentiation of the sexes correlates with a clear distinction in social status between men and women”, as Paul (1950: 212) pointed out in his analysis of a Guatemalan Indian village chicken-eating ritual in which a cockerel and a shaman (always a male) is involved if the subject of the ritual cure is a boy, and a pullet and midwife if a girl. On the third morning after the baby’s birth, a rooster is killed (preferably red rooster) to feast the ancestors and ask for their blessing among the Miao.

To reduce anxiety over the prosperity of a family, which largely depends on marriage and descendants, parents resort to various preventive and protective measures involving chicken rituals. Chicken is used in their daily life, either functioning as food for the wedding feast and dowry, or as the medium to connect the secular world and the supernatural world of the Miao, to seek peace and prosperity of the household and its individual members.

Behind the Chicken Ritual: Family Harmony and Prosperity

The Miao are believed by the Han Chinese to excel at witchcraft (black magic). They have been persistently associated with the practice of *gu*, deliberate poisoning through magic means. Even though Diamond (1988: 3) argues that “the Chinese beliefs in magical poisoning and Miao witchcraft are...not based on ethnographic fact but are a way of talking about irreconcilable cultural differences”, other forms of magic do have a place. In terms of the incorporation

of magical beliefs, the chicken marriage ritual demonstrates four characteristics: 1) popularity – common people master the knowledge, so it is not just available to the shaman or other specialist; 2) Informality – neither restricting rules (e.g. special costume, professional incantation) nor complicated procedures are involved in the chicken ritual performed by ordinary Miao people; 3) positive – as white magic, it is to be used to do positive things to other people or their own benefit; 4) ethnicity – to work properly, rituals should conform to the accepted symbolic idiom of the culture, and the Miao marriage customs are rooted in Miao history, culture, religion and environment. All the forms of chicken ritual in Miao marriage can be grouped according to their functions into four types: rooster swearing; rooster divining; rooster exorcizing; and hen/egg fertility promoting. More important than knowing the procedures of a certain ritual is an appreciation of certain cultural concepts and implicit assumptions which impart conscious and unconscious meaning to the ritual, so the following section takes a look at some of the cultural idioms behind the Miao chicken ritual.

Rooster swearing: rites of social affliction

When a rooster is used in oath-taking in China, people chop off its head as an oath by the blood of life, or cut off its neck and drain its blood into a bowl of liquor to drink. According to Simoons (1991: 298), this was allowed in English courts in Singapore and Hong Kong. Li (1997, cited in Katz 1999) wrote about a chicken-beheading ritual by the candidates during elections in Taiwan. The candidates cut off the chicken's head and swear in front of the people that they would be just like the beheaded chicken or would be condemned by god if they had behaved improperly. Li (1997) applies James Frazer's (*The Golden Bough*) "law of similarity" to explain it. Katz (1999) states that while the chicken-beheading ritual is very common in South China, he never found relevant literature on such rituals in North China, and it is a ritual existing in both the Han and non-Han societies. While its origin is not clear, this ritual can be considered as shared by different ethnic groups and cultures, since cultural elements, such as the belief in the power of a chicken in a particular ritual, may have spread from one group to another by contact and diffusion.

Katz (1999: 179) mentions one case among the Miao in Rongjiang of Guizhou Province: if people couldn't resolve a dispute, the plaintiff and defendant must conduct a chicken-beheading ritual in the company of the shaman. He believes this ritual does not fit the theories of sacrifice and scapegoat such as the theory of "ritual violence" (Girard 1979), which argues that many societies transfer social violence to animals and other objects through violent ritual behaviors. Rather, he applies the concept of "rites of affliction" (Turner 1968) – including physical afflictions such as diseases and social affliction such as social conflicts – to the chicken-beheading ritual. Rooster-swearing among Miao lovers can be considered as a ritual of social conflict, through which they try to resolve the social conflict over their love not being accepted socially. Furthermore, for the Miao, the rooster symbolizes trustworthiness, one of the five virtues of the rooster perceived in traditional Chinese culture (the other four are *wen* 文 refinement, *wu* 武 martial, *yong* 勇 bravery, and *ren* 仁 benevolence). Before watches and clocks, the Miao were accustomed to use the crow of a rooster as a signal to get up and go to work in the field.

Rooster divining: chicken in Miao myths

To understand the symbolic meaning of the rooster divining ritual, we may turn to the cultural motif which recurs in Miao myths and legends. Using a rooster to predict the future of a marriage reflects its mystical function in the mind of the ancient Miao. There are various Miao sun-bird/ sun-rooster myths, which demonstrate that this ritual may have something to do with the association of bird/chicken with the sun. One of their widespread sun myths is about a rooster calling the sun out: long ago, there were twelve (nine in a different version) suns hanging in the sky. The people could not stand the heat and asked a brave hero to shoot eleven (or eight) of them by arrow, leaving only one. But the last sun was so scared that it hid, not daring to come out until a rooster started crowing (Pan, Yang, and Zhang 1997; Tapp 1989; Wu 2002). There is a similar myth popular in West Hunan (Lu 2000) and Southeast Guizhou (Bender 2006) about a hero who rides a golden pheasant to rescue the sun taken by a demon to bring life, joy, and hope back to the

earth. These myths show that in Miao belief, the rooster is the medium connecting the secular and supernatural worlds; it is a sacred bird, a messenger of the sun god. It is capable of delivering requests for blessings to ancestors and gods in the supernatural world, and carrying messages about the future from the supernatural world to the Miao. This also explains the use of roosters in Miao funeral ritual for guiding the soul of the deceased to find the path leading to the realm of the ancestors.

In the Miao belief system of animism, particular forces of nature are personified, and they believe places such as trees, caves, cliffs, rocks, ponds, rivers, and even wind currents, have spirits (Bender 2006, Livo and Cha 1991, cited in Thao 2006; Shen 1982, cited in Diamond 1988). During my fieldtrip to Fenghuang in West Hunan (the hometown of the distinguished author Shen Congwen) in 2002, I observed the local Miao custom of *baiji* [拜寄]: when a family has a new baby, they personify cave, tree, rock, well, or any other object in the natural world, which they choose to claim as the protector of their newborn baby. Every year afterwards until the baby grows up, the family brings the child to its protector to show respect by offering incense, liquor, and meat (typically a cooked chicken or pork), to express thanks for the protection given and ask for blessing for the following year. This still practiced custom (Figure 4 and Figure 5) reflects not only their belief in animism, but also the value they place on the baby that is crucial for family prosperity. Among the Miao in northern Thailand, the God of Thunder is pictured as winged creature, which “was once trapped and hung up above the fire to dry, but escaped and flew booming away across the rice-fields, causing stunted rice-crops for ever afterwards” (Tapp 1989:62)⁴. From the myths associated with the God of Thunder, we can see its importance to Miao subsistence and life, as well as its

⁴ According to the epic song “The Great Flood” collected in southeast Guizhou, there was “conflict between the clever ancestor of humankind, Jang Vang, and the vengeful Thunder God...The Thunder God ... returns to the sky, where he vents his wrath by flooding the earth”, and it is a fearful chicken who lies to the Thunder God, so the Thunder God lowers the water and the ancestor survives the flood (Bender 2006: 157-168).

relevance as a winged creature to birds or chickens. More specifically,

according to Wu (1996) and NECCEL (1988), in the Miao's flood myths, the thunder god is in charge of the rain, and the image of the thunder god is a rooster.



Figure 4: *Baiji* custom in Fenghuang County, Hunan, China. A cypress tree was personalized by this local family as protector of their children. The grandmother (standing) and the mother brought two girls to the cypress tree, feasting the spirit of the tree, and asking for blessing for the following year, the fifth year, as they told me. Photo by Xianghong Feng.



Figure 5: *Baiji* custom in Fenghuang County, Hunan, China. The mountain caves were personalized by some local families as

protectors of their newborn babies. Photo by Xianghong Feng.

We may also relate this ritual to Miao origin and migration myths. The Miao are an ancient migrant ethnic group from north China to south China and later further south to Southeast Asia. In Miao migration myths, some say when the ancient Miao began to migrate, it was the bird/chicken who guided them to settle down in a place good for crop planting. Others say after the flood, there was no seed left in the world. It was the bird/chicken who found the seed and brought it to the people (Song 1999). A wooden pole representing the Miao sun god used for blessing a good harvest features a rice plant and a carved bird facing the sun, which is a vivid illustration of the connection among rice, birds, and the sun in Miao belief. In Miao origin myths, the Miao ancestor came out of a bird egg or was rescued by a sacred bird (Bender 2006; He 1996; Liu 2002; Peters-Golden 2005; Song 1999; Zhou 1999). One of the stories described in the Miao epic “Song of Butterfly Mother” from southeast Guizhou goes: Long ago, a butterfly laid twelve eggs in a sweet gum tree and then flew away. A mythic bird took the eggs and tried to hatch them. After fifty years, she was about to give up, but suddenly she heard from the inside of an egg to tell her to wait. After two more years, the egg hatched and that was Jang Vang, the ancestor of the Miao⁵. According to their myths, bird/rooster is the one who brought Miao people the sun, warmth, light, rainfall, rice seed, and even life, which are all essential for their livelihood (Figure 6). See next page for figure 6.

⁵ Similar story is told in the Old Sweet Gum Miao Ballad. The sweet gum tree was cut down: the trunk became fish roe; the sawdust became honeydew; the stumps became butterflies; the buds became moths; the roots became owls, “Woo-woo”, singing in midnight; the leaves became swallows and eagles flying high in the sky; and only a pair of long treetops were left, swinging in the wind, then became a bird, to carry in its arms the butterflies’ eggs.

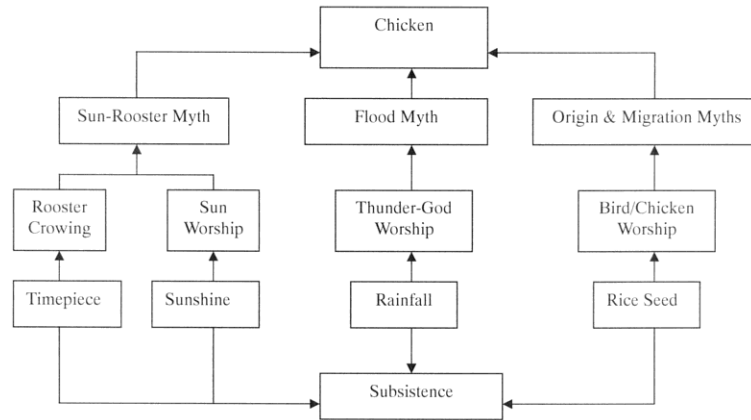


Figure 6: Chicken, Myths, and Miao's Subsistence

Rooster exorcizing: kinship and family order

In order to explain the rooster-exorcizing ritual in the wedding ceremony, two questions need to be addressed: 1) why people think that a wedding is an occasion associated with danger and thus in need of exorcizing; and 2) why the rooster is believed to have the power to keep away evil spirits.

The groom and/or bride, in the wedding are vulnerable to evil. Especially the bride, she is not only a potential victim but also a potential temptress who can bring bad fortune to others. According to Westermarck (Liu and Li 1992), it is widely believed that when people enter into a new status through birth, puberty, marriage, and so on, they are vulnerable to the evil spirits and therefore in danger. So, special rituals are normally performed for those who are transferring from one status to another. Whether an exorcizing ritual is needed depends on either the bride or groom's marital status: a) if it is the first marriage for the groom, an exorcizing ritual is necessary, regardless of whether the bride is a virgin, widow, or divorced; if the groom already has a wife or had a wife, an exorcism is not necessary,

regardless of the bride's marital status; b) if it is the first marriage for

the bride, an exorcizing ritual is needed, whether or not it is the groom's first marriage; if the bride is widowed or divorced, this ritual can be simplified or even waived. The idea is widely shared that when people do something for the first time, there will be a certain danger, and a wedding is one such occasion.

Ahern's ethnography in Taiwan on Chinese women's power and pollution (1978) may shed light from a different perspective on this particular chicken ritual. Ahern explores the question of why Chinese women should be considered unclean or polluting from: first, looking to the nature of allegedly unclean substances and their connection with birth and death; second, viewing the ascription of pollution to women as a reflection of their social role; and third, seeing women's putative pollution as part of a system of ideas relating pollution to breaking the boundaries of social groups.

The first aspect is somewhat similar to Westermarck's explanations since menstrual blood and the blood of a virgin's first intercourse connect with birth as "unclean substances". However, we need distinguish the difference between women who are vulnerable and in danger while entering into a new stage of life (Westermarck's view) and women as potential polluters (Ahern's view). Through the second and third aspects, Ahern advances our understanding of this issue by looking at the social aspects of women's role in Chinese society in general. Ahern (1978: 283) argues that things the Chinese consider unclean threaten order or are a result of disorder in the family or in the human body — the idea of dirty or polluting substances as "matter out of place", while disorder can be "anything that tends to undermine the tenets of order, any external threat to orderly entities, is unclean." In the family, for example, the entrance or exit of members is problematic and requires ritual action. The act of entering or exiting (e.g. newborns, the dead, brides) seems to make people dirty (productive of disorder), and therefore requires cleansing (restoration of order through ritual).

In a traditionally patrilineal extended Miao family, woman as the in-marrying spouse (the bride) builds certain potentially disruptive tension to the existing order of her husband's (the groom's) family, due to likely disputes between the wife with her husband and

especially her female in-laws, as well as potential sexual activity

between her and her male in-laws (avoidance between men and their sons' wives are common among many descent groups of Miao, which is also seen in other cultures in South Asia). The Miao's belief in ancestral spirits requires not only acceptance of a new family member by ancestral spirits, but also banishment of wild spirits which have accompanied the bride from her own patrilineage.

According to Peter-Golden (2005), the bride's entry into the groom's clan must have the approval of his ancestral spirits, during which time, "ceremonies [are] performed to ensure the young couple's souls do not wander off; the girl in particular is at risk for this consequence, since her incorporation into her betrothed's group is 'a spiritually delicate business'." Tapp (2003: 304) explains that this widespread Miao custom of "banishing the girl's evil influences" is to "send back the girl's clan spirits as well as evil things in general."

According to Douglas (1970: 114-115), disorder "symbolizes both danger and power", and "ritual recognizes the potency of disorder." It shows beliefs about persons in a marginal state, who "may be doing nothing morally wrong, but their status is indefinable." Thus, a woman is viewed as polluting not only when entering into her newlywed husband's family, but also in her natal family before marrying out. Tapp's (1989: 89-90) discussion of the common ritual prohibitions relating to categories of kinship and spatially expressed in the structure of the Miao (Hmong) house include the prohibitions on both in-married women and daughters of the family. He points out that "these are not prohibitions aimed at women so much as prohibitions aimed at those who have been or are expected to become the members of the other clan (through marriage), and yet are living in the household." (1989: 91) As Ahern (1978) further argues, a son occupies a firm, permanent position in his family as a future heir to the family estate and as one of those who will perpetuate descent lines, so a daughter's position in her natal family is in a sense more problematic since she belongs there only temporarily, until she marries out and becomes part of her husband's family. The central dilemma might be expressed as how we can keep families pure and homogeneous and their members united and loyal when, in order to grow, they need outsiders (women with competing

loyalties and children whose loyalties are unformed). The answer is

that by ritual means, outsiders can be cleansed before entering the family. The roosting-exorcizing ritual during the Miao wedding ceremony is a way for people to solve a fundamental problem of the human condition they are facing.

Keeping order applies to nature as well as to the family. As Tapp (1989: 91) points out, there are prohibitions of a ritual nature, such as those against the confusion of wild things with tame things, which have to be kept carefully separate if misfortune is not to result. According to Zhou (1998), chicken divining is practiced in Hainan when a bird or snake gets into the house, when a hen crows or lays soft eggs, which are abnormal and hence considered as disturbances to the natural order. 2) Rooster overcomes the devil as *yang*

Overcomes *yin* the rooster is the natural enemy of many pests (e.g. centipede and scorpion) which are harmful to both domestic fowl and people. The rooster crows as the sun rises in the morning. Evil spirits, typically associated with darkness, are afraid of sun and light. So the devil disappears when the rooster crows and the sun rises. This is a dichotomy common to many South and Southeast Asian cultures. Simoons (1991: 298) states that, “in ancient China the cock was symbolic of the sun, a *yang* element, light, warm, and strengthening, with a white cock preferred for exorcising the spirits of darkness, which were identified as *yin*, cold, and weakening”. According to the Miao Epics in southeast Guizhou, white chicken is used in Ancestor Sacrifices (Bender 2006: 137, 180, 195). In West Hunan, a rooster was used to expel evil spirits which caused disease or misfortune (Ling and Rui 1947: 121). Tapp’s ethnography on Miao (Hmong) religion in northern Thailand (1989: 59) states, “As with much in Hmong religion, Chinese influence is strong...The Hmong world of *yeeb ceeb* parallels the Chinese world of *yin*, the dark world of the spirits: the Hmong world of *yaj ceeb* parallels the Chinese world of *yang*, the bright world of men and women, of material objects and nature.” In Miao cosmology, the rooster belongs to the positive as the *yang*, and the devil belongs to the negative as the *yin*. The positive/*yang* can conquer the negative/*yin*, so the rooster is believed to have the power of warding off the devil and bad fortune. Graham (1961) discusses how the blood of humans, chickens, or

ducks can be used to exorcise evil spirits according to folk religion in

Southwest China. In her study of the power and pollution of Chinese women, Ahern (1978: 273) associates the escape of any blood from a living body with power—both beneficial and destructive power—because of the involvement of blood in both life and death, and “the life force in this power can be harnessed to produce a child, to please the gods with a potent offering, or to protect a person threatened by an evil spirit. At the same time, the destructive force in the power of blood portends death and danger.” Rooster swearing and exorcizing rituals described earlier both recognize the power of a rooster’s blood.

Hen and egg: the symbol of fertility

Frazer’s classic study on magic and religion (*The Golden Bough*) explains the relationship between ritual and sexual activity. He thinks food and descendants are the two typical things that people are seeking by means of witchcraft rituals (Liu 2001). Some rituals in the wedding ceremony are aimed at promoting the bride’s fertility. For example, the custom of spreading cereal (now symbolized by confetti) onto the bride’s body is common in many countries including China, India, and some western countries. This ritual might originate from the metaphor of marriage fruit as children and plant fruit as cereals (Liu and Li 1992). The Miao use chickens with high reproductive potential as well as fruitful plants such as bamboo, a branch of the *tung* tree, dates, or rice in wedding ceremonies (Tapp 2003: 291, 295-296). Chickens are also used to pray for children⁶. Chicken, rather than any other animal, may be chosen not only because of its high fertility, but also for its close association with the sun. Miao origin myths always depict their ancestor as originating

⁶ In some areas of Indonesia, when a woman wants to have a baby, she asks a man, who should be a father of many children, to pray for her to the sun god. He holds a chicken’s thigh above the woman’s head and begs to the sun god for a child. Then, he does the same thing to the woman’s husband. At last, the chicken is killed and put in the household shrine, together with leaves of areca, as the sacrifice to the sun god (Song 1990).

from some sort of egg such as bird/chicken egg, butterfly egg, or stone egg.

Conclusion

The natural environment, subsistence, and family order of the Miao are closely interpenetrated with secular ritual and sacred myth. The explicit cultural forms and underlying cultural idioms are intimately interrelated and inseparable, and “chicken” as a symbol links underlying cultural idioms to observable modes of marriage ritual. While the chicken ritual may seem irrational from an outsider’s point of view, it makes sense to the Miao in terms of certain assumptions implicit in their culture. The cultural idiom related to chicken ritual is family harmony (largely depending on marital harmony in an extended patrilineal family) and prosperity (largely depending on offspring resulting from good marriage and successful reproduction), both of which have been highly valued traditionally. Analysis of various types of Miao chicken ritual indicates that it is an institutionalized means of relieving the intolerable pressure to “do something”, either forestalling and exorcizing misfortune, or praying for blessings and good fortune for the sake of family harmony and prosperity. It should be understood that the chicken ritual not only reflects social strains, but also plays a role in defining the way in which gender role, kinship, marriage, and family are perceived and experienced.

If the meaning of marriage were just the bond between men and women, or the establishment of a sexual relationship, marriage could have been a purely private matter, without much intervention from the families involved. However, in matters where a man or a woman seeks a spouse, few ignore the processes set by society. In many cultures, choosing a spouse was and is conducted by their parents rather than arising out of their own will, which has been criticized as a residue of feudalism (Fei 1998: 129). It may seem absurd to leave marriage decisions up to chicken-divination. Almost all parents intend to choose a good marriage for their children. The traditional criteria for successful marriage are family harmony and prosperity. The success of a marriage is so crucial to a family or a lineage that those affected feel that they have to do something to improve the outcome. Chicken in their cultural world has the power

to connect the secular world in which they are living and the sacred spiritual world.

Chicken rituals are not uncommon for the purpose of restoring social order, either the domestic order between an in-marriage wife with her husband and her in-laws through the chicken-exorcizing discussed here, or domestic order between siblings through chicken beating and eating (Paul 1950), or community order through chicken-beheading (Katz 1999). Relating Ahern's (1978) idea of pollution with the Chinese kinship system makes sense of chicken-exorcizing in Miao wedding ceremonies. The system of ideas about polluting relates to the idioms of patrilineal descent. It is natural to perceive women rather than men as outsiders, and elaborate rituals must be performed when the bride enters her husband's family. Women are depicted on the boundaries, breaking in as strangers, because the kinship system is focused on male lines of descent.

The elements of procedure, belief, and assumption behind the chicken ritual are not confined to the Miao and other southwest minority ethnic groups in China. Similar rituals had existed in the Chinese Han since ancient times, even though they may more or less differ from one another⁷. Just as Hsu (1983: 148) argues that religion and science are the twin human requirements, the belief and cultural idioms behind chicken rituals are "as much as a necessity of human life as food and air". For humans will always love and be disappointed in love, will always face unexpected danger in marriage and having children, and will always be confronted with issues threatening family harmony and prosperity even if our scientists and technologists have conquered all the Earth.

⁷ Throughout history, Chinese minorities (such as the Miao) and the Han have learned many things from each other, and have had many of their customs altered by contact with each other (Tapp 2000, 1989).